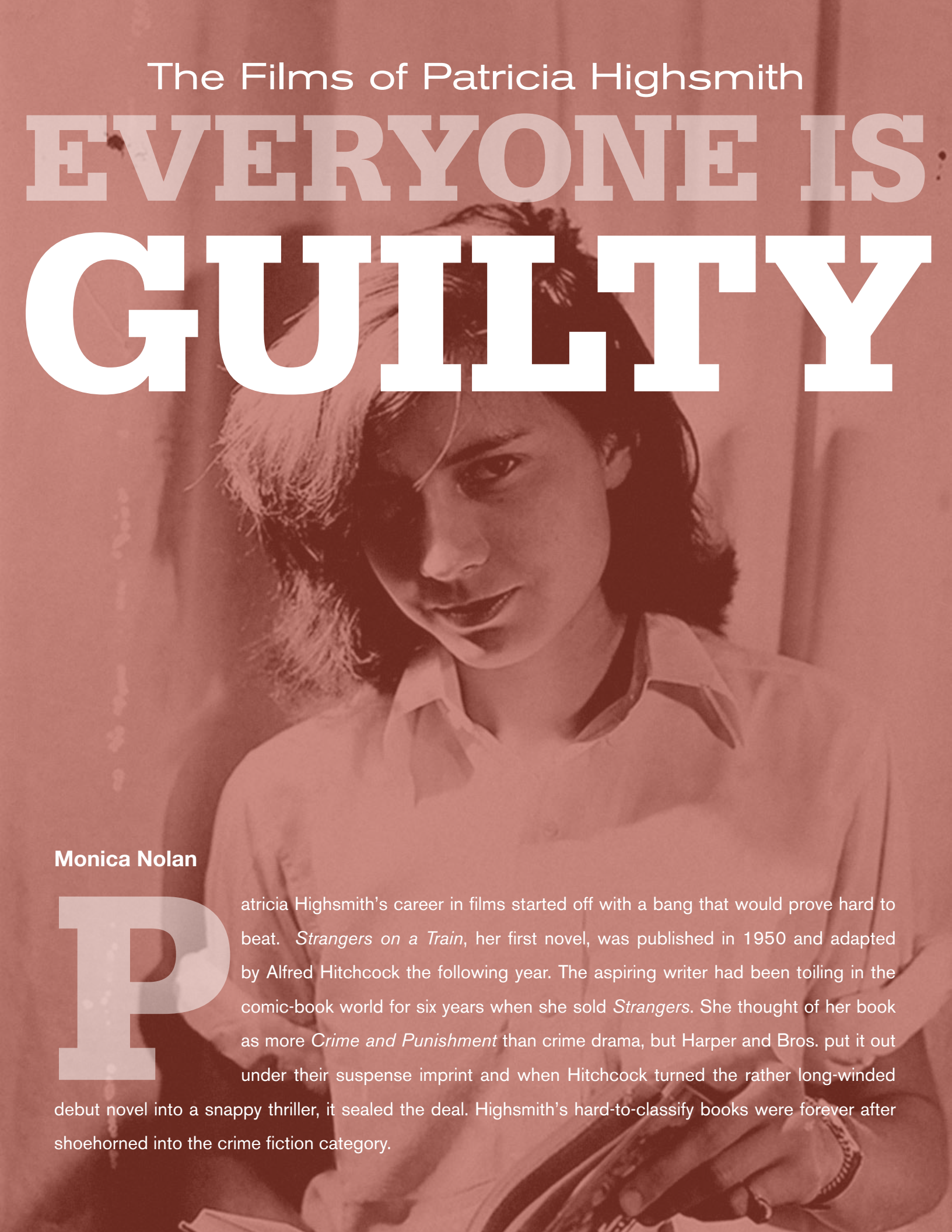
The Films of Patricia Highsmith

EVERYONE IS GUILTY



Monica Nolan

Patricia Highsmith's career in films started off with a bang that would prove hard to beat. *Strangers on a Train*, her first novel, was published in 1950 and adapted by Alfred Hitchcock the following year. The aspiring writer had been toiling in the comic-book world for six years when she sold *Strangers*. She thought of her book as more *Crime and Punishment* than crime drama, but Harper and Bros. put it out under their suspense imprint and when Hitchcock turned the rather long-winded debut novel into a snappy thriller, it sealed the deal. Highsmith's hard-to-classify books were forever after shoehorned into the crime fiction category.

