



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

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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 revolution ary 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.

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

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Jenny Yates says

By turns, this biography of Patricia Highsmith is fascinating and irritating. Highsmith was a true eccentric – impulsive, passionate, odd, and changeable – and the book is full of intriguing details. Her multiple lovers, her jealous relationships with her lovers’ pets, the inspirations for her macabre plots, her constant travels, her alcoholism, her shifting connection with the lesbian community, her tense relationship with her mother and stepfather, her pet snails, her paranoia about money, her dietary dysfunctions, her weird sense of humor – it’s all there.

However, I was a bit irritated by the structure of the book. I felt that the author was trying to give you a sort of Highsmith flavor, and so she made the structure unique, uncomfortable, and unwieldy. She ties the chapters together by theme, with multiple chapters on the same theme designated as “Part One,” “Part Two,” etc. This means that chronological order is lost, and you have to keep checking the year and computing more or less how old Highsmith was when this or that happened, and putting it into order in your own mind.

To compensate for this, Schenkar adds a 25-page appendix called “Just the Facts” at the end, in which she provides a chronological listing of the major events in Highsmith’s life. I would have been much happier if she had used this as a framework for the book.

Mostly, the book remains interesting. Sometimes it becomes paralyzed by a dead weight of name-dropping. At other times, Schenkar’s arch comments about Highsmith get in the way. Sometimes these are admiring, sometimes judgmental, but they maintain the sense that we are always looking at Highsmith from the outside. I never really felt like I got inside her head. She often came across rather like an exhibit in a museum of weird, unpleasant people.

Patty says

“Fear of loss, instigated by a world of people and objects out of her control, was a constant theme in Pat’s life. It put its unmistakable patina on much of her work – that long, slow crawl over the surface of things that can be counted, described and handled...” p. 453

“She was only comfortable when she was uncomfortable. Discomfort – the condition with which he was most at home and least at ease – was a productive state for her; it usually kept her writing.” p. 463.

This biography took me three months to finish. I kept thinking I would give up, but then I went back. Patricia Highsmith’s writing makes me very uncomfortable. **Stranger On the Train** is the first book in a long time that I didn’t finish for my book group. Not only did I quit only a few chapters in, but I have no intention of returning to Highsmith Country. This book confirmed that it is a world that I don’t want to be in for any amount of time.

However, I needed Schenkar’s explication of Highsmith to help me figure out why I was so uneasy while

reading **Stranger On the Train**. I have never before put down a book because I was made uncomfortable by the characters' behavior. There have been books where I don't like the characters or don't care for them. But the people in Highsmith's book seemed evil to me, really, really evil. I wanted to know about the woman who could imagine those people.

I learned a lot about Patricia Highsmith, her writing and her life. I found out some of the factors that made her the way she was. I am never going to like her, but I understand what might have made her write the kinds of novels and stories that she wrote.

Schenkar has done yeoman's work explaining Patricia Highsmith. If you like to know the inner workings of people, this may be your book. Schenkar is a good writer who found a fascinating topic. I don't think you could invent Highsmith.

aya says

everything i've read about patricia highsmith before this bio highlights how much of a monster she is. things like she had no friends, she was barely human, etc. this bio did a wonderful job of showing this side of her as well as an incredibly insecure and tortured artist who had the capacity to be an incredibly sweet friend and a passionate lover.

though incredibly thorough and insightful, the author stretches coincidences and aha! moments too far sometimes. at times she seems to want everything to fit into Her Idea of highsmith so badly that she will force it. she goes off into tangents a little too often--especially about other authors and artists that have no real connection to patricia highsmith.

it is interestingly organized--not entirely by subject but also not entirely chronologically. sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. i did very much appreciate the detailed chronology, maps, and figures at the end of the book.

Andy says

It's nice to know that there's another Patricia Highsmith biography out there because this one's bad, very bad. Joan Schenkar's sloppy biography doesn't follow a linear timeline, so we're perpetually skating from the Forties to the Seventies to the Fifties and back. It's as if the biographer had a serious case of ADD. Consequently, the bio was very hard to follow.

There's also way too much to do about her lesbianism, i.e. there's more about that than her actual novels. Highsmith's attitude to lesbianism was very twisted anyway, because Highsmith always cast women as the villains in her novels and didn't like women much outside of the bedroom. Highsmith's racism and her anti-semitism also comes across as very confused and disturbed (i.e., she complained about "The Negro Problem" but was a big Chester Himes fan, she worked for and befriended more Jews than anyone I know). I'm going to hit the other Highsmith bio, I want to read about a great writer, her sexual proclivities just don't seem that important within the context of her career.

