

Patricia Highsmith

Exhibition of the Swiss National Library
10 March – 10 September 2006

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1. Families, a refuge out of hell

Patricia Highsmith was born in Fort Worth, Texas, where she spent much of her early years, having been put on and off in the good care of her maternal grandmother. Throughout her life, she had a distressing and conflict-ridden relationship with her divorced and remarried mother. Weakened by the separations and disappointed expectations, the daughter struggled to build her love life. She had trouble sharing a house with a lover for more than a few months. Highsmith's literary output bears testimony to this painful reality, but also to her fierce lucidity. In her writings, the nostalgic desire for an ideal family usually disintegrates before the inexorable collapse of relationships. In an atmosphere of separation, love is but an illusion, a pure projection, often shattered by the reality of the other.

From adolescence onward, Patricia Highsmith's arguments with her mother became near continual. In June 1942, Mary Highsmith slapped her daughter. In response, Highsmith wrote a story in which a girl who is forced to take care of her mother kills her in a fit of laughter, by planting a pair of scissors in her chest. In the 1970s, the family conflict worsened. Highsmith's mother lost some of her mental faculties and was placed in a nursing home in Fort Worth. During the last twenty years of her mother's life, Highsmith neither visited her, nor wrote to her. She also renounced her inheritance.

Despite the clashes with her mother, Highsmith always remained close to her Texan family, in particular her cousin Dan O. Coates, whom she thought of as a brother.

The difficulties and traumas of family life are the subject of several of Highsmith's novels and short stories. In *Edith's Diary*, the female protagonist is weighed down by problems: her apathetic and spineless son disappoints her, and she has to act as a home nurse for her husband's senile and disabled uncle. To top it all, Edith's husband moves in with his secretary, leaving her to cope alone. Edith suffers mental disintegration and keeps a diary in which she records the elements of a fantasized life. She imagines herself as a happy grandmother, and also as a mother proud of her son's brilliant career. The split is playful and innocent at first, but soon drives Edith towards madness and her tragic end.

Although Patricia Highsmith showed a certain compassion for Edith, she was pitiless for the father character in *People Who Knock on the Door*. Richard is a family man who discovers God following a religious experience. He is depicted as a holier-than-thou proselytizing bigot, who tries to talk his son's girlfriend out of having an abortion. But when a former drug-addicted prostitute—still in danger of falling back into her old ways—becomes pregnant by him, he is faced with his contradictions. It is downhill from there for Richard, in this indictment of right-wing Christian fundamentalism, and in

particular the “born again” movement in the United States, which Highsmith researched extensively for the novel.

In the short story “The Terrapin”, a matricide is precipitated by the killing of the animal in the title, in preparation for a stew. The young male protagonist originally thinks the terrapin is a present to him from his mother. Horrified by the killing of the shelled reptile, and overwhelmed by resentment, he stabs his mother to death. It is no surprise that the boy enjoys books on psychology, including Karl A. Menninger’s *The Human Mind*, which Highsmith also read as a child. Her own copy is presented in the exhibition.

The short story “The Button” also shows a reparatory murder, although there is no link between the attacker and the victim this time. Roland, the father of a child with Down’s syndrome, is offended by his wife’s regressive behaviour towards their “Mongoloid” son, and repulsed by the eyes which the outside world casts on their trio. One night, he attacks and strangles a total stranger in the street and rips off a button from his jacket. The button, which he keeps from then on in the pocket of whatever trousers he is wearing, takes on multiple meanings, including revenge, reassurance and compensatory secret.

2. Killers and fantasists

Patricia Highsmith’s novels depict violent deaths, murders and other crimes. The border between a vague desire to murder and an established crime often fluctuates, as does the relation between claimed and actual guilt. Strangely enough, her protagonists sometimes enact an imaginary murder, as a game, or out of innate curiosity, only to be suspected of having actually committed it later. Other characters remain in the dark about the fate of those they attacked and can, therefore, consider themselves either guilty or innocent, depending on their state of mind. The imagination of Highsmith, who has an unusual gift for plumbing the psyche of criminals and psychopaths, is reflected in these fantastic plots. It is a terrifying world in which a murderer may become the delinquent double of an artist, or may even, at times, be both artist *and* murderer.

