

Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 71
Patricia Highsmith

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast. I'm Susan Stone. The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women, both overlooked and iconic, who achieved amazing things against the odds while they were alive. And we do it how? Through women's history storytelling on stage, here in Berlin and beyond. Then we bring you a specially curated selection of these stories here on the podcast. I'm Susan Stone, and I am pleased to welcome back from epic travels, the one and only DLS co-founder, Florian Duijsens. Hello there!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Hi there, Susan. It's great to be back on your couch.

SUSAN STONE: The couch has missed you! So in this episode, we're gonna take you all the way to New York, because the featured Dead Lady presentation comes via our friends at Dead Ladies Show NYC, which is organized and hosted by Molly O'Laughlin Kemper with Sheila Enright. Florian, as I recall, you were at this show, correct?

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: I was, I was. I happened to be very glamorously in New York for work and I totally crashed the show, bringing with me a talk I'd done in Berlin — that's been on the podcast — about Memphis Minnie and we had a blast. It was so awesome to be in that space too with all these wonderful people, the audience members and the historical knowledge of being a space where one of my previous Dead Ladies, Emma Goldman, actually once held her anarchist meetings. So it was a yay all around.

SUSAN STONE: Well, in this episode, everyone will just have to travel vicariously, or at least most of you. And we are going to learn about a Dead Lady who was brilliant, but difficult, even unpleasant. As were some of the iconic characters she wrote, one of whom might actually be in your Netflix queue right now. It is in mine, or *he* is in mine.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: He's already out of mine, only because I've already watched it.

It's Patricia Highsmith, creator of Tom Ripley, who you might have seen played by Matt Damon or John Malkovich or Dennis Hopper, or even by the much, much, much, much hated Alain Delon, finally dead, and more recently by Andrew Scott in the gorgeous and deadly new black and white adaptation simply called *Ripley*, which you should definitely explore right after you listen to this podcast episode.

To tell us about the talented Ms. Highsmith, we're turning to writer and educator

Hannah Meyer. Here she is recorded live at New York's KGB Bar Red Room.

HANNAH MEYER ON TAPE: Awesome, thank you so much for having me. So throughout my own life, I've discovered that I have a type, which is unavailable older women. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] And novelist Patricia Highsmith also had a similar interest, or one could also say an obsession.

In 1948, when Patricia Highsmith was 27, she was working in a toy store and an older blonde woman comes in, buys a train and leaves. And despite the fact that she never actually meets this woman and the reality that she's in psychotherapy to get her into the right mindset to marry her male fiancé, Patricia Highsmith becomes enamored by this woman.

But because this is the 1940s, she has to be subtle about it. So she memorizes this woman's address and travels not just once, but multiple times from midtown Manhattan all the way to this woman's house in New Jersey to watch her from outside of her house. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

And this woman becomes the muse for one of the most iconic queer novels in history, *The Price of Salt*, which was later adapted into the 2015 film *Carol*. And here's a clip from the first scene, from where the two main characters first meet.

FILM CLIP FROM CAROL SHOWING TWO WOMAN AT SALES COUNTER:

CATE BLANCHETT AS CAROL: I love Christmas, wrapping presents and all that. And then somehow, you wind up overcooking the turkey anyway. Done.

CATE BLANCHETT AS CAROL: Where did you learn so much about train sets?

ROONEY MARA AS THERESE: Oh, I read too much probably.

CATE BLANCHETT AS CAROL: That's refreshing.

ROONEY MARA AS THERESE: Thank you.

CATE BLANCHETT AS CAROL: Merry Christmas.

ROONEY MARA AS THERESE: Merry Christmas.

CATE BLANCHETT AS CAROL: (whispers) I like the hat.

HANNAH MEYER: Yeah! [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] So who is this woman behind this literary U-Haul?

Novelist, short story writer and comic book writer, Patricia Highsmith was, as her biographer Joan Schenkar writes, full of criminal instincts.