Highsmith's debut novel provided Alfred Hitchcock with the perfect premise for a classic thriller, and vivid roles for Farley Granger and Robert Walker

In *Strangers on a Train,* Bruno, the psychopathic playboy villain, says, "I like mysteries. They show that all sorts of people can become murderers." This became Highsmith's credo and it has fueled some of the most twisted material in the noir canon. Her work is not as lurid as Jim Thompson's or as poetic as Cornell Woolrich's—Terrence Rafferty in a *New Yorker* review described her prose as "blunt and straightforward as a strip search"—but her world is chilling precisely in its banality, its pervasive sense of evil depicted as a part of the everyday world.

Her childhood certainly encouraged this worldview. Mary Patricia Plangman was born in 1921, shortly after her parents divorced. As an adult, she learned that her mother had swallowed turpentine in an attempt to end the pregnancy ("That's why you're so fond of the smell," her mother joked). Later, her father, Jay Plangman (whom Highsmith met only once), wrote that the unsuccessful abortion was his idea.

Patricia was raised by her grandmother, while her mother worked as a commercial artist. Eventually Highsmith's mother remarried and moved to Queens with a new husband, returning to Texas to collect her daughter when she was six-years-old. Highsmith took her stepfather's name despite her intense dislike of him, which provided her first insight into the criminal mind: "I learned to live with a grievous and murderous hatred early on."

Hitchcock's *Strangers* is the story of a chance encounter between Bruno, who wants his father dead, and tennis player Guy, saddled with a floozy wife. Bruno proposes they swap murders, but Guy doesn't realize he's serious. The meat of the movie is the cat-and-mouse game that ensues as Bruno, having carried out his half of their "deal," tries to pressure the horrified Guy into holding up his end.

In Highsmith's book, Guy does kill Bruno's father—but this was too much for Hollywood. Hitchcock made the story his own and it's full of the master's classic touches: the unmoving figure in the audience at a tennis match, amid a sea of turning heads; the strangulation reflected in a pair of glasses; the out-of-control carousel at the climax. None of these are found in the novel.

But Bruno, who wants to be "friends" with Guy, belongs entirely to Highsmith. He's the first of the many twisted men she would put on the page, and his relationship with Guy—veering from admiration to hatred and becoming a deadly game that wreaks havoc on all around them—is a theme Highsmith would revisit over and over. And it is Robert Walker's suggestive, purring performance that hints at the homosexual subtext present in so many of Highsmith's novels;

Todd Haynes' *Carol*, starring Rooney Mara and Cate Blanchett, is based on Highsmith's 1952 lesbian novel, published under an alias to protect her newfound success as a crime writer

hints were all the movies could manage in the closeted 1950s.

Highsmith had been having affairs with women since high school, and her womanizing never slowed down (she tried affairs with two men in her 20s and memorably described the experience as like "being raped in the wrong place.") In the 1950s, when institutionalized homophobia meant everything from fear of being fired to many lesser anxieties and humiliations, Highsmith never hid her sexuality; but neither did she declare it. Her second book, a lesbian romance called *The Price of Salt* (1952), was published under a pseudonym so as not to tarnish her newly minted reputation as a Hitchcock-worthy crime writer. That book has had to wait 63 years for its screen debut, but Todd Haynes' version, *Carol*, will be released this November.