At least three of Highsmith’s novels bear the mark of imaginary or uncertain crimes, an innovation in the field of crime literature. In *The Blunderer*, the corporate lawyer Walter Stackhouse is interested in lopsided friendships, including those between certain murderers and their victims. His sensitivity and interest in criminal affairs have endowed him with intuition. One day he reads a newspaper article on the murder of a woman and soon guesses that the husband is responsible. But when Stackhouse’s own wife commits suicide, his interest in murder and his habit of collecting newspaper articles on the subject make him out as a murderer in the eyes of a brutal police detective. Caught in a spiral, he vainly proclaims his innocence.

A Suspension of Mercy (published in the United States as *The Story-teller*) is a veiled book on the art of writing a good suspense novel. Sydney Bartleby is a frustrated writer, whose novels and television scripts are regularly rejected by editors. He is unhappy in his relationship with his wife and has often imagined killing her. Making allowances for an elderly neighbour, he sets out from his house early one morning, carrying a rolled carpet which he buries in the woods. When his wife fails to return from a stay away, his imaginary enactment of her murder backfires, and everything points to him as a culprit. Unbeknownst to him, Bartleby succeeds where his scripts fail in capturing the attention of an audience.

The case is quite different in *The Tremor of Forgery*, which includes no official accusation, or investigation. One night Howard Ingham hurls his typewriter at the head of a thief to prevent him from entering his bungalow at a Tunisian beach resort. The traces of the incident - bloodstains and the injured or possibly dead burglar - are immediately removed by personnel eager to preserve the reputation of the establishment. Although a prying fellow American urges Ingham to confess and pursue the truth, he must ultimately face his conscience on his own, and chooses to live with the uncertainty that he may have killed a man.

3. **Morality, normality and oddity**

In his foreword to the collection of short stories *Eleven* (1970) Graham Greene wrote that Highsmith's world is "without moral endings". Highsmith had addressed the issue four years earlier, in her book *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*, commenting that Graham Greene "is also a moralist ... and I am interested in morality, providing it isn't preached." She owned up to a liking for criminal characters, and found "the public passion for justice quite boring and artificial, for neither life nor nature cares if justice is ever done or not." This personal code of ethics asserts itself in the stories, often going against social or religious morals, and legal stipulations. Morality, normality and oddity challenge each other under the puzzled gaze of the reader, fostering an uncertainty and disquiet that carry until the very end of the tale, and beyond.

Society's morals

In *The Cry of the Owl*, society is prompt to accuse, on the basis of his voyeurism, an otherwise rather discreet and harmless man, while it tends to clear characters who appear more "normal", but are in fact dangerously disturbed and unpredictable. The way in which the story is told encourages the reader to resist the certainties of the majority and to side with the marginalized individual.

A criminal society

In *The Glass Cell*, Philip Carter is imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. In jail, he changes from martyr to killer, and later murderer: the intolerable miscarriage of justice has thrown a monkey wrench into the system. To survive after his release, the victim must oppose society's faulty steamroller with his own law. *The justice I have received, I shall give back*, he thinks to himself.

Individual morals

Howard Ingham of *The Tremor of Forgery* builds an ad hoc morality conditioned by his new environment. A human life does not always seem to have the same value in Tunisia as it does in the United States. Which raises the question: Must Ingham confess to the probable, but accidental killing of an Arab thief, which the locals themselves seem to want to keep quiet? Ingham wonders "whether a person makes his own personality and his own standards from within himself, or whether he and the standards are the creation of the society around him."

The debate reaches its peak with the character Tom Ripley, a serene murderer who lives from his crimes with complete impunity. Although he is not devoid of morals (he never kills a woman and regrets one or two of his murders), he consciously takes the law into his own hands when he kills Mafiosi, thereby imitating them too. As a confirmed psychopath, he imposes his own code of ethics on a world which, with a few exceptions, offers little resistance. In Highsmith's writings, a somewhat contradictory personal morality can be very convincing indeed.