David K. Lemons says

I agree with many of the other reviewers who attempted to read this book. Like me, they also admired the novels of Patricia Highsmith, and she is still one of my preferred authors when I'm not reading more serious books; she's relief, although weird relief. Joan Schenkar tried to do a good job with this, but I gave up on page 57, having encountered this type of biographer before (the over-reaching type) and seeing the signs and tone early enough to save myself. Unless you are researching "Pat" yourself, better just to read her stories and maybe the Wikipedia article on who Patricia Highsmith might in fact be.

Jeffrey Round says

How can you resist a biography that begins, "She wasn't nice. She was rarely polite."? Schenkar's book is not hagiography by any means, but it is one of the most incisive, gripping biographies you will read. She makes clear her dislike of her subject again and again: Highsmith was racist, anti-Semitic, misogynistic, and just downright unpleasant whenever she could get away with it. She brought a lover to the brink of suicide then walked away with utter callousness. She was the type of person no one should want to call a friend, yet many did, to the author's bewilderment. Despite this, Schenkar is not stinting in praise for Highsmith's work, which includes some of the most arresting and warped psychological portraits in twentieth century literature. Her perceptive take on Highsmith's art brilliantly reveals the parallels running through her subject's life and work until at last you understand Schenkar's intent is not to destroy Highsmith's reputation (she did that more than capably on her own), but to make sense of the extraordinary pull her writing has on so many when placed beside her pathetically-blunted humanity.

J. says

Strangely enough, I didn't love this. But I'm not sure I can say I've read every last bit of footnoted addendum, oblique reference, unattached factoid and free-floating nanobit, because of the way I read it -- and the way it was written.

Ms Shenkar seems to have had ample access to Highsmith in the very late years of the legendary mystery author's life; she certainly had near total access to the effects & papers of the estate. Odd & personal details - - a pair of 501 jeans given to Shenkar by Highsmith still "hold the shape of her body" are offered wherever possible. Any biographer must dig to find meaningful detail, but sometimes this feels a little bit too prying, too invasive, without necessary cause. Just how the transaction occurred and what the terms may have been aren't really stipulated here, and it leaves the reader with an uneasy sense of the whole thing. The fact that Highsmith's *fiction* had a lot to do with disguises, snooping, counterfeits & poses ... doesn't reconcile any similar approach in a biography.

So, then, with the creepy quibbles out of the way, how's the bio work out ? Well, we go straight to more quibbles, unfortunately. Somewhere in the middle of this I decided that if Schenkar wasn't going to follow much of any kind of chronology--- stringing associations, acquaintances, semi-relevant details & back-stories, connections direct or vague together, in time-warping clusters --- that I was going to *stop reading it chronologically*. Using the appendices, index and the author's own associations in the text, I proceeded Google style throughout the rest of the book: like a long internet-search, you can spiral around and through

the book on topics of interest, and yet never turn more than three or four pages consecutively. Fair is fair; she wrote it this way.

Beyond all the bumps and roadblocks that crop up, you do have to say that Shenkar 'gets' Highsmith -- the deeply disturbing fictional elements of disguise, impersonation, transgression and transformation -- the heart, the *pulse*, of Highsmith's work. That Highsmith may have been a bit off the rails by the end of her life doesn't help the book, though. And that Shenkar may well have been the mouse in a dotty old rich lady's game of Legendary Lion and Biographer Mouse isn't entertained.

But an early anecdote in the book gets right at the Problem Of Patricia :

... All through the 1970s, at her house in the hamlet of Moncourt (the house she loved the best and the one she kept the longest), Pat had a near neighbor, a Czechoslovakian émigré who occasionally did odd jobs for her. Monsieur Knet was exactly the kind of self-made man Pat liked to trade small talk with. He used to return home from his night job, in the early-morning hours, and note the lighted roof window in Pat's upstairs bedroom -- the only light visible at that hour in the hameau -- and the sound of her venerable Olympic portable typewriter clickety-clacking across the courtyard...

And that is how Monsieur Knet remembered Patricia to me: a sharply syncopated sound in the night, a rectangle of eerie illumination, a woman sitting at her desk, writing, he said, "frightful things dripping with blood" ...

As mentioned, Shenkar really gets Highsmith, as this brief vision aptly illustrates; the body of work, from *The Talented Mr Ripley* to *Strangers On A Train*, is very much an eerie illumination in the dead hours of the night... Perhaps a shorter, more discreetly-framed analytical appreciation, some deft editorial oversight that reins in the factoid-epidemic -- might have saved this biography from being the gossip-ridden mess that it is.