After Hitchcock, onscreen adaptations of Highsmith's work have been uneven and sporadic; many intriguing ones (Claude Chabrol's *Cry of the Owl*, a Samuel Fuller-directed version of one of her short stories for a French-UK anthology show) are nearly impossible to find. Directors are both drawn to and stymied by Highsmith's twisted and often improbable

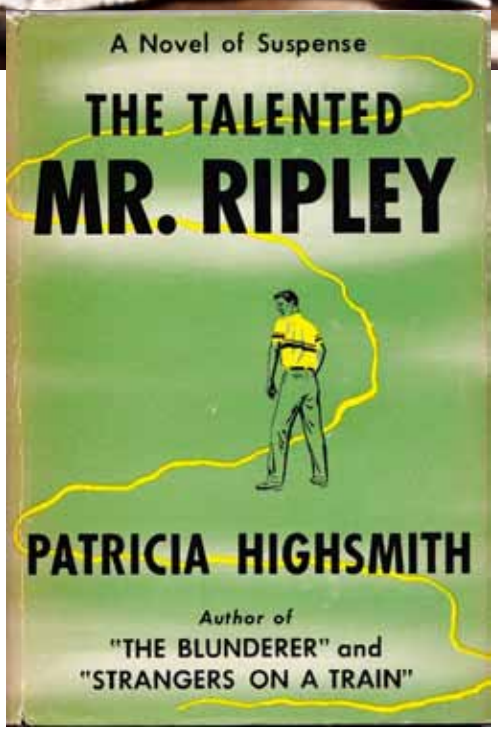
Highsmith recalled her only two sexual experiences with men as like "being raped in the wrong place."

plots. Raymond Chandler, who worked on the adaptation of *Strangers on a Train*, complained of the trouble he had making the protagonist's "damn-fool behavior" credible. In addition to the problem of plausibility, there's also Highsmith's fascination with homoerotic male relationships and her tendency to leave evil unpunished—neither tickets to big-screen success.

Tom Ripley, the killer who gets away with it, was her next sociopath to make it to the big screen. Highsmith wrote the first of what would be five Ripley novels in 1955. An inveterate traveller, she was got the idea in Italy, began the book in Massachusetts, and finished it in New Mexico. "I often had the feeling Ripley was writing it and I was merely typing," she commented on the ease with which it flowed.

With *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the homoerotic subtext present in *Strangers* moves closer to the surface. In the book Tom is a failed actor and budding conman, who wangles a trip to Italy from businessman Richard Greenleaf, his mission to convince Greenleaf's son Dickie to return home. The plot was inspired by Henry James' *The Ambassadors*, but the homicidal homoerotica is pure Highsmith. Tom falls for Dickie, is disappointed by Dickie, kills Dickie, and takes over Dickie's identity. Like Dorothy B. Hughes before her, Highsmith puts her readers inside a

Made in France by René Clément, *Plein Soleil* (*Purple Noon*) was a gorgeous, stripped-down telling of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, starring (l-r) Maurice Ronet, Marie Laforêt, and Alain Delon



killer's point-of-view, forcing them to identify with him—without the cathartic release that comes when Dix Steele is captured at the end of Hughes' *In a Lonely Place*.

