

The New Criterion

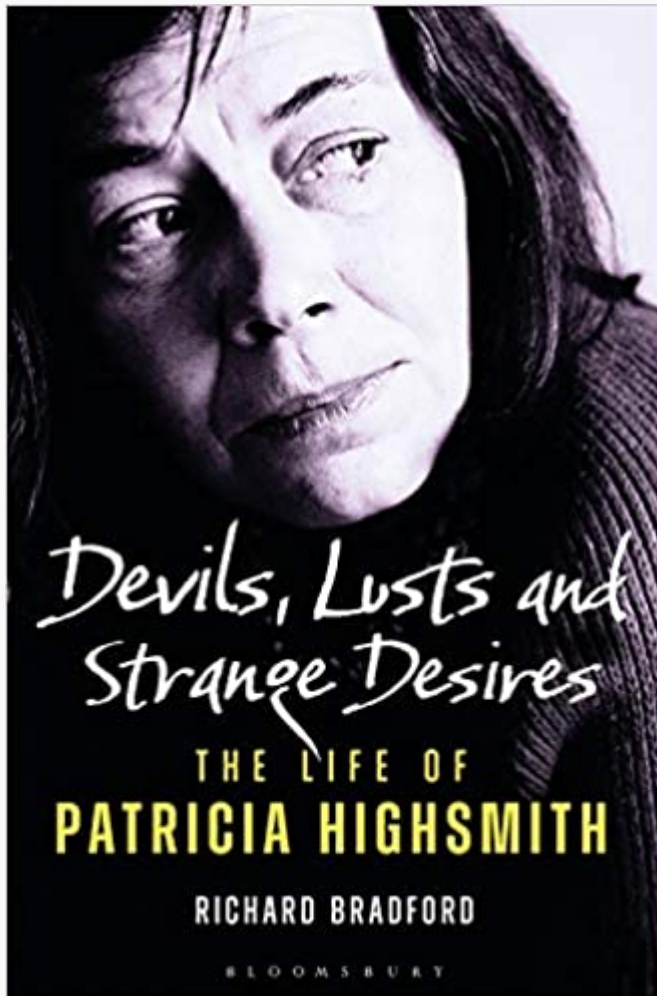
Books February 2021

Vicious Highsmith

by Brooke Allen

A review of *Devils, Lusts and Strange Desires* by Richard Bradford

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Richard Bradford

Devils, Lusts and Strange Desires

Bloomsbury Caravel, 272 pages, \$30.00

It's a well-known principle that if you admire certain writers' work, maybe you'd be better off not meeting them in the flesh. Good writers are often surprisingly unpleasant people—no one can quite figure out why, but it's true. And never has there been a writer I'm so glad not to have known (though I very much enjoy her fiction) as Patricia Highsmith (1921–95). To use a non-PC term—I think I can get away with it in these pages—she was a predatory lesbian, in addition to being a professional homebreaker; a nasty drunk; an emotional sadist; and an equal-opportunity bigot who seems to have detested every group except the American and European gratin. Arabs, Jews, the French, Catholics, evangelicals, Latinos, blacks, Koreans, Indians both dot and feather . . . the list goes on and on.

Richard Bradford, Highsmith's most recent biographer, observes, in his book *Devils, Lusts and Strange Desires*, her carryings-on with a sort of horrified fascination.¹ “Compared to Highsmith, the likes of Casanova, Errol Flynn and Lord Byron might be considered lethargic—even demure. She seemed to enjoy affairs with married women in particular, but breaking up lesbian couples was a close second.” “An insatiable appetite for things, and people, stolen from or denied to others, seemed to have become her *modus operandi*.” She had an urgent and insatiable need for high drama ending in ruined lives, and if a relationship did not provide her with such fodder she soon moved on.

The question of mental illness of course arises, though Highsmith was never diagnosed. Bradford cites a psychiatrist, unacquainted with the writer, who passed her in a hotel corridor and noted that her facial expression was one he had never witnessed outside of an insane asylum. She herself speculated that she might have been bipolar, but to me (amateur psychologist that I am) her behavior seems more in keeping with borderline personality disorder. But we will never know.