4. **On Music**

The characters of Patricia Highsmith's short stories give little information on their readings or musical preferences; they are rather indeterminate on a cultural level. However, this is not the case with her novels' protagonists, who tend to be multi-faceted and are described in rich detail; they are often educated and cultured writers, artists or artisans whose social desirability - even when they are murderers - is a function of their good taste and learning. Their libraries, and music and other collections reflect Highsmith's preferences and are often described.

It takes no less than five adventures for Tom Ripley's musical personality to be fully revealed. The first novel, in which he is still a young man in the process of formation, gives practically no information on the subject. In the second, Tom is seized by a desire to hear Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He thinks of it as "his music", a music that inspires him. In Salzburg, he visits the house where Mozart was born and sees the "clavichord" doomed to silence, its keyboard protected by a panel of glass. In *Ripley's Game*, Tom goes to Paris and carefully picks out a "gem"

of a harpsichord, “of beige wood embellished with gold-leaf here and there”. Back in his house Belle Ombre, he uses it to practise the *Goldberg Variations*, which he knows from a recording with Wanda Landowska. His preferences develop further in the last two novels: Domenico Scarlatti, Bach (he also plays him), Albéniz, Brahms, -Mendelssohn, Sibelius, Scriabine, the *Lieder* of Schubert by Fischer-Dieskau, and Strauss’ *Rosencavalier*. He dislikes Bizet.

Tom Ripley is Highsmith’s only repeat character, which may explain why he is also the one with the most rich and complex artistic personality. In addition to his musical preferences, readers are privy to his literary and artistic tastes (see *Curious breeders and collectors*), the sum of which make him Highsmith’s most multidisciplinary protagonist. Although other characters are professional painters, writers, sculptors, designers, pianists, theatre directors, scriptwriters, architects and so on, none seem to achieve his overall degree of refined *knowledge* in the arts. But when it comes to actual practice or creation, he remains somewhat of an amateur, with the possible exception of his piano playing.

In addition to a small record collection and a few pieces of art, Highsmith had a fine personal library, part of which is shown in the exhibition.

5. Home, sweet home

During adolescence, Patricia Highsmith suffered from the cramped conditions in the New York apartments she shared with her mother Mary Coates and her stepfather Stanley Highsmith. She expressed this in the personal diaries she kept for many years. Predictably, she later paid close attention to the spaces in which she lived, and developed a sustained interest in architects and their creations, both of which are reflected in her literary and pictorial work. Indeed, she designed her last home, built with the architect Tobias Ammann in Tegna in the Swiss canton of Ticino between 1987 and 1988. It was a large M-like figure, which bore (before a second floor was added by new owners after her death) a curious resemblance to the “long, low, and flat-roofed”, “shining white” and Y-shaped house she imagined thirty years earlier, in 1948, for the architect Guy Haines in *Strangers on a Train*.

Highsmith’s fictional homes stand for refuges, hiding places and castles, and are often featured as full-blown characters. In *This Sweet Sickness*, for instance, David’s secret weekend house plays the role of a dream factory that shelters the mad concoctions of his unstable mind.

But the most memorable of these homes is Belle Ombre, the French country house where Tom Ripley lives with his wife Heloise by the opening of his second criminal adventure - after his murder of Dickie Greenleaf and the forging of a will that leaves all of Dickie’s money to him. Located close to Fontainebleau, Belle Ombre is covered with “a Virginia creeper’s reddish leaves”. It is “a two-storey squarish grey stone house with four turrets over four round rooms in the upstairs corners” that make it “look like a little castle”. Visitors praise its beauty, its “robust symmetry”: “It was home, and not exactly humble.”

Ripley admits to “a love of house and home usually found only in women”. He does not hesitate to kill under his own roof when Belle Ombre, a wedding present from his wife’s parents, is at risk. He eliminates three troublesome intruders there, one art collector and two Italian Mafiosi, who might have bombed the place, or endangered the income required for its upkeep.

In her own life, Highsmith was as attached to her home as her beloved snails to their shells.