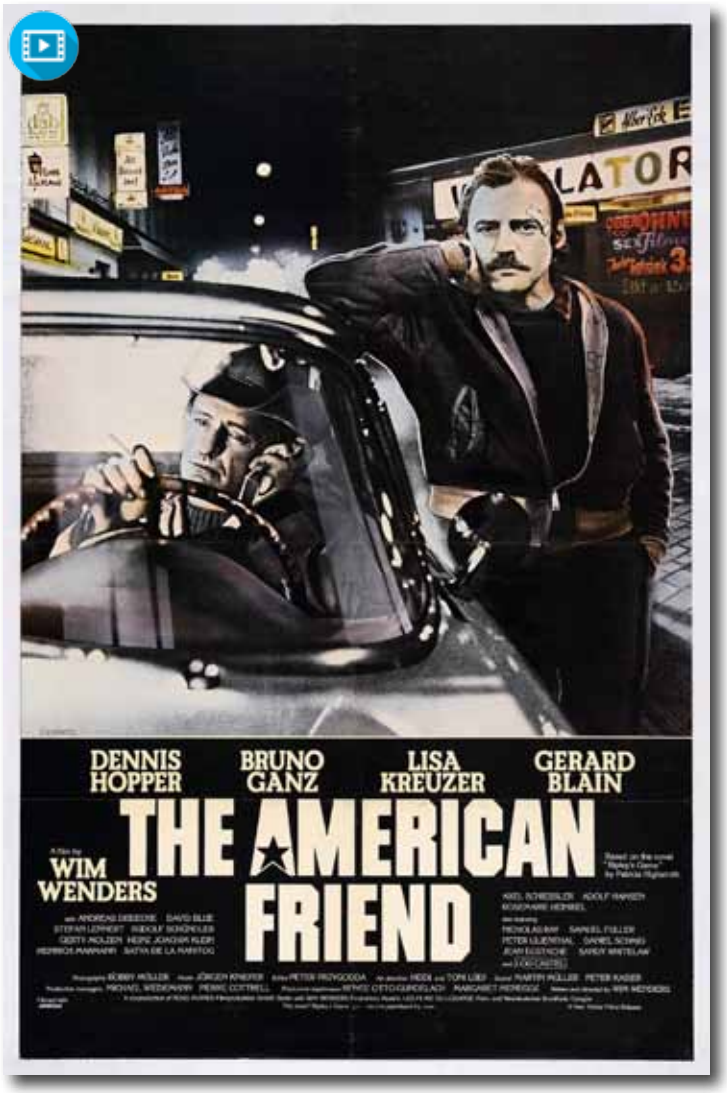
Raymond and Robert Hakim, who bought the property and produced it as *Plein Soleil* (*Purple Noon*) in 1960, told Highsmith they wanted to highlight the homosexual angle, but feared censorship. Their adaptation, directed by René Clément (best known for 1952's *Forbidden Games*) is a sun-bleached, fast-paced thriller, which dispenses with the book's complicated backstory. Tom Ripley (Alain Delon) is a hanger-on of the wealthy Philippe Greenleaf (Maurice Ronet). He's a companion in Phil's debauches, a sort of court jester who fetches and carries for him—and also spies on him and eventually murders him, stealing his identity and girlfriend. The filmmakers don't try to explain his motivations, just observe, as in the scene where Tom dresses in Phil's clothes and kisses himself in the mirror as he imitates Phil's voice. When he begins to court Marge (Marie Laforêt), Phil's bereaved girlfriend, he seems motivated by a desire to have *all* of Phil's possessions rather than by any real attraction.

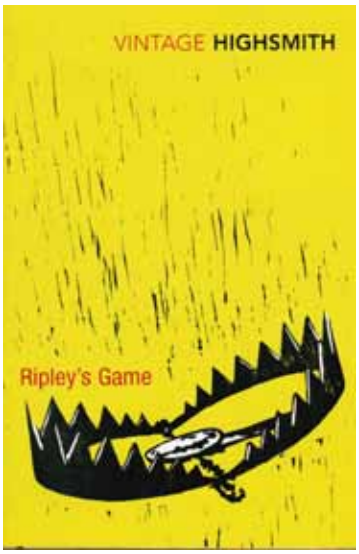
Plein Soleil remains one of the best adaptions of any Ripley book, its only flaw the ending, in which the police close in on Ripley. Highsmith, who would sometimes sign letters "Pat (alias Ripley)" called the end "a terrible concession to so-called public morality." With Ripley, her intention was to show "the unequivocal triumph of evil over good." And, "I shall make my readers rejoice in it."

