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The life of Patricia Highsmith was as secretive and unusual as that of many of the best-known characters who people her "peerlessly disturbing" thrillers and short stories. Yet even as her work has found new popularity in the last few years, the life of this famously elusive writer has remained a mystery.

For *Beautiful Shadow*, the first biography of Highsmith, British journalist Andrew Wilson mined the vast archive of diaries, notebooks, and letters she left behind, astonishing in their candor and detail. He interviewed her closest friends and colleagues as well as some of her many lovers. But Wilson also traces Highsmith's literary roots in the work of Poe, noir, and existentialism, locating the influences that helped distinguish Highsmith's writing so startlingly from more ordinary thrillers. The result is both a serious critical biography and one that reveals much about a brilliant and contradictory woman, one who despite her acclaim and affairs always maintained her solitude.

Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith Details

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From Reader Review Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith for online ebook

Yooproprof says

Patricia Highsmith (1921-1995) is best known for her disturbing books about sensitive and sympathetic psychopathic murderers (i.e. "Strangers on a Train" and "The Talented Mr. Ripley") - and for the movies they've inspired. Andrew Wilson's biography is fascinating, well researched and convincing; I don't know if I'd want to have dinner with Miss Highsmith, but at least I think I can understand a little "where she's coming from." The author Wilson would probably make a good novelist himself; he understands psychology, without being reductive or a follower of the Phil Donahue School of analysis. In many ways Highsmith was not a happy person, and she held many reprehensible beliefs about human nature and society, but she was a survivor, no doubt.

And she liked to read. I understand that, too. Here's Wilson describing Highsmith's fondness for solitary reading in her apartment - when she was in her early 20s:

"She had always been a voracious reader, but now she turned down invitations to dinner in favor of staying at home and immersing herself in the dark imaginative landscape of Thomas Mann, Strindberg, Goethe, Joyce, T.S. Eliot and Baudelaire. The mere thought that she was alone and surrounded by books gave her a near sensuous thrill. As she looked around her room, dark except for the slash of light near her lamp, and saw the vague outlines of her books, she asked herself, 'Have I not the whole world?'"

"Beautiful Shadow" is perhaps somewhat over-detailed, or maybe it just is that Highsmith's life lacks the kind of neat and tidy essence that makes for an elegant biography. On the other hand, Wilson is to be commended for his exhaustive research, AND for his ability to empathize with his subject, even at her most difficult.

carlageek says

I have strong feelings and complex thoughts about Highsmith, both the woman and the writer. Wilson does too, and he expresses them in a compassionate book that probably whitewashes the absolute worst that the woman could sometimes be, while approaching the writer with an appealing mixture of analysis and reverence.

Antigone says

Andrew Wilson's *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith* is a comprehensive piece of reportage. Given access to the author's abundance of personal diaries, working journals, correspondence, and the many living acquaintances (family, friends, neighbors, publishers, lovers) quite willing to go on the record, you would expect little less. Yet the fundamental labor of the true biographer, at least from my perspective, is to go beyond the facts, beyond the proofs, beyond the dry history of a life to flesh out the human being. This is a labor Mr. Wilson has left largely undone. To be fair, his subject presents great challenge on this front...but, hey, he had to know that going in.

Patricia Highsmith had a troubled life that she worked very hard to keep private. The daughter of a Texas couple who divorced within a year of her birth, she was parked for the first four years of childhood with her aged grandmother. Deeply-conflicted over issues surrounding her identity and sexual orientation, she struggled with anorexia as a teen and funneled her search for self outward into literature, Christian Science and, later, the Communist party. She had difficulty coming to terms with where her libido led her. She felt very much a male imprisoned in a female body, and it is perhaps one of the grace notes of the transgender movement to enlighten the rest of us on just how complicated it can be to identify, in any specific sense, the nature of one's internal sexuality. Highsmith - in 1940, 1950, 1960 - possessed far less information to apply to her attempts at definition and so it comes as no real surprise to find her spending six months with a Manhattan psychotherapist in a concerted effort to turn straight. Equally unsurprising, it did not take.

