



The Talented Miss Highsmith: The Secret Life and Serious Art of Patricia Highsmith

By Joan Schenkar

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Patricia Highsmith, one of the great writers of 20th Century American fiction, had a life as darkly compelling as that of her favorite "hero-criminal," talented Tom Ripley. In this revolutionary biography, Joan Schenkar paints a riveting portrait, from Highsmith's birth in Texas to Hitchcock's filming of her first novel, *Strangers On a Train*, to her long, strange, self-exile in Europe. We see her as a secret writer for the comics, a brilliant creator of disturbing fictions, and erotic predator with dozens of women (and a few good men) on her love list. *The Talented Miss Highsmith* is the first literary biography with access to Highsmith's whole story: her closest friends, her oeuvre, her archives. It's a compulsive page-turner unlike any other, a book worthy of Highsmith herself.

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- Sales Rank: #211122 in eBooks
- Published on: 2010-01-18
- Released on: 2010-01-18
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Author and playwright Schenkar (*Truly Wilde*) presents a compelling portrait of suspense novelist Patricia Highsmith (1921–1995), whose own life was often as twisted as that of her antihero Tom Ripley. Dispensing with the traditional chronological narrative, Schenkar divides her study into themed sections, which crisscross and mirror each other, embodying the themes of doubling and alter egos in Highsmith's work and life. From her early years in Texas through her time soaking up Manhattan's literary life in the '40s to her self-exile in Europe, Highsmith kept diaries in which she meticulously detailed everything from her myriad female lovers to plot ideas. Pessimistic, alcoholic and chronically unhappy, Highsmith created some of the most chilling tales of psychological suspense and betrayal, including *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and its sequels, and *Strangers on a Train*. Schenkar's research is impeccable, and she makes excellent use of the voluminous Highsmith archives in Switzerland and interviews with Highsmith's friends, ex-lovers and literary contemporaries. Perversion, Highsmith once said, interests me most and is my guiding darkness, and Schenkar illuminates how her demons played out on the page and in real life. 16 pages of b&w photos. (Dec.)

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From [Booklist](#)

Highsmith is best known for *Strangers on a Train* (1950) and her Ripley series, which begins with *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955). Schenkar's fascinating biography portrays Highsmith as driven by obsessions, especially her love-hate relationship with her mother, and a yin-yang ambivalence that became a central main theme in her writings, which also evinced the fast-moving action she developed while writing comic books in her twenties. The Highsmith Country she created was filled with "the constant shifting of identities," both inward and outward, "that created the consistency, the fierce peculiarity, the weird, graveled originality of her work." The author of a pseudonymous landmark lesbian novel *The Price of Salt* (1951), Highsmith was a femme fatale whose same-sex affairs spanned the Atlantic Ocean, a series of sudden, wild passions, another signature theme in her fiction. The catalyst for Schenkar's exhaustive, compelling work, which boasts copious end notes, maps, charts, diagrams, bibliography, and chronology, was the recent unearthing of 8,000 pages of Highsmith's secret journals. The result is an essential scholarly, lesbian, and literary biography. --Whitney Scott

Review

Praise for *The Talented Miss Highsmith*:

A *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year

A 2010 Lambda Literary Award Winner

A 2009 Edgar Award Nominee

A 2009 Agatha Award Nominee

A Publishers Weekly Pick of the Week

"Schenkar has a wonderfully bold approach: not worrying about a linear chronology (although this is meticulously supplied in the appendices), but choosing instead to follow the emotional water course of Highsmith's life, allowing her subject to find her own level — to be tidal, sullen, to flow without check, so that events in one decade naturally make an imaginative tributary into turbulence before and after. Schenkar's writing is witty, sharp and light-handed, a considerable achievement given the immense detail of this biography. Highsmith was a detail junkie. Schenkar's nonlinear organizing method was a brilliant idea to save herself — and the reader — from data overload. This is a biography of clarity and style. A model of its kind." --**Jeanette Winterson, *The New York Times Book Review*; cover review**

"This is no ordinary biography...[Ms. Schenkar] writes with great authority and perverse affection...'The Talented Miss Highsmith' breaks much ground in connecting Highsmith's diabolical tales with the real women who prompted her strongest passionsIn addition to its impressive sweep, this biography also values minutiae. An exacting inventory of the contents of Highsmith's office captures every mundane object, right down to the goat's bell and the Wite-Out pencil. Highsmith loved details like that. And Ms. Schenkar shows an uncannily keen grasp of Highsmith's spirit." --**Janet Maslin, *The New York Times***

" Throughout nearly 700 pages of lustrous text, Schenkar's prose is as supple and shapely as Highsmith's was flat and functiona..."

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