And while she never actually killed anyone, her fixation manifests across 22 novels and short stories, informed by her experience growing up as a lesbian in the

McCarthy era, an outsider among the wealthy elite, Highsmith creates a nuanced portrait of morality through characters who exist, love and murder on the margins of society.

And while she is known for her crime fiction, her work is informed most intimately by her profound obsession and love of women.

So, she was born in Fort Worth, Texas in 1921, but she actually almost wasn't born at all because when her mother was four months pregnant, she tried to drink an abortion by drinking turpentine, but this fails.

And at three years old, Highsmith meets her stepfather, Stanley Highsmith, who she does not like at all. And at eight years old, she's introduced to psychoanalysis when her grandmother gives her *The Human Mind* by Karl Menninger. And this basically popularizes a lot of what Freud was talking about.

So at the tender age of 10, she's writing murderous fantasies about her stepfather while reading psychoanalytic theory. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] And the family splits their time between Texas and New York.

And when Highsmith is 12, her mother promises her that she'll divorce her stepfather and return to Fort Worth. But instead, she changes her mind and leaves Highsmith with her grandmother. And while she eventually comes back, Highsmith never forgives her mother for abandoning her and they have a love-hate relationship for the rest of her life.

So Highsmith's obsession with Freudian analysis and murderous rage serves her well in college at Barnard, yeah, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] where she writes short stories that are so dark that the literary magazine is hesitant to publish them. And she begins keeping a journal where she plots out ideas for stories and also where she orchestrates her very complicated romantic geometry.

While she is totally closeted in 1930s Texas, it is her college years in New York where her biographer describes Highsmith "started her career of aggressive seduction." And she parties across Manhattan at bars like Marie's Crisis Café and Minetta Tavern. And she meets people like writer Margaret Atwood and photographer Rolf Tietgens. And she's introduced to a circle of artistic lesbians and begins to sleep across the circles of them. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

And she's described by a friend as intensely charismatic with a habit of standing up whenever a woman walked into the room. So basically she's a top. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] And in a journal entry from her early 20s, she writes about one night in the East Village and says: "What a woman. Billie was there in a black suit. She's 30. Her husband is a journalist. I drank too much. I don't know how I decided to go home with her. Perhaps she made the decision in a taxi. I'm not in love with her. Oh, only if she were unattainable, how I could love her then."

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Two days later: "I met an insufferable young woman from school on my way to Billie's. And my good angel tells me that this would be better,

but my God, I'll take the devil." And later that night: "Love goes hurtling."

Her journal entries from these years are cyclical, beginning with an obsession with a woman, a realization of their faults, bitter hatred, and then curiosity for another.

After she graduates, she struggles to find a job as she interviews for positions at magazines like *Harper's Bazaar* and *The New Yorker*. But she ends up, as she writes, coming to these interviews very hungover and on three hours of sleep. But she ends up finding work as a comic book script writer, and all the while, she's writing over a dozen short stories, and she's also an intense workaholic. And in her journal, she writes, "Days without any creative work are lost days. An artist, a real artist, would work. Now, of course, being 21, I feel a great responsibility to do something good and everything creative. No more reasons for being imperfect due to immaturity." [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] So, yeah, she's stressed.

And part of what makes Patricia Highsmith so great at finessing both the plots of her short stories — and also women — is her calculating mind, her photographic memory for everything, including women's phone numbers, but also a specific ranking system that she devises called her "lover's chart." This was before *The L Word*. And she makes notes of women that she's seeing. And as you can see here, there's a little note for "bad judgment on my part." And this is by a fair number of the women. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

So Highsmith's obsessive and methodical way of navigating romantic geometry bleeds into her career as a novelist. Her biographer writes how "she thought about love the way she thought about murder— as a complex game of emotional urgency between two people, one of whom dies in the act." [AUDIENCE GIGGLES]

So while she's in upstate New York with her mother and stepfather, she comes up with an idea about two soulmates who swap murder, so basically two besties who would literally kill for each other. In 1948, Highsmith sends the first two chapters of this novel to the artist's colony, Yaddo, where she gets in under the recommendation of Truman Capote.