Highsmith began writing in a professional sense during her college years, yet it wasn't until she'd attended Yaddo (through a recommendation from Tennessee Williams) that she managed to produce her first novel of note, *Strangers on a Train*. This was followed up shortly thereafter by *The Price of Salt* - published under a pseudonym and constituting a fictional exploration of a real-life encounter she'd had with a beautiful suburban housewife over a counter at Bloomingdales. The initial Ripley novel was percolating on her horizon. Prolific in every sense of the word, Wilson refers to the atmosphere of these febrile years as extreme - excessive in both drinking and "sexual buccaneering." Highsmith's literary voice, dark as it was, appeared very much to depend upon the light of fresh love in her life. Her relationships were legion, her mercurial spirit often cruel, her emotional comfort found (somewhat ironically) only in the arms of women who would dictate to her and ladle up a cauldroned feast of wretchedness and despair.

I am tempted to go on in an effort...I don't know...to right the wrong of this? But that's not why I'm here. It is important for you to know that I'm enriching the material in a way Andrew Wilson does not. Mr. Wilson remains at a relative remove. While he more than appreciates her literary genius, there is little wonder of the soul he chose to focus upon and this dispassionate approach is not appealing. Patricia Highsmith was a very complicated human being who, frankly, deserved far more in the way of insight than was on offer here. Hers was a hard life; bleak, restless, lonely, severe. Reporting it from such a distance, and with such aridity, elicits the impression of this woman as a sideshow. It is wrong-headed and, in certain respects, criminal. If there's one person you should be able to count on (posthumously) for a deep and abiding intimate concern, it should be your biographer. Yet once again she is marginalized. Objectified. Held at arm's length. And that just broke my heart.

Andy says

Ten pages into the book and I already prefer this far more than the Joan Schenkar bio. I could do without Wilson's exhaustive itineraries of Highsmith's European travels, which are over documented to the point of tedium and for the most part do not shed any light on her writing, except in a few scattered instances. Nevertheless, Andrew Wilson delves quite deftly into Pat's eventual descent into madness.

Evan says

I became interested in Patricia Highsmith after reading *The Price of Salt*. That book stayed with me. I couldn't stop thinking about it. I wanted to know more about it's author so I picked this up. It took me almost

three weeks to read this. I don't generally like biographies or autobiographies but I am glad I endured and read this. It went through her work and life chapter by chapter and though I am unfamiliar with her other work, the exception being *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, it was never boring to read. I could have done without the epilogue but that's the only thing in the book that I didn't care for.

Sarah says

Patricia Highsmith's biography was just published. Recently deceased, she wrote very popular murder fiction most famously *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and succeeding novels about the maybe homosexual murderer and con artist Tom Ripley. In my quest to read about the lives of women famous in their own right, she is definitely a strong example: a lesbian, she never married nor settled down with a lover, was not close to either parent, and as far as I can see owes her entire fame solely to her own determination and talent. Pretty good role model right?

Not really. Her biography consists of whinging paragraphs of letters to her parents, notably her mother tried to abort her by drinking turpentine and then when she was small would eerily remark upon PH's love of the smell of the stuff. It's a laundry list of women she fell for, slept with and tossed away. And it's a little, weirdly, homophobic. PH believed that Tom Ripley really was her alter ego; and lived her life in a law abiding way but with those values at stake.

I dropped the book 1/2 way through - its endless tide of abandoned panties and bitter recrimination was boring and stifling. But was it worth reading? Of course! It's refreshing to read about any person who could be described as representing multiple "oppressed peoples" in a completely non-enlightening manner. And even more importantly it's refreshing to read about a famous woman who deserves her fame, but not my admiration. It reminded me that my values are more important than my success, lest I die a bitter old maid with a nasty, nasty biography for a eulogy.

James Perkins says

You may not have heard of Patricia Highsmith, but you've almost definitely seen the films *Strangers on a Train* or *The Talented Mr Ripley*, which were based on two of her most famous novels. I read this book on the advice of a literary magazine, and I can honestly say that it is one of the best biographies I have ever read. It was meticulously researched and extremely well-written, providing a model to all of us of what a good non-fiction book should be. Author Andrew Wilson did not try to avoid the embarrassing or awkward bits and paint a gorgeous posthumous picture or move in the other direction to spoil his subject's literary reputation, but has provided us with a balanced biography using facts, myriad interviews with her surviving friends, family, and publishing associates, and the pièce de résistance that crowned his research: her own thoughts, which were carefully recorded across her entire life and career in her cahiers (notebooks), and are today stored in the Swiss Literary Archives.

Through it all, Wilson writes in a stylish, touching manner: despite the facts that she was a very difficult person, cantankerous, often shy, an alcoholic loner who was almost at war with the world, I felt a lump in my throat as I read about her final days. A unique talent, her literary skills and output were considerable, and this

excellent biography has made me want to read more of it.