Beverly says

I read *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *Strangers on a Train* several years ago, after having loved the movies made from them. I have to admit I didn't like the books as well as the movies, which I never, ever say. The screenwriters made the stories more benign than Miss Highsmith did. No one gets away with it in her world, except for Ripley. I never felt empathy for Ripley in her book, as I did with Matt Damon's portrayal in the movie.

Her biography is a portrait of a vile person. Everyone she knew seemed to label her as nasty, morose, bellicose or a misanthrope. She was racist and anti-semitic, calling the Holocaust, the "Semicauist", because it had destroyed only half of the world's Jews. She had no sense of humor, but her agent heard her laugh once after 20 years of knowing her when she saw the eyes gouged out of a poster of children in a concentration camp.

She was a lesbian, but hated women and feminists. Highsmith wrote a set of short stories, entitled "Little Tales of Misogyny". Joyce Carol Oates in a review for the New York Review of Books said that the stories are "sadistic sketches heavy-handed in sarcasm and virtually devoid of literary significance. . . " She went from woman to woman, "falling in love" for a few short weeks and then hating each in turn.

She was anorexic and hated fat people. As a hostess, she neither fed you or kept you warm. An alcoholic, Highsmith was always causing scenes in bars and hotels. She had cats for pets, but could abuse them cruelly, swinging one cat around in a bag over her head to the astonishment of a guest. Oh! And she also kept snails as pets, that's right I said snails.

The author, Schenkar, needed a good editor too, as she seemingly, couldn't not put in ALL the information she found out about Highsmith. Every lover is written about, even ones lasting days. I don't know why I finished this, the subject was a revolting person and it wasn't written well.

AJ says

Unfortunately, I'm giving up on this book, 312 pages in. I never give up on a book lightly, but I've been struggling with this one for two months and it's distracting me from getting other reading done. I feel like the author wanted to write a massive tome, even if it meant filling it with pages and pages of boring gossip and who-did-Pat-Highsmith-sleep-with-tonight and repeating endlessly that she had a complicated relationship with her mother. There was a lot of interesting stuff packed in here, I was especially fascinated with Pat Highsmith's reaction to publishing *The Price of Salt*, but it was hidden under layers and layers of trivia.

Talulah Mankiller says

I have a confession to make: before I ever read *Middlemarch*, I devoured a biography of George Eliot. And although I'm not terribly enamored of her poetry (except for that one in the *Sweet Valley High* book where the girl tries coke and DIES) I've plowed through *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. I have biographies of George Sand and Collette sitting on my shelves; I've never read anything by either of them. I like reading about authors, even (sometimes especially) authors whose work I'm not familiar with. Why? Simple. Authors are FUCKING WEIRD.

There are, of course, boring authors out there, but they don't tend to attract biographers; I suppose that if you're going to write a 500 page doorstop about somebody, that somebody had damn well better be high on entertainment value. Whatever the reason, author biographies amuse me deeply, which is why despite never having read a single one of her books (nope, not even *The Talented Mr. Ripley*), I picked up Joan Schenkar's new biography of Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Miss Highsmith*.

First (and briefly!), the critique of the book itself: Schenkar doesn't go with a strictly chronological approach, which means that we start somewhere in the middle and often cover the same ground several times. This didn't annoy me TOO much, but perhaps because of this approach, there were certain things that Schenkar kept alluding to without ever fully explaining. The most glaring example is that of Highsmith's medical problems, including anemia and some sort of eating disorder—Schenkar admits that they're both things that had a huge impact on Highsmith, but she only discusses them in passing and never dedicates any real analysis to them. ANNOYING. Otherwise, it was a pretty good book, for the simple reason that Patricia Highsmith was an absolutely APPALLING human being.

Reading between the lines, I get the impression that the only way Highsmith was able to maintain her numerous and quite robust friendships was through pity: she convinced everyone she knew that, because she was so fucking awful, there was no way—ABSOLUTELY NO FUCKING WAY—that she'd ever be able to

get someone to tell her the bus schedule, let alone be her friend. Although most of her friends talked about how intelligent and attractive she was, there was always an undercurrent of, “And she was so damn AWKWARD, you just had to feel sorry for her!” Truth was, she wasn’t just “awkward”: she was a terrible person, and the reason everyone always felt that she was ill-at-ease is because she was busy making them feel ill-at-ease—usually through violent sexism, racism, or some combination of the two. Schenkar deals with this by adopting a coolly amused, slightly detached authorial tone; every time Patricia does something dreadful (about every quarter of a page or so), Schenkar’s reaction can best be summarized as, “Oh, that’s just so HIGHSMITH of her.” Apparently, Highsmith’s friends coped with her in much the same way, with an added dollop of pity and a little smattering of “Aren’t we so KIND to have PUT UP WITH HER.”