Within her two-month residency, she completes a full draft of her first novel, *Strangers on a Train*, in which a man hoping to divorce his unfaithful wife in order to marry the woman he loves, meets a very charming stranger on a train who proposes the idea that they exchange murders because neither would have a motive and no one would expect them.

So as Highsmith fine tunes the orchestrations of the plot of her in-progress novel, she also becomes this charismatic agent of chaos at Yaddo. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] In her journals, Highsmith writes continually about how she hates the director of the colony, calling her a "strange, creepy sort of woman who would regimen a strict ritual of breakfast at 8 a.m., lunch at 12 p.m., and the general expectation that guests should spend a minimum of eight hours in their rooms in pursuit of artistic fulfillment."

And this naturally leads to a mass rebellion led by Highsmith who would start in-

house drinking sessions involving imbibing 10 martinis and Manhattans with a dash of gin and traveling out to Saratoga Springs.

And on one of these expeditions, Highsmith meets Marc Brandel, who by a lot of conventional standards is a very attractive prospect for her. He's the son of the esteemed novelist John Davys Beresford. He's already published two books before coming to Yaddo, and most importantly, he's a man.

They become friends, and when he confesses his love to Highsmith, she tells him that she's been a lesbian for as long as she remember, which she writes that he is amazingly receptive of.

So they enter into an on-again, off-again relationship, all of course, while Highsmith has affairs with women. And one of these women, Brandel introduces to her after Yaddo on a trip to Provincetown, Massachusetts.

So within literal hours of meeting the vogue model and painter, Ann Smith, on a dock, they basically fall in love with each other. And after Ann Smith leaves Provincetown, Highsmith writes how she felt she was, quote, "in prison" with Brandel.

So while she's choreographing this intensely homoerotic relationship between the two main characters and strangers on a train, she's also orchestrating a kind of romantic trigonometry between Marc Brandel and her, Marc Brandel and Ann Smith in real life.

So after being rejected by six publishers, *Strangers on a Train* is published by Simon & Schuster and later adapted into a film by Alfred Hitchcock.

Highsmith and Brandel celebrate with champagne and in a flurry of excitement, they get engaged. And it is this excitement, but also the mounting pressures of heterosexuality and a nuclear family and the McCarthy era that prompts Highsmith to agree.

While queer individuals could be themselves in certain spaces like the gay bars in the East Village that a Highsmith frequented, they would often have to take certain precautions like getting off a stop early to avoid suspicion.

And despite having ongoing relationships with women, Patricia Highsmith would write in code in her journal about her lesbianism, calling it "the ever present subject." So this is why by the end of 1948, Patricia Highsmith is engaged to a man who she feels imprisoned by.

And one solution for troubles with heterosexuality in the 1940s and 50s is psychotherapy. So Patricia Highsmith goes to a psychotherapist to get her into the right mindset to marry a man. And the therapist suggests that she join a therapy group for women who are latent homosexuals, which is basically like asking an alcoholic to go to AA to find more drinking buddies. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

And Highsmith writes in her diary, "Perhaps I shall amuse myself by seducing a couple of them." And she does, but not in her therapy group. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

It is in December of 1948, when she's 27 and working at a toy store to help pay for her psychotherapy, when she meets a blonde woman who makes her feel quote, "swimmy in the head." [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

And in a fever — as in literal chicken pox — Patricia Highsmith goes home and pours out the entire plot of *The Price of Salt* in two hours. So, spoiler alert, cover your ears if you want. So, the novel follows Therese, who is dating a man that she does not love. And while working at a toy shop, she meets Carol, a New Jersey housewife who is in the process of divorcing her husband. Therese memorizes Carol's address, writes her a Christmas card. The two drink hot milk together, and they fall in love with each other on a cross country road trip, while being tailed by a detective that Carol's husband hires. But despite all odds, they end up together.