Michael Martin says

Andrew Wilson's *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith* is a thorough look into the life and literary output of Patricia Highsmith. He documents (in sometimes too great detail) every quirk and eccentricity of the author's life, from her dozens of fragmented relationships, her stalking of women she barely knew, and her brusque unpleasantness towards almost everyone she ever came in contact with.

Still, I found the book quite interesting, and fleshed out the personal demons which drove her to write such classics as "Strangers on a Train" and "The Talented Mr. Ripley".

My one complaint of the book is the author's TOO detailed descriptions of every one of her novels and short pieces, many times revealing twist endings, murders, story resolutions. I wish he had been able to reference her writings without giving away important plot points, as I planned on reading more of her work.

Highly recommended.

Cyanemi says

So far so good. I am on page 250. From some of the reviews I thought PH would be portrayed as an absolutely horrid person. She isn't. She was eccentric and quite self involved. Maybe on the next 250 pages she becomes evil. (She becomes a little more horrid as she ages.)

This was one of the greatest Biographies I have ever read. It was interesting and moved quickly. This biography also had to use every psychological theory on the planet to explain Highsmith's bizarre behavior. She really did not have that bad of a childhood. Some people are simply born screwy. The very fashionable Asbergers was also raised up as a possibility for her behavior.

My absolute favorite thing was the fact that she transported her beloved (live) snails 6-10 under each breast several times across Europe. It is explained often that this woman was bone thin so did she have inverted wallets or what holding those creatures in (under) there? I'm pretty sure this particular tidbit did not occur because mommy didn't give her a cookie when she was 4. Is that a snail under your breast or are you just happy to see me?

I have read one of her books and might try some more after reading the biography

Lady says

For all your faults, imperfections, problematic beliefs, and amorality, thanks for the unique perspective, for Tom Ripley, and most of all for Carol and Therese. Thank you for giving their relationship a happy conclusion even if that was one that's denied to you your whole life. You may not believe that it can happen nor that you deserve it, but thanks for the generosity.

In death, we cease to exist. You may have died alone but I'd like to think that you lived your life the way you wanted.

Farewell.

Jon Ureña says

A few years ago I found a quote (I love quotes), by a certain Amy Hempel, that intrigued me:

"I read about a famous mystery writer who worked for one week in a department store. One day she saw a woman come in and buy a doll. The mystery writer found out the woman's name, and took a bus to New Jersey to see where the woman lived. That was all. Years later, she referred to this woman as the love of her life. It is possible to imagine a person so entirely that the image resists attempts to dislodge it."

I wondered who that mystery writer could have been, and I also identified with a mind that would daydream an entire life out of a moment and follow that obsession. That "mystery writer" was Patricia Highsmith.

While I was reading her "This Sweet Sickness", about a loner unable to connect with people who obsesses over a woman he loves, to the point of building a complete second identity he would like to live, I identified with it, and how it was told, in a way that suggested that the writer was the kind of peculiar I was; hardly anyone knows about the depths of social blindness, isolation, anxiety and obsession (and attached malaises like obsessive-compulsive disorder and chronic depression) like autistic people.

Patricia Highsmith was a retiring, silent person with a tremendously dark interior world, who could not properly connect with anyone, who loved certain people when they were away but needed space when they were close. She considered herself to have a man's brain, but didn't want a man's body, and was attracted to women, but didn't particularly like them. She was a masochist who consistently "chose" to love women who bossed her around and hurt her. She smoked and drank so heavily that it destroyed her body, although, curiously enough, didn't seem to have affected her mind. Her instincts didn't align with the human world around her. She was hypersensitive to noises and being touched. She was clumsy and awkward. She was at her best when daydreaming or writing, which are forms of the same thing, but fell into horrible depressions the moment she came back to herself. She was never at ease with the world.

Almost everything about her screamed Asperger's to me, but I can't be objective about it. It was weird that nobody else caught it, until one of her friends did:

"In hindsight, I think Pat could have had a form of high-functioning Asperger's Syndrome. She had a lot of typical traits. She had a terrible sense of direction, she would always get lost and whenever she went to the hairdresser's she would have trouble parking even though she had been with me lots of times. She was hypersensitive to sound and had these communications difficulties. Most of us screen certain things, but she would spit out everything she thought. She was not aware of the nuances of conversation and she didn't realise when she had hurt other people. That was probably why her love affairs never lasted very long, because she couldn't overcome the difficulties in communicating. Although she didn't really understand other people - she had such a strange interior world - she was a fantastic observer. She would see things that an average person would never experience."