The next director to take a crack at Tom Ripley was Wim Wenders. He had discovered Highsmith in the early 1970s, devoured her novels, and wanted to adapt *The Cry of the Owl* (1962). But rights to her work were hard to come by. "EVERYTHING was sold," he explained to Highsmith biographer Joan Schenkar. "Mostly bought up by American studios who weren't doing anything with the properties." He wrote Highsmith with his regrets about this situation, and followed up with a visit to France, where she was then living. "Would you be interested in this?" Highsmith asked, giving him the manuscript of *Ripley's Game* (1974).

The result is *The American Friend* (1977), which combines Highsmith's third Ripley novel, *Ripley's Game*, with elements from her second, *Ripley Under Ground*. It's another version of the "anyone is capable of murder" plot, as shady art dealer Tom Ripley (Dennis Hopper) manipulates a mild-mannered picture framer named Zimmerman (Bruno Ganz) into committing a murder for hire. Wenders sets his anarchic noir against an industrialized western Europe as Zimmerman travels on homicidal errands from Hamburg to Paris to Munich. The camera swirls dizzyingly around the bewildered Zimmerman, following him through greenish tunnels and across a cityscape crowded with cranes. Roger Ebert wrote in his review that Wenders "gives us so much atmosphere we're swimming in it."

"Hopper," Highsmith complained, "is not my idea of Ripley." The actor came to the shoot fresh from *Apocalypse Now*, and his





The novel *Ripley's Game* served as source material for two adaptations: *The American Friend* (1977) and *Ripley's Game* (2002)

performance does seem like a hangover from Coppola's film. He drove Ganz, a theater actor making his film debut, crazy with his fondness for improvisation. But Hopper grows on you, and Wenders' love for the material, and the noir tradition, is palpable. The film is packed with lightning-quick homages to other suspense films, and features Samuel Fuller and Nicholas Ray (complete with eyepatch) in supporting roles. Highsmith later changed her mind about the film, writing to Wenders that he'd "come closer to the spirit of the book than any of the previous adaptations."

The same year that *The American Friend* was released Claude Miller adapted one of Highsmith's most disturbing books, *This Sweet Sickness*. The story of an obsessive, deranged love, it could be called "Portrait of a Stalker." Marijane Meaker, who began an affair with Highsmith shortly after it was published in 1960, believed the book was Highsmith's way of working out her own obsessive love for an unattainable woman. It wasn't the first or last time Highsmith would "write something out of my system" as she put it. Highsmith's ex-girlfriends frequently found themselves in her books, often as corpses.

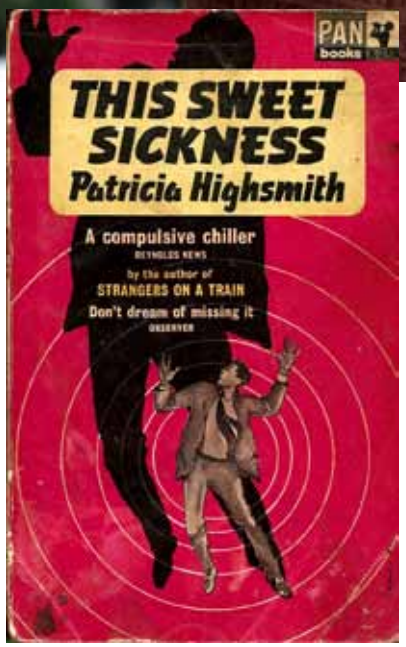
Dites-lui que je l'aime (*Tell her that I love her*, 1977) tells the story of David Martineau, who can only relate to women as untouchable objects of desire. During the week he leads a mundane existence, shuffling between office and drab boarding house in a dull exurb outside Paris. The weekends, however, he spends in a luxurious chalet in the Alps, at the ideal home he has created for his future bride, childhood sweetheart Lise. The only problem is that Lise is married, pregnant, and seems quite content with her own life.