What makes all this interesting, aside from the reader's prurience and the perverse fascination involved in watching a train wreck in progress? It is, Bradford demonstrates, that Highsmith's personality is so closely interwoven with those of her characters, her pathologies so allied with

theirs, that a knowledge of her life truly expands the imaginative exercise of reading the fiction—which is not always the case with biographies. But how much do we actually know, and how much of what she tells us can be trusted? From adolescence on she recorded her life, thoughts, and fantasies in a series of “*cahiers*,” now assembled in the Swiss Literary Archives at Bern. Bradford has clearly spent a long and frustrating time in those archives, trying to differentiate truth and fantasy, fact and fiction. He admits that the attempt was often vain—but that fact in itself tells us much about Highsmith's odd psyche. “As well as writing books featuring invented characters,” he tells us, “she decided that her own life should become the equivalent of a novel, a legacy of lies, fantasies and authorial inventions.” She apparently did this for several reasons: to create a life she

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desired rather than the one she lived, shaping her own life as fiction; to transpose her own experiences imaginatively into those of her characters; and, mischievously, to confuse scholars and biographers, poor saps like Bradford who, she knew, would scrutinize her papers after her death.

Much of her childhood and early life can be ascertained, however. Was there anything there to have caused the extreme behaviors of later years? Probably so, as it turns out. She was born in 1921 in Fort Worth, to Jay Bernard Plangman and Mary Coates Plangman. When Mary got pregnant, the Plangmans, who were looking forward to a new life in New York, attempted an abortion (with turpentine!) but botched it; Jay inexplicably revealed this incident to Patricia in later years. The birth of the child (whom neither parent wanted) hastened the collapse of the marriage, and the Plangmans split up six months later. Mary got remarried two years later, to Stanley Highsmith, an illustrator and photographer, who adopted the child.

Patricia claimed to have childhood amnesia, a state that is usually connected with childhood trauma, and in fact she suspected that she had been sexually abused at her grandmother's house. Bradford suggests, however, that the amnesia might possibly have been invented as a method for Highsmith to place her life within her own artistic control: "one has to wonder," he writes with justifiable frustration, "if Highsmith intuited [invented?] childhood amnesia as a means of rewriting her past." Certain salient facts, however, still stood out to her. "My [sexual] character was essentially made before I was six," she recalled, as well as that from the age of eight or so she had entertained "evil thoughts of murder of my stepfather": "I learned to live with a grievous and murderous hatred very early on."

Patricia spent much of her childhood shuttling back and forth between Texas and New York City; at one point the Highsmiths temporarily split up and Patricia was left with her grandparents in Fort Worth for a year while her parents worked things out. Then it was back to New York, and the Julia Richman High School, where one of her major crushes was one Judy Tuvim (later to achieve fame as Judy Holliday). In 1938 she enrolled at Barnard College, where she cut quite a swath "dressed as a character in a noir movie"; "My vision of her," remembers one contemporary, "is with a cigarette hanging out of the corner of her mouth. And the camel hair coat, the high white collar and I think she wore an ascot. I mean she was stylish." A year into college she joined the Young Communist League. Not that she was ever very political; Bradford's assumption is that she posed as a communist for attention, as it was not a persona adopted by many of the nice Barnard girls. "Quite soon, though, she grew tired of this new performance."

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It was at this time that she commenced her lifelong career of social climbing, befriending luminaries like Janet Flanner, Ludwig and Madeleine Bemelmans, and Berenice Abbott.

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glamorous, the wasp. Like her most famous character, Tom Ripley, fixating on the glittering, golden Dickie Greenleaf, Highsmith was always fascinated by such creatures of fantasy: "she only truly

desired women who came from the kind of social, cultural and intellectual ranking to which she aspired." She even stalked them. When she was working as a temporary saleswoman at Bloomingdale's one Christmas season, for example, she was deeply struck by a mink-clad blonde and tracked her down to her home. Unlike the situation in her 1952 novel, *The Price of Salt*, which was inspired by this incident, she and the strange woman would never actually meet, let alone have a romance. (Times being what they were, Highsmith had to publish *The Price of Salt* under a pseudonym; much later, after its true authorship had been finally revealed, it was adapted as the 2015 movie *Carol*.)