She wasn't a recluse, however, like some journalists called her. She kept plenty of friends, travelled and invited people over, people who tolerated how weird she was. She never made it as big as she deserved mostly because she didn't care to belong to a "writer's community", didn't like exposing herself to the public, and her stories didn't offer hope nor platitudes. On a personal note, as an aspiring author, I hate the "community building" and ego-boosting that getting together with other writers involves, and curiously

enough almost never involves discussing how to write a good story with excellent prose.

Patricia was also a misanthrope who disliked and hated way more than she liked. She got in trouble for her opinions regarding black people, religion and Israel. Having been born clearly different, she was a hardcore individualist that intended people to take responsibility for themselves. During the last half of her life, and having been on the brink of bankruptcy, never knowing if the next book was going to sell, she was very stingy with money, but in her will she left her millions to a writer's retreat she spent a few weeks in while writing her first novel.

Despite all her bad and unsolvable things, reading about her has made me aware of a hole in the world, the kind that opens when a real human being goes away. I look forward to learning more about her, and about myself, while reading her stories.

Christine says

This is probably my most difficult book review.

I'm an avid reader and reread Highsmith's Ripley books multiple times over the past 25+ years. I also read "The Blunderer" after having watched the movie with Maurice Ronet & Marina Vlady. And I read "Strangers on a Train", but have to admit that I like Hitchcock's adaptation better than the novel.

I read several Highsmith novels that I did not like, but way back in the 80's and 90's I just read a lot of Highsmith.

So finally discovering that there was a biography on her life was very interesting for me, but I had no clue as to what to expect. As long as she was alive (before 1995) the fact that she was gay was kept secret and although it was more or less obvious in a few of her books, I did not really pay attention to it.

Her life was not easy from childhood on. She had many affairs, some with men, most with women, and she never seemed to be able to find the one life partner with whom she could have stayed together and live a fulfilled, happy and content life. So while I kept reading her biography, I felt more and more sorry for her, but at the same time I was in awe about the brilliant books she was capable of writing under these circumstances.

She was apparently only happy when she was writing and always went into a depression whenever she finished a book.

This book is on the one hand an easy read from Wilson's very good writing style, but due to the content it's not easy to digest.

It certainly is a book that will stay on your mind for quite a while after you finish reading it. And it was one of the most important books that I read this year. I have mixed feelings about it however because Highsmith was always one of my favorite novelists, but I am very sad for her that she did not have a happier life and had to go through so much agony.

Blanca says

This book was on my reading list for at about two years. It won an award, and is extensive, with a bounty of interesting insights about the psychology that motivated Highsmith's writing.

It was also exhausting, clunky and suffered from being obsessive and at times boring. I tried to be a dutiful reader because I have long admired the myth of Patricia Highsmith, but after a while, I lost interest in Highsmith's failings in relationships, and lost patience waiting to see how the million experiences documented influenced the work of Patricia Highsmith.

There is some compelling literary criticism on a lot of her work, and that is where the biography shines. It would be even better biography if the three sections were edited. Childhood/Texas; Adolescence/New York; Adult/Europe

I saw interesting criticism making a correlation between her maturity, geography and writing.

So ultimately, the biography relied too much on obscure, yet interesting tid bits about the odd author, instead of revealing the literary relevance of Highsmith to encourage a following of new and eager readers. I for one, will be sure to read, "The Snail-Watcher", a short story and besides her better known works "Strangers on a Train" and of course, the Ripley books, I am interested in "The Blunderer" and "The Cry of the Owl".

Cateline says

Tragic life, very detailed bio of Patricia Highsmith based on her own diaries, notebooks and friends testimony. Wilson also covers the writing and shaping of her novels and short stories attaching them to her life's struggles. Amazing woman, tragic, ahead of her time...Highsmith was a force to be reckoned with to say the least.

Recommended.

Karen Pullen says

I like to read biographies of writers; the best reveal how the unique personality and soul of the writer filters her talent, hard work, and dedication onto the page. Wilson accomplishes this goal in this beautifully written book. Wilson had access to her years of detailed journals, so this is as complete as picture as one could hope for.

It's hard to read parts of Beautiful Shadow because Highsmith was obviously a troubled woman, misanthropic, alcoholic and prone to serial passionate relationships that fizzled out after a year or two. But you can't fault the author for the shortcomings of his subject!