This transposition of lesbian love to heterosexual characters is probably one of the reasons critics have accused Highsmith of misogyny, and one of the reasons the movie makes for queasy viewing, especially since Miller adds an attempted rape and another corpse to the pile Highsmith amasses in the book. While it's a pleasure to watch a very young Gérard Dépardieu pull off the nebbishy David, the movie is, as Highsmith put it after a screening, "kinda crappy."

Highsmith died in 1994 in Switzerland, so we'll never know what she would have made of Anthony Minghella's 1999 version of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. In 1954 when she was fleshing out Tom Ripley's character, Highsmith noted: "Like Bruno he must never be quite queer." In Minghella's version the gay subtext is dragged into the sunlight, explicated and expanded to death. Ripley is even given a gay lover, and sensitive lines about a locked basement of secrets he wishes he could share (Would Highsmith's Ripley even be aware he had such a Freudian basement?). The locked closet and Dickie's rejection are to blame for Tom's multiple murders; greed and self-preservation are shunted to second place. Matt Damon gives hints of a nicely shifty Ripley, but the script turns Tom into an inept criminal who escapes detection through lucky breaks, not the hard work and split-second improvisations that make the book so much fun. The film's biggest crime, however, is that it gives Highsmith's dark little fantasy an A-list movie treatment, where pristine period details, gorgeous costumes, and picture postcard settings swamp the suspense and make the corpses seem a rude intrusion from another film.

Liliana Cavani's version of *Ripley's Game* (2002) went straight to DVD but is worth looking up. It's a more straightforward adaptation than *The American Friend* and features John Malkovich at his sinister best as Ripley, beating a crooked art dealer's henchman to death in the opening scene and cheating his sleazy accomplice Reeves (Ray

Young Gérard Dépardieu starred in Claude Miller's version of one of Highsmith's most perversely disturbing novels



Winstone) out of a couple million. This Ripley is a soft-spoken super-villain who lives in a fortress-like Palladian mansion in Italy. He's a far cry from Hopper's Ripley, who runs around sweating like an overworked housewife, trying to accomplish a never-ending list of lethal chores.

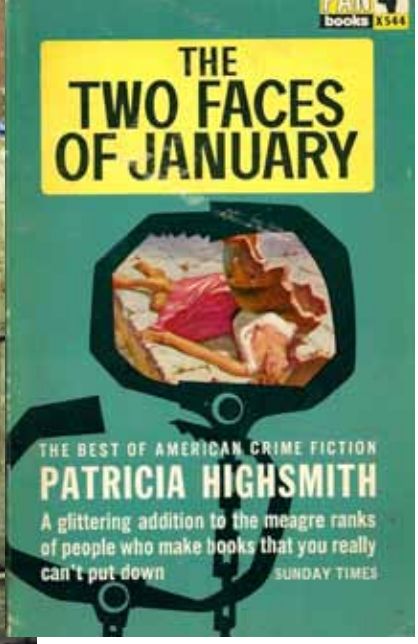
Cavani's version emphasizes the homoerotic dynamic between the two men; for this is a seduction, even if its goal is murder rather than sex. Picture-framer Jonathan (Dougray Scott) insults Ripley, who then sets in motion the machinations that will turn him into a murderer. Once that has been accomplished, Ripley feels affection for his creation—he wants him to succeed, and to that end shows up on a high-speed train to help him dispatch not one but three more victims. Cavani turns this sequence into a comic and gruesome parody of the Marx Brothers overcrowded stateroom in *Night at the Opera*, as the tiny train bathroom is stuffed with bodies. "It never used to be so crowded in first class," quips Ripley.