6. Curious breeders and collectors

Why is Patricia Highsmith so bent on assigning curious obsessions and hobbies to her characters? Why do her novels feature so many collectors and odd breeders? Her aim is probably to give individuals a touch of the bizarre, to zero in on their peculiar inner-selves, but also to insidiously move the storyline towards places beyond rationality. A journalist once titled an article on Highsmith “Sick of Psychopaths”, but the writer was at least as fascinated by the psychology of collectors as she was by that of psychopathic killers.

In the lesbian novel *The Price of Salt* (also published as *Carol*), Carol's young lover, the stage designer Therese, sculpts cats' heads and other figures, just as Kimmel does wood figurines in *The Blunderer*. In *Strangers on a Train* and *Deep Water*, we meet a breeder of snails and bed bugs and a cultivator of foxgloves. In contrast to the calculating murderous inclinations of Vic Van Allen in *Deep Water*, or of the notorious Tom Ripley, the passionate involvement which these same characters show as collectors or breeders supports psychiatric observations on collection enthusiasts: their absence of empathy in human relations is offset by a narcissistic-fusional bond with their collection. The curious breeder Vic lets blood-feeding bed bugs bite his hand, because he wants them "to go through their normal life cycle". Elsewhere, he studies the lovemaking of his gastropods with anthropomorphic pleasure: "They were genuinely in love, Vic thought, because Edgar had eyes for no other snail but Hortense and Hortense never responded to the attempt of another snail to kiss her."

Proliferating and stimulating, the collection is the place where the libido can be sublimated into intellectual curiosity. Highsmith had read Freud, and had assimilated the idea. Indeed, the protagonist of *Edith's Diary* expresses the hope that her passive adolescent son might finally develop a passion for something: "With puberty, there's often an impetus, life takes on a meaning, and there's a drive toward something, even if it's only - butterfly collecting or making model ships." This is exactly what happens with Ripley. In the course of his adventures, he takes readers along his personal collection which includes a Marie Laurencin, a nude by Pascin, two forged and one genuine Derwatts (the only imaginary painter in this line-up), a Soutine, "of whose work Tom was especially fond", a Van Gogh, two Magrittes, and drawings by Cocteau and Picasso. Ripley also has "many drawings of less famous painters which he thought equally good or better" - and goes so far as to hang one of the forged Derwatts in the place of honour above the fireplace. Most of the cited artists are connected to the School of Paris movement - in Highsmith's fiction, French art and literature repeatedly stand for cultural distinction.

Patricia Highsmith herself sculpted wood and collected figurines of cats and snails, some of which have been preserved. She considered as pets the snails that she kept in her home and observed with great attention.

7. Society under a microscope

Patricia Highsmith's protagonists operate outside the norm and live on the fringe of society. They are often homosexuals, strangers, artists, or, far more threateningly, psychopaths. Nearly all are exposed to the suspicious examination of an orthodox and frightened society that rejects them and hounds them, thus reinforcing their misanthropy. Highsmith herself was a fierce loner, who preferred to stay out of public life. But in her novels and political satires she was nonetheless a keen observer and scathing critic, who took visible pleasure in denouncing the facts and avenging wrongs. The numerous reader's letters she sent newspapers under batty pseudonyms were another way in which she gave vent to her relish of criticism.

Binoculars, the familiar prop of fictional detectives, also appear in Patricia Highsmith's writings. However, they do not work towards solving an enigma, but rather help establish an uneasy backdrop of observation and suspicion between neighbours or family members. This occurs in *The Price of Salt (Carol)*, *The Cry of the Owl*, *A Suspension of Mercy (The Story-teller)*, *Found in the Street*, and *Ripley Under Water*. When he is released from jail, Philip Carter of *The Glass Cell* evokes this atmosphere of social claustrophobia: "The whole world is like one big prison, and prisons are just an exaggerated form of it."

As a lesbian, Highsmith was imbued with a feeling of social non-conformity from an early age. Later, her status as an American living in Europe also marginalized her, making her as much of an outsider in her chosen home as she had been in her country of birth. Although she sometimes deplored it, she was also extremely attached to the solitude she had opted for, and the attendant independence. She believed in self-determination even in the face of death and became a member of EXIT, the society for the right to die with dignity. Moreover, she sometimes chose suicide as a means to solve the conflict between a desire for solitude and a feeling of suffocation in her novels. In her own life, Highsmith was also confronted with the suicide of several of her friends, including that of the painter Allela Cornell and the writer Arthur Koestler.