You’re...something to have put up with her, but I’m not sure “kind” is the right word for it.

Anyway, if anyone around you tries to claim that racism is a mental illness, just hand them this book. Highsmith hated everyone who wasn’t her, essentially, but she saved most of her vitriol for the Jews and a good bit of it for blacks (the second’s not surprising—she was born in the 1920s and was directly descended from slave owners who missed the “good old days”). Through the use of Highsmith’s private writings, Schenkar makes it painfully clear that although all this hate probably started with her family and her social milieu, Highsmith continued and extended it because of her own feelings of inferiority and entitlement. She was a gifted person surrounded by other, even more gifted people, and she was never the specialist snowflake, not by a long shot. Academically, she scraped her way into college, and she scraped her way back out again. She wasn’t a bad student, but she wasn’t a stellar one; she would spend the rest of her life writing privately in five separate languages without ever mastering any besides English. She was, in short, a highly gifted person, but she was never going to be the MOST gifted person, and instead of accepting that and moving the fuck on with her life, she let her feelings of inferiority consume her. So much of her racism was sour grapes: she had Jewish friends (and Jewish girlfriends—for those of you not in the know, she was gay), but the second her Jewish friends and/or lovers outmatched her in something, she fell back on her old friend: virulent antisemitism.

That’s not a mental illness, guys: that’s a person who is unable to accept that they are not and never will be smarter than everyone else on earth. That’s a person who would rather slander and revile an entire ethnic group than admit to personal limitations. That’s not mental illness—that’s assholery, pure and simple. And we can’t make a pill for that, unfortunately.

Recommended for: Highsmith once threw a rat through someone’s window “as a joke.” No shit. YOU CANNOT MAKE THAT STUFF UP. If you enjoy bad authorial behavior, you’ll DEFINITELY enjoy this.

Ladiibbug says

Did Not Finish

Biography

Author Patricia Highsmith is a favorite author - her debut novel, *Strangers on a Train*, was the inspiration for Alfred Hitchcock's 1951 thriller.

Ms. Highsmith also authored the noir Tom Ripley series (five books). This superb psychological thriller was made into a feature film, the first starring Matt Damon, the second, John Malkovich, and the third, Barry

Pepper.

This is a rare Did Not Finish book. I tried reading it two years ago, and just couldn't bear to continue. The author wrote about every stray piece of paper that had anything to do with Ms. Highsmith, speculated on how events might or might not have influenced her books, her life, her family relationships.

I tried again, and give up -- not because Ms. Highsmith was a hard-to-like person (she was), and not because of her chaotic personal life, or her sometimes just downright meanness.

The writing is disjointed, and for me was a dreaded chore to read. I gave up again at page 220.

What a shame that this biography of such a famous, intriguing, and troubled author is so poorly written and put together.

Karen says

I'd rate it a bit less than a 3. The wealth of material on Highsmith turns into overkill in the hands of author Schenkar. Yes, we are happy that Highsmith kept a diary for decades, but we don't need all the details unless they are essential to her life, and more importantly, relate to her writing. Once Schenkar reports about halfway through that Highsmith was rather blank about her own writing, we realize that a major reason for reading the book has just been squashed flat: we will not receive much insight into her writing. Since she's mainly known to Americans as the author of deliciously twisted stories, this is truly a letdown.

I did like the story about her being at Yaddo with Flannery O'Connor, and the brief mentions of her Hitchcock projects, but could have done with less about all her many lovers. If one is obsessed with a subject, perhaps one does want to know every person the subject slept with, but I don't think most readers care that much.

The point that is made over and over--that Highsmith was neurotic, alcoholic, disturbed and eccentric--could have been toned down nicely. Readers get tired of being hit over the head. I always question a biographer's agenda in making sure the reader knows just how weird and strange a writer is. In Highsmith's case, her shame over her lesbianism is a valid reason for her pain, not strange at all, given how unacceptable lesbianism was in provincial America of Highsmith's time. At the time of her death, she no longer even had an American publisher. Wouldn't this bio have been more interesting if Schenkar had focused more on the social context instead of Highsmith's love life!

Last, the actual writing leaves something to be desired. Schenkar overuses the parenthesis, and needs to learn a basic law of writing: do not put essential information in parentheses. What