And while this is Highsmith's only novel without murder, she writes about their attraction with a kind of predator and prey dynamic. In the scene where they first meet, Highsmith writes:

"I see her the same instant she sees me, and instantly I love her. Instantly I am terrified because I know she knows I am terrified, and that I love her. Though there are seven girls between us, I know she knows she will come to me and have me wait on her."

And in her journal, Highsmith struggles with her engagement to Brandel while writing obsessively about the woman that she met. And as I mentioned earlier, Highsmith would go on adventures to this woman's house to observe her.

And after one of them, she writes, "I went to the house of the woman who almost made me love her when I saw her for a moment in December. Murder is a kind of making love, a kind of possessing." As her biographer sums up, only Patricia Highsmith could phrase a novel of life-changing love in the language of Jack the Ripper. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Patricia Highsmith publishes *The Price of Salt* under a pseudonym under the advice of her publisher, and the book becomes a best seller. And now that she's written two novels, she, for the first time in her life, has a fair chunk of coin. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] So she goes to Europe where she believes is the center of sophistication. But she also goes because it's where Ellen Hill, a wealthy sociologist, lives in London.

And while she's in Europe, she travels a lot, and she's very prolific, writing between two and three books a year. And while she's in France, she sees a solitary, wealthy young man in shorts and sandals with a towel flung over his shoulder making his way along the beach. And she wonders where he's going and what he could be doing. And so she comes up with the titular character of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, a character that Highsmith follows across four decades and five books.

In the novels, Tom is enlisted by an acquaintance to bring back the wealthy Dickie Greenleaf, and he falls in love with Dickie's lifestyle and a bit with Dickie himself. And on a boating trip, he bludgeons his friend to death and takes over his identity.

And in the novels, after Tom kills Dickie, Highsmith writes, "He loved possessions, not masses of them, but a select few that he did not part with. They gave a man self-respect, not ostentation, but quality and the love that cherished that quality. Possessions reminded him that he existed and made him enjoy his existence. It was simple as that, and wasn't that worth something, he existed. Not many people in the world knew how to, even if they had money. And it didn't really take money, not masses of money. It took a certain security."

So, she's writing about this young man, turned charismatic murderer, who falls in love with his friend's lifestyle and with his friend himself. While she herself is enmeshed in a circle of wealthy European artists, while also embroiled in them romantically.

And so she finally ends her engagement to Brandel and her two-year relationship with Ellen Hill. And this relationship is the longest of her entire life. And she begins an emotionally turbulent affair with Kathryn Hamill, who is a wealthy doctor and former dancer who leaves her husband to just travel around Europe with Patricia Highsmith.

So Kathryn is to Highsmith, as Dickie Greenleaf is to Ripley, a relationship involving love, intense hatred and fantasy. And this isn't like vague inspiration. In interviews about the book, Highsmith says that she often felt very literally as though Tom Ripley were writing the novels. And in an inscription to a friend, she writes, "to Charles with love, Tom."

And this is revolutionary, because in 1950s America, writers like Agatha Christie and H.G. Wells are the prominent figures in crime fiction. And in their work, their books tend to follow a certain formula in which there are a number of suspects, one murderer and each of them die off until the murderer is revealed, justice is restored and the killer goes to prison.

But what makes her work so transgressive is that she invites the reader into the mind of the murderer, and explores in a very personal way how anyone could become a murderer under the right circumstances. And in her journal, she would often write about how she often felt very close to killing in her life. As one American commentator wrote, you could sense a great deal of evil coming off of the page.

So in 1981, after one too many disagreements with French tax authorities, Highsmith moves to Switzerland where she enters her, what many journalists call, her curmudgeonly decade. She develops an intense love of snails and at a book launch, she lets the snails just crawl out of her shirt and onto the table while saying absolutely nothing. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

And she also develops some odd theories, such as that menstruating women should not be allowed in libraries. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Did not become

popularized for whatever reason.

And as she gets older, her alcoholism gets worse and she becomes disillusioned from her relationships with women and which she writes about in a book called *Tales of Little Misogyny*. And her own biographer describes how she was rigid with hatred for Highsmith as her anti-Semitic and racist beliefs intensify.