As Bradford points out, "there are eerie resemblances between the real-life stalker, Highsmith, and her horrid creation, Bruno" (the psychopath in *Strangers on a Train*). Highsmith, he continues, "spent much of her life as a writer siphoning the emotional catastrophes she prompted, encountered, and experienced," using alcohol as a way of heightening her already provocative behavior. The two most memorable characters in her fiction, Tom Ripley and Charles Anthony Bruno (whose name was changed to Bruno Anthony in the Hitchcock film), are almost certainly memorable because of the author's personal identification with their obsessions: like Bruno, who wishes profoundly for his father's death, Highsmith fantasized for years about murdering her stepfather, and, like both Bruno and Tom, she equated murder with love. "Murder," she wrote, "is a kind of making love, a kind of possessing."

Devils, Lusts and Strange Desires is not a critical biography, but the connections between Highsmith's life and works are made clear. In the years after college Highsmith began writing, supporting herself primarily by penning scripts for the Sangor-Pines Comic Shop. (Bradford suggests that the spare comic-book style might have had some influence on her prose.) She drew well, and even considered becoming an artist rather than a writer. In 1944 she moved to a pleasant villa in Taxco, Mexico (Bradford rightly wonders where she got the funds to pay for it), and wrote a novel, *The Click of the Shutting*, which was "irredeemably bad" but whose plot foreshadowed the central relationships in *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. The first of her twenty-two published novels, *Strangers on a Train*, appeared in 1952.

From this point on, with an assured income, Highsmith spent much of her time abroad: in Positano (which she wonderfully recreated as Mongibello in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*); in France, although she hated the French; in Switzerland, where she died of lung cancer

and aplastic anemia in 1995, mourned by few. She had always been dreadful: once she had looked on as a distraught lover washed down an overdose of Veronal with several large martinis, then left her there on the bed and went out to dinner with friends, returning at 2:00 a.m., finally deigning to call an ambulance when she failed to wake the hapless Ellen from her coma. But as Highsmith aged, her vision grew even darker, perhaps because, as she remarked in a *cahier*, she regarded the vast majority of humans as "morons." One of her lovers mused: "If she hadn't had her work, she

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would have been sent to an insane asylum or an alcoholics' home. . . . It took a while for me to figure this out, but all those strange characters haunting other people, and thinking and writing about them—they were her. She *was* her writing."

Devils, Lusts and Strange Desires is certainly an engrossing book, though it leaves a rancid taste in the reader's mouth. But why was it written? There are already two Highsmith biographies out there: Andrew Wilson's *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith* (2003) and Joan Schenkar's *The Talented Miss Highsmith: The Secret Life and Serious Art of Patricia Highsmith* (2009)—and this for a writer who has been dead only twenty-five years. Bradford's introduction doesn't provide a justification, and one suspects that, 2021 marking Highsmith's centenary, he approached, or was approached by, Bloomsbury to produce a volume in honor of the occasion. Bradford, a British academic, is a prolific writer who specializes in literary biography, having authored lives of John Milton, Philip Larkin, Alan Sillitoe, both Kingsley and Martin Amis, Ernest Hemingway, and George Orwell. Trying to separate fact from fiction in the Swiss archives might have made Highsmith the most difficult subject he's taken on. His most serious handicap in the attempt is his obvious unfamiliarity with the American scene: he compares the lifestyle in *The Philadelphia Story* with "those of the degenerate Regency Aristocracy," calls Manhattan's 103rd Street "midtown," says that Astoria "is a suburb of New York" and that Barnard College is "in Central New York, adjacent to Broadway." Simply asking an American reader to have a look at the book prior to publication would have cleaned up this sort of thing.

But, at his best, Bradford can demonstrate real psychological savvy. Speaking of Highsmith's avowed anti-Semitism, for instance:

I suspect . . . that Highsmith as the foul anti-Semite was in part an invention. Like Ripley she reflected horrible elements of her creation honestly enough but she deliberately exaggerated them as an excuse in provocation and self-loathing. Highsmith knew that those closest to her were appalled by her views and her expressions of them, which is why she continued them. She was genuinely anti-Semitic, but in the same sense that Ripley was a genuine, real murderer.

The key word here, I think, is "self-loathing." Was she born this way, or had the conditions of her early life created the pathology? For all of his assiduous archival detective work, Bradford has not succeeded in finding the answer.

¹ *Devils, Lusts and Strange Desires: The Life of Patricia Highsmith*, by Richard Bradford; Bloomsbury Caravel, 272 pages, \$30.

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