

PATRICIA HIGHSMITH ON SCREEN



Week Four
‘The Ripliad, Part One’

Welcome to *Patricia Highsmith on Screen*

Week Four

It feels as though, in modern literature, every author has a central character to whom they return time and again, whether for creative or commercial reasons. There is insufficient space here to recount the many long dark nights of the soul during which I have tried to conjure a detective of my own from the aether. (Spoiler: I think I finally cracked it the other day. A morose, loquacious film lecturer who solves crimes in a digital arts centre. Honestly, so many crimes.)

But with Patricia Highsmith, Tom Ripley at first feels like an outlier. When *The Talented Mr Ripley* was first published in 1955, it was her fourth novel – the third of three suspense novels and the pseudonymously released *The Price of Salt*, later re-released under her own name as *Carol*. (I remain staunch in my opinion that *The Price of Salt* is a far superior title. The only recent title injustice to bother me as much is when Guy Ritchie abandoned the original name of *The Gentlemen*. Which was the near perfect *Toff Guys*. Just me? Fine.)

However, there was clearly something about Tom Ripley that spoke to his creator. She returned to him and his story four further times, creating a five novel cycle known pleasingly as *The Ripliad*.

So, why Tom Ripley? This con man, this murderer (hardly the only murderer in the Highsmith canon, but the clearly the most successful and, in a variety of ways, attractive).

Well, in armchair psychiatrist mode, which we've nestled into more than once, the argument could be made that Tom Ripley – the insecure chameleon, the clever but twisted, the man with a longing for a better life that resists him – IS Patricia Highsmith let loose. We've talked – repeatedly – about the dangers of imagining a like-for-like comparison between real life and fiction, but the diaries do ring true to some of Ripley's strengths and foibles.

We certainly return to our central themes of identity and individual morality with a vengeance. (Literal vengeance, once or twice.) Ripley is a man who wants to be something else and is prepared to bend the rules of convention to achieve it. But he is also awkward at times, for all his charm, especially in the beginning.

He kills primarily out of a sense of necessity, a cold pragmatism for which Highsmith often seemed to hanker and occasionally employed in her personal life.

She is protective of him in interviews without *quite* exonerating him. She certainly, even if she doesn't always like him, finds him *interesting*.

And, like many of her works, she finds little ways to inject her personal life into Ripley's adventures. Of course, that is what authors do. In short, you don't spend five novels alongside a murderer unless he is, in some way, good company.

Now, can we say the same about our cinematic Ripleys?

FILMS WEEK FOUR

Loving Highsmith (2022) – Dir. Eva Vitija

The Talented Mr Ripley

Purple Noon (1960) – Dir. Rene Clement
Alain Delon as Tom Ripley

The Talented Mr Ripley (1999) – Dir. Anthony Minghella
Matt Damon as Tom Ripley

The Talented Mr Ripley (2009) (Radio 4)
Ian Hart as Tom Ripley

Naan (2012) – Dir. Jeeva Shankar
Vijay Anthony as Karthik

Ripley (2024) – Dir. Steven Zaillian
Andrew Scott as Tom Ripley

Ripley Under Ground

Ripley Under Ground (2005) – Dir. Roger Spottiswoode
Barry Pepper as Tom Ripley

A Gift for Murder – The South Bank Show (1982)
Johnathan Kent as Tom Ripley

Ripley Under Ground (2009) (Radio 4)
Ian Hart as Tom Ripley