Highsmith dies in 1995, leaving her estate to Yaddo and 8,000 pages of journal entries. And fun fact: she wrote them in German, French, and English so no one would be able to figure out what they were about, but they were translated and were published in 2021.

So, Patricia Highsmith built a life on transgression and moral ambiguity, blurring the lines between love and murder in an era of social repression. As Megan O'Grady writes for *The New York Times*, Highsmith's brilliance as a novelist is her way of making us experience life as a tightening noose. She was a great chronicler at a time of peak social conformity of our American secret selves.

Patricia Highsmith revolutionized not only the genre of crime fiction, but of queer fiction as well. *The Price of Salt* ends when Therese and Carol see each other after months apart. Highsmith writes: "It would be Carol in a thousand cities, a thousand houses and foreign lands where they would go together, in heaven and in hell. Carol saw her and seemed to stare at her incredulously a moment while Therese watched the slow smile growing, before her arm lifted suddenly. Her hand waved a quick, eager greeting that Therese had never seen before. Therese walked towards her."

After the book comes out under her own name in the 1990s, Highsmith receives an onslaught of mail from closeted queers as the first story in which queer characters do not, as Highsmith described in an interview, pay for their deviation by cutting their wrists, joining themselves or by switching to heterosexuality. And this dead lesbian trope is something that still exists today, which is why it is so significant that in 1952 they end up together.

For me, this is personally revelatory. As a closeted 12-year-old in Idaho, I was very obsessed with my voice teacher to the point where I memorized her phone number and would call her up on the phone just to hear her voice. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] And then I would hang up and write about her in code in my journal. And it took around seven years and a haze of unnameable emotions and tiny collected moments percolating with intense shame to the clear and obvious revelation that I was a blatant latent homosexual.

For me, Patricia Highsmith's work and discovering it in my teenage years was revolutionary in its explicit queer romance, the fact that it does not condemn queers to death or insanity and instead radically suggests that women can love other women without breaking themselves.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

SUSAN STONE: Hannah Meyer on Patricia Highsmith recorded live at the KGB Bar

Red Room in New York by Christopher Neil. Thank you, Chris. And thanks to everyone at Dead Ladies NYC, including the lively audience at the Red Room, which is overseen by the fantastic Lori Schwarz. As always, you can find photos, links, and more info on our featured Dead Lady in our episode notes over at deadladiesshow.com/podcast. And we will include an essay that Hannah wrote about Patricia Highsmith that was published on LitHub. You can also find some of the stuff over on social media. Find us @deadladiesshow.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: And if you're in New York this wonderful, wonderful spring, the gang there have a show scheduled on May 22nd. They'll be talking about child-actress-turned-diplomat Shirley Temple Black, writer Margaret Mitchell of *Gone with the Wind* fame, and Olympic athlete Wilma Rudolph. Learn more by following them on Instagram too, @deadladiesnyc.

Here in Berlin we also have a show coming up extremely soon. Tomorrow in fact, May 16th, I'll be talking about eccentric scientist Dame Miriam Rothschild. Cineast Rachel Pronger will present Czech filmmaker Esther Krumbachová, and Katy will be talking about Swiss non-witch Anna Göldi, this time in English.

SUSAN STONE: And we hope to see you there. We will put ticket links for our show and Dead Ladies NYC show both in the notes for this episode.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: And if you can't come see us in person, but you'd still like to support us anyway, visit us at patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast, where you can find fun book-themed features and interviews.

SUSAN STONE: In fact, Patreon members had early access to the story of Patricia Highsmith as a special preview. That's just one of the many treats awaiting our Patreon pals.

The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me, Susan Stone. Our theme tune is Little Lily Swing by Tri-Tachyon. We'll be back again soon with another Fabulous Dead Lady. Bye for now.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Bye everyone! Bye Susan!

SUSAN STONE: Bye Florian!

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)