Although in Highsmith's early novels the critique of society occurs indirectly through the bias of tragic private destinies, she later developed more straightforward lines of attack. In *Tales of Natural and Unnatural Catastrophes* she presents a collection of grotesque or satirical short stories, including several apocalyptic scenarios in which nature avenges the abuses inflicted upon it by modern society. Highsmith denounces in particular the conservative and warmongering power of the late US President Ronald Reagan.

In harsh and sometimes sarcastic letters to politicians and newspapers Highsmith also expressed her concern about the fate of Palestinians and their oppression - legitimized by the United States - at the hands of Israel. Although she never based a plot directly on the conflict, she dedicated *People Who Knock on the Door* and *Ripley Under Water* to, respectively, "the courage of the Palestinian people and their leaders in the struggle to regain part of their homeland" and "the dead and the dying among the Intifada".

8. Mirror portrait

Patricia Highsmith excelled in psychological introspection. She identified with her anti-heroes and, throughout the plot, polished their complex personalities by placing them in chaotic situations, or else assigning to them strange, incomprehensible or dismaying actions. In her novels, we often find pairs of males involved in a love-hate relationship. These unsettling duos enact an unconfirmed homo-erotic relation through an abundance of allusions and unspoken comments. Patricia Highsmith mirrored herself in these fictional couples, entrusting them with much of her own unhappy experience in her relation to others. The sexually ambiguous Ripley was, by her own saying, her favourite character and somewhat of a literary alter ego.

In *The Talented Mr Ripley*, Tom Ripley travels to Italy at the request of a well-to-do American ship-builder, who wants Tom to convince his son Dickie Greenleaf to come home and work in the family business. But when Tom meets Dickie, he takes a liking to his leisured and carefree peer and begins to imitate him, going so far as to try on his clothes in his absence. Then Dickie turns away from him and Tom is cut to the quick. He responds by killing him and taking over his identity, before travelling through Europe for several months, playing on and off the role of Dickie, until he finally forges a will in which "Dickie" leaves all his money to him.

There were periods in which Patricia Highsmith had a great number of lovers. However, in the public eye she remained secretive about her homosexuality until a few years before her death. Her second published novel, *The Price of Salt (Carol)*, which details a love story between two women, appeared under the pseudonym Claire Morgan in 1952. It sold over a million copies and became an instant lesbian and even gay cult novel. Its happy ending for the love relation earned Highsmith thousands of letters from grateful readers, even though, as a possible acknowledgment of the reality of post-war America, one of the women was in fact stripped of the custody of her daughter. It is not until 1991 that the novel was published under the name Patricia Highsmith, with an afterword by the author.

The personal diaries and letters kept in the Highsmith collection shed light on the love life of the young writer. She recorded in them the detail of her versatile and impetuous romantic encounters, documenting the difficulties attached to homosexual relations in the repressive New York of the 1940s and 1950s, and analyzing her own private tragedies. In keeping with the ambient mood, Highsmith even underwent psychotherapy in an attempt to cure herself of her homosexuality. Self-analysis and a yearning for self-knowledge lead to relentless interrogations in these writings. Highsmith also lent herself to questionnaires - "List of Twenty Things which I Like", "Twenty Things that I Do Not Like" and "The Proust Questionnaire" - which paint the portrait of an unsociable loner who hates not only noisy people, but also the wearing of jewellery, clothes, or perfume that might attract attention to her person. Early mornings are a true hell, as are those who believe in an after-life, or in proselytizing.

Highsmith's last, posthumous novel, *Small g: a Summer Idyll*, is set against the backdrop of the Zurich homosexual scene and the AIDS epidemic. An otherwise responsible and friendly doctor makes one of his homosexual patients, the graphic designer Rickie, believe for a while that he is HIV positive, in order to bring him round to responsible sexual behaviour.