

## The poet of apprehension

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A book review of: HER DIARIES AND NOTEBOOKS 1941-1995 Patricia Highsmith

Editor: Anna von Planta; afterword by Joan Schenkar. Weidenfeld and Nicholson 2021,

After Patricia Highsmith's death, her friend Anna von Planta found eight thousand pages of diaries and notes stashed in a linen cupboard. She distilled Highsmith's pages into a mere 999, and the result is a milestone in the understanding of 20th-century writing. Most people who have read Highsmith see her as an antisocial, anti-Semitic, croaky old lesbian hermit with a handbag full of pet snails, drinking and smoking herself to death in a Swiss hideaway.

But Highsmith is far more complex, as this book reveals. Some writers are ahead of their own time and wait decades for critical recognition – and Highsmith is long overdue. In her five Tom Ripley novels she created an adorable psychopath. Graham Greene called her “the poet of apprehension”, casting a light on the dark corners of the soul. She even claimed that Ripley was partly inspired by her own character, and once signed herself: Pat H, alias Ripley.

She was born in 1921 as the stepchild of Stanley Highsmith. This was the start of a love-hate relationship with her mother Mary which would last seventy years. The future novelist hit puberty in a world where being gay was a felony, and lesbians did not exist. At the age of twelve she wondered if she was a boy born into a girl's body. As a diarist, she resembles Samuel Pepys in some ways. He also has a passion for women, a tendency to break into foreign languages and a cunning, cutting intellect. But he gives us only a dozen years of secrets – Highsmith delivers an entire adult lifetime, and bares her soul.

In Von Planta's two-inch thick blockbuster, the young Patricia speaks for herself. On a motoring holiday in 1941 she saw Mt Rushmore: As art it is beyond consideration – as a monument it is an insult to the majesty of the mountains. At Barnard College in New York, she studied English Lit, Ancient Greek and Zoology. Which is perhaps where she learned about snails. Most species could be described as girls born into a boy snail's body, containing both sperm and hundreds of eggs. But mating with another snail is essential for fertilisation. In 1946 when she was still putting bread on the table as a comic book scriptwriter, Pat wrote: Man has no more soul than a garden snail. The point is, the snail has a soul too. Soon her collection of pet snails had reached thirty molluscs – with boys' names such as Chauncey.

Snails turned up again this year in the film *Deep Water*. Adrian Lyne, who directed *Fatal Attraction*, came out of retirement to film the Highsmith story. It starred Ana de Armas – and Ben Affleck as a snail breeder. Alas, *The Hollywood Reporter* panned the movie, writing: It manages to drain all the subtlety and psychological complexity from Highsmith's story of marital warfare, transgression and obsession.

Highsmith's early diaries record the violent mood swings and self-analysis of a tormented student just out of her teens. If there is a constant theme on nearly every page, it is work, meaning writing. This entry, from April 1941, seems prescient: My appetite is twofold: I hunger for love and for thought. Pretty, witty, sipping martinis into the wee small hours with the literati of Greenwich Village, she makes a vivid impression, a networking dynamo and voracious reader with an encyclopaedic vocabulary.

Keying piano or typewriter, she is ambidextrous; carving wood, doing carpentry, sketching or painting, she uses her left hand. But the right is reserved for the scrawl that fills most of the eight thousand pages. In four languages, which Von Planta had translated into English. The editor must also be commended for the book's copious and entertaining footnotes.

Patricia's six years as a comic book scriptwriter in New York put bread on the table, but she was more interested in love and her personal work. And love she did, passionately, sometimes platonically with gay and straight men. She tried sex with

Arthur Koestler, but both agreed that the spark was missing. The young Highsmith was usually involved in lesbian triangles. Which brought out the poetry in her.

Love is a desperation  
A necessity  
Do I even know you?  
Not completely  
But I need you completely.

She started a course to “cure” homosexuality, but dropped it when Truman Capote told her she was wasting her time. He helped her to get into a writing residence at the Yaddo foundation. And there she held her own among hard drinkers. I must have had five martinis or six. Plus two Manhattans. At Yaddo she met the novelist Marc Brandel, who gave her the title for the book she was writing: *Strangers on a Train*. He proposed, she accepted, during the wild champagne celebration after Alfred Hitchcock bought the movie rights. Then she changed her mind. Later the importunate Marc insisted that he would not mind a sexless marriage. Her diary records: But still I hesitate, have nightmarish dreams of marriage.

The *Price of Salt*, about a lesbian passion, was written under the pseudonym Claire Morgan and became a huge best seller. It was based on an obsession – a suburban lady whom Highsmith stalked – but failed to follow through. Pat put her own name to it when the movie *Carol* was released. Then came the Ripley novels and films. The notes and diaries cover her life in England, where she bought a house to be near Caroline, a married woman who played her like a fish on a line for twelve years. She settled in France, where she ended up paying double American and French taxation. Finally she moved to Switzerland. And it was work, work, work all the way, right up to the end in February 1995, when the booze and tobacco finally stopped Highsmith in her tracks. Diary entries are scant by this stage, and her notes are largely concerned with her current novels – and philosophical remarks. She loved to travel, and always wrote a vivid description of a foreign place first seen from a plane, train or bus.

She had a close circle of good friends, including the French film star Jeanne Moreau, and was not a shy recluse. As she grew older, her pessimistic grumpy attitudes got bad publicity. She was pro-Palestinian, but this brought accusations of anti-Semitism that are hard to refute, despite Jewish lovers from her past, male and female. Anna von Planta's achievement may not help the reader to feel affectionate toward Highsmith, but it will bring understanding and admiration for one of twentieth-century English literature's greatest figures.

Her 22 novels light up with the deeper insight of the diaries. At Yaddo, working on *Strangers on a Train*, she wrote of Bruno the psychopath: I am so happy when Bruno appears in the novel. I love him! And readers lapped up her five books about the charming Ripley, who had no conscience. Which prompts this speculation – could a Highsmith novel be a dark mirror of the reader's soul, reflecting just a tiny glint of psychopathy?