

# PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

b. January 19, 1921

d. February 4, 1995

## AMERICAN NOVELIST

**She was a famous author of psychological thrillers such as “The Talented Mr. Ripley.”**

*“My imagination functions much better when I don’t have to speak to people.”*

Patricia Highsmith was an American novelist and short-story writer best known for her internationally famous psychological thrillers “Strangers on a Train” and “The Talented Mr. Ripley.” Popular screen adaptations of these and many of Highsmith’s works have been released over the last 75 years.

Born Mary Patricia Plangman in Fort Worth, Texas, Highsmith was the only child of two artists. Her parents’ marriage ended nine days before her birth, purportedly after her mother, at her father’s urging, attempted to terminate the pregnancy. In 1924, her mother married Stanley Highsmith, and they moved to New York City, where Highsmith was raised. She developed an early interest in psychology, reading Karl Menninger’s “The Human Mind” at age 9.

Highsmith attended Barnard College and graduated in 1942. She spent the next seven years working on her own writing while supporting herself as a comic book writer. Her breakthrough came in 1945 when Harper’s Bazaar published her short story, “The Heroine,” a piece that established her hallmark style and dark psychological themes.

In 1950, Highsmith published her first novel, “Strangers on a Train.” She sold the rights indirectly to an unknown buyer, later identified as the director Alfred Hitchcock. Hitchcock released a screen adaptation in 1951. Initially pleased, Highsmith later criticized the film’s ending, which was altered from the book’s, due to Hollywood censorship.

Highsmith published a novel about a lesbian relationship, “The Price of Salt,” under the pseudonym Claire Morgan in 1952. It is recognized today as a groundbreaking work. She wrote her most famous book, “The Talented Mr. Ripley” (1955), in just six months. Its main character, Tom Ripley, appeared in four of her subsequent novels. The book received the 1957 Grand Prix de Littérature Policière and inspired film adaptations, including “Purple Noon” (1960), “The Talented Mr. Ripley” (1999), starring Matt Damon, and the Netflix limited series “Ripley” (2024).

A lesbian whose sexuality informed her work, Highsmith struggled with internalized homophobia. In her 20s, she was engaged to a man but never married. She had many affairs with women, most of whom were married, and avoided permanent romantic relationships. The screenwriter Phyllis Nagy described her as “a lesbian who did not very much enjoy being around other women.”

All together, Highsmith published seven short story collections and 20 novels. Among other honors, she was named an Officer of the French Order of Arts and Letters in 1990 and was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1991. She spent much of her life in Europe and died in Locarno, Switzerland, in 1995.



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