Any close encounter with Patricia Highsmith involves psychological risk, which is one reason her books are always coming back into vogue.

By Jane Goodall

Writing Dangerously

PATRICIA HIGHSIGHT’S 1964 novel The Two Faces of January has recently been released as a film directed by Hossein Amini, who speculates on her special appeal to filmmakers. Cinema has played a vital role in generating the readership of Highsmith’s novels, from when Alfred Hitchcock bought the rights to her first novel Strangers on a Train in 1950. The Talented Mr Ripley, published in 1955, was released as a film in 1960 starring Alain Delon, and again in 1999 in a brilliant adaptation by Anthony Minghella, with a cast that included Matt Damon, Gwyneth Patrow, Jude Law and Cate Blanchett. A few years later John Malkovich succeeded Matt Damon in the central role with Ripley’s Game, playing the mature Ripley as a hard-grained sociopath.

Clearly, Tom Ripley is a character who appeals to different generations and in different eras. Highsmith’s criminals engage in identity theft, run fraudulent investment schemes and pose as tax department officials in order to elicit...
Soon, the couple and the tour guide will be embroiled in scenes from a thickening nightmare. What kind of human intelligence wants to imagine such terrible destinies for people who have made their way to an idyllic place, to soak up its wonders and pleasures?

“Perversion interests me most,” the 21-year-old Highsmith wrote in her diaries, “and is my guiding darkness.”

Something about this guiding darkness is leading financial information —practices that seem quite contemporary to us. But there is also something timeless about her sinister fictional worlds.

In a preface to the film companion edition of The Two Faces of January, Amini writes that “she was one of the first authors to tell her stories from the villain’s point of view”. Not quite.

Highsmith’s favourite writers included Dostoevsky and Edgar Allan Poe, both of whom explored the criminal psyche from the inside. It is true, though, that she is one of the few crime writers to adopt this perspective, which raises the question of whether she really was a crime writer in the generic sense. Her plots have been called “classic” and their starkly simple architecture resembles that of Greek tragedy.

Amini’s film begins with a group of wide-eyed young girls being shown around the Acropolis in Athens by a handsome male tour guide. Some distance away, a well-dressed couple are strolling in the sun, like figures from a glossy travel brochure.
How she emerged with such powerful self-determination from these social and cultural constraints is a significant question. We should remember that not all women of that era allowed themselves to be confined by prototypes. Highsmith’s mother and grandmother were both forceful personalities, with the capacity to forge a path through the world on their own terms. They were strong role models, though her relationships with both women were fraught with tension. The love–hate bond between mother and daughter remained highly charged even in the writer’s mature years, when she was living in Britain and Europe, distant in every way from the formative influences of her childhood. A friend who once unwisely asked the two of them to tea in an attempt to help Highsmith cope with her mother’s visit to London was left feeling that the house was ready to explode with the tension.

There was never any doubt that Patricia Highsmith wanted a career, and that the prospect of conventional marriage had no place on her agenda. Compared to many other women born in the Depression era, she led a charmed life, or at least that’s how it might have looked. As a teenager, she moved with her mother and stepfather to New York, where she attended Barnard College, graduating in 1942 at a time when Manhattan was awakening to new forms of cultural and social vitality. Writers, artists and musicians converged on Greenwich Village, where the bars and cafes were home ground for anyone who wanted to flout social conformity. Highsmith spent her evenings drinking hard and seducing glamorous women. If she repressed anything, it was not her sexuality. From early adulthood, she established a pattern of serial
up the atmosphere of a world almost unchanged by twentieth-century technologies.

As part of this vibrant social milieu Patricia Highsmith was surely a lucky woman. And yet, in the face of all its opportunities, she cast herself as Maleficent, conjuring onto the page the figure of Tom Ripley, nemesis of the blessed and the gifted.

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HER BOOKS, LIKE her affairs, tended to overlap chronologically, and this highly unorthodox lesbian romance was already forming as she worked on the murder plot of *Strangers on a Train*. Cautious about “outing” herself to the general public who were just getting to know her as a crime writer, she published *The Price of Salt* under the pseudonym of Claire Morgan. But Highsmith’s stories were drawn up from somewhere much deeper than genre divisions can account for, and read together now, these two books are like two sides of a coin: both dramas of predestination and guilt.

*The Price of Salt* found a niche readership among the lesbian community, but became a bestseller when released for the mass market by Bantam Books, with endorsements from *The Louisville Times*, which described it as “utterly sincere and honest”, and the *New York Times* praised the handling of “explosive subject matter” with “sincerity and good taste”.

The income from her books enabled Highsmith to travel. She toured Europe, staying in Berlin, Zurich, Salzburg, Athens and the south of France, and also spent time in Tunisia. In the postwar years, young north Americans with artistic and literary ambitions (including Truman Capote, Gore Vidal and Leonard Cohen) were discovering the appeal of small Mediterranean towns where they could gaze out over the ocean, stroll the ancient streets and soak up the atmosphere of a world almost unchanged by twentieth-century technologies.