Highsmith was fascinated with characters stalking one another, and in *The Cry of an Owl* she takes a well-meaning peeping tom as her hero. She wrote the book in 1962 after she'd broken off her relationship with Marijane Meaker, and used Meaker as the model for her hero's jealous ex-wife. The book is Highsmith's most popular after the Ripleys; it has been adapted three times in as many countries. If you're not in France or Germany, British television director Jamie Thraves' 2009 version is a nicely taut drama, set against washed out landscapes where the sky is always gray. Sad-sack Paddy Considine plays Robert Forrest, the recently divorced peeping tom, and Julia Stiles delivers a terrific performance as the object of his gaze, sweet, death-obsessed Jenny. When Jenny catches Robert in the act she invites him in (kudos to Stiles for making this halfway credible). Jenny will swiftly decide Robert is the one for her, but in Highsmith's world, no good can come from turning a romantic fantasy into reality. Jenny's jealous ex-boyfriend disappears, and Robert is suspected of murder. The police hound him, the missing man's father attacks him, and by the end three people have died. Robert is responsible for none of these corpses, and yet somehow bears the guilt for all.

Highsmith's most recent appearance on screen is the higher profile *The Two Faces of January* (2014), screenwriter Hossein Amini's (*Wings of the Dove*, *Drive*) directorial debut. Viggo Mortensen plays Chester, an affable American conman, enjoying a Greek vacation with his wife Colette (Kirsten Dunst). The pair crosses paths with Rydal Keener (Oscar Isaac), who unwittingly helps Chester hide the corpse of the detective who's tracked him to Greece. The movie turns into a lackluster version of Highsmith's oft-repeated cat-and-mouse duel between two men, with Colette as the supposed object of desire.

The Two Faces of January is generally not considered Highsmith's strongest book. Her editor at Harper & Bros. rejected it, writing, "The book only makes sense if there is a homosexual relationship between Rydal and Chester." (No one ever agrees what's too much or too little when it comes to Highsmith's not-quite-queer characters). Highsmith, whose alcoholism eventually helped kill her, began routinely mixing her morning orange juice with vodka as she struggled with this book. It was finally published by Doubleday in 1964.

In an interview, Amini spoke of his fondness for Chester: "He wasn't truly a bad man," said the director, sounding a little like Spencer Tracy in *Boys Town* declaring "There's no such thing as a bad boy." This is the flaw in Amini's version of *January*; he wants to make the characters likable, an impulse completely at odds with Highsmith's skewed worldview. Highsmith's agent once told her that her books didn't sell well in America because they were too subtle and none of the characters were likable. To which Highsmith replied,



Oscar Isaac, Viggo Mortensen and Kirsten Dunst starred in an adaptation of one of the author's most difficultly wrought books

"Perhaps it is because I don't like anyone."

Highsmith's next appearance on the big screen will be a departure from the corpse-ridden films that have preceded it. In Todd Haynes' *Carol*, homosexuality is no longer the subtext, but the subject. It's the story of a romance, between a divorced housewife (Cate Blanchett) and a younger woman (Rooney Mara) who meet by chance in a New York department store during the Christmas rush. The 1952 book was also a historical landmark; it's considered the first lesbian pulp to end happily.

A happy ending? Highsmith?

Fear not. If Haynes is faithful to the book, there will be paranoia, guilt, and anxious tension aplenty. The book was written in the '50s, after all, and the bar for a "happy ending" was lower then, when most lesbian stories ended with the characters dead, straight, or committed.

It should also be noted that *Carol* is, in a sense, the source of Highsmith's stalking fixation. In 1948, the as-yet unpublished author was working at Macy's during the Christmas rush. Spotting an attractive blonde woman in a fur coat, she was instantly smitten, and memorized her address from a COD package. Later she took a train to New Jersey, to try to catch a glimpse of her again, and described, "feeling quite odd, like a murderer in a movie."

For Highsmith, love and murder were always, and will always be, inextricably intertwined.

Monica Nolan is the author of a series of lesbian pulp parodies whose titles include *Maxie Mainwaring, Lesbian Dilettante* and *Dolly Dingle, Lesbian Landlady.* She has written about film and culture for a variety of publications and blogs about lesbian pulp fiction at www.monicanolan.com/pulppep.

Three Faces of HIghsmith: the young womanizing author, the middle-aged recluse, and the legendary master of the psychological noir thriller