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_The Talented Mr Ripley_ is the portrait of a human being who is himself a blank page, seeking a character and a life story. In Minghella’s screen adaptation, Ripley (Matt Damon) has talent as a musician, but Highsmith endows him only with the gift of impersonation. He’s a chameleon, able to slip into someone else’s identity, in this case that of Dicky Greenleaf, a spoiled rich boy who is his college contemporary, and living the easy life in an Italian village.
Ripley takes to wearing Dicky’s clothes, imitating his voice, and signing his cheques, rendering Dicky’s presence quite superfluous. Soon Ripley’s own identity becomes a role to be assumed at need. It’s just a matter of a quick costume change along with a switch in the wardrobe of mannerisms: “It was a good idea to practice jumping into his own character again because the time might come when he would need to in a matter of seconds.”

There’s a wry acknowledgement here of the superhero narrative Highsmith knew so well from her experience writing for comic books, but in Ripley’s case the identity game involves murder. He is a walking blight, who enters another’s life as a terminal affliction.

Ripley is in a sense Highsmith’s own alter-ego, and she kept him going across five books, charting a life course of deepening perdition. Fascinated as she is with crime, she is uninterested in detectives and solutions: her obsession is with the lost soul whose only mission is to take another down.

This theme harks back to her Calvinist heritage. Calvinism was the darkest face of Protestant Christianity, characterized by a vision of the world divided between the saved and the damned. Those upon whom Divine favour shone—“the elect”—were endowed with a life course that would lead them to redemption, but for every child born as one of the elect, there was another set inevitably on a path to damnation. Efforts to change one’s own predestined course were futile; such efforts were themselves part of the pattern set by fate, which determined every decision, every action and every influence a person encountered.

This is an intensely dramatic idea and one that has inspired many classic works of literature, from...
By the time she reached middle-age, she was drinking from first thing in the morning through most of the night. The habit spills over into her writing; hardly a page goes by without someone pouring a drink.

“Whatever pity I have for the human race is for the mentally deranged and for criminals,” she wrote in her diary. In her novels, she sought payback against the elect. Ripley’s “game” is to fix upon a victim who is to be drawn into crime despite himself. This is also the essential plot of most of her other stories, including *Strangers on a Train* and *The Two Faces of January*. Guilt is a state of delirium that engulfs the two central characters, binding them together like some strange passion, so that they become inseparable. Perhaps it is this we need to focus on in this latest Highsmith revival. We may be more tolerant of sexual diversity, but we still have our reprobates and pariahs, from asylum-seekers dubbed “illegals” to those we deem terrorists and predators.

“I am human. Nothing human is alien to me”, said the American poet Walt Whitman. Patricia Highsmith represents that rare kind of consciousness: one prepared to acknowledge sinister aspects of human nature as her own. She inhabits them, knowing this is a dangerous way to live, but out of that comes the mind-bending intensity of her best writing.

**Misery was home ground, and her only remedy for it was drink, which she consumed in formidable quantities.**

The experience of the outcast always spoke to her. When Highsmith effectively came out as a lesbian with the 1990 publication of the novel under her own name (and with the new title, *Carol*), she wrote an afterword, saying that before this book, gay and lesbian characters in American fiction “had to pay for their deviation” by committing suicide, switching to heterosexuality or “by collapsing—alone and miserable and shunned—into a depression equal to hell”.

She remained notoriously edgy when probed about her sexuality, responding to questions on the BBC 2 Late Show with some venom: “I don’t answer personal questions about myself or other people that I know, any more than I give out other people’s telephone numbers.”

Happiness was always a strange phenomenon to Highsmith, referred to frequently in her writing as if it is a state one of her characters is trying to experience. Misery was home ground, and her only remedy for it was drink, which she consumed in formidable quantities throughout her life. As a young woman, she would down a half-bottle of gin as prelude to the evening’s martinis, which would be followed by a late-night scotch or three.

Paradise Lost to *Frankenstein*, but in personal terms, it could be a terrifying proposition. Highsmith suffered from a lifelong sense that she had entered the world to play out a sinister role. She described a visionary childhood dream in which a circle of doctors are presiding over her birth, conferring about some “unspeakable defect” they are trying to assess. The verdict they pronounce is the worst: she is fated to live with a heart of darkness.

Although she was never overtly conflicted about her sexual orientation, it is possible to read this as profound psychological disturbance arising from a sense that there something fundamentally not “right” with her. The title of *The Price of Salt* refers to a verse from the Gospel of Matthew, beginning, in the King James Bible translation, “Ye are the salt of the earth”. There is a stern warning. If the salt have lost his savour, it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out and to be trodden under the foot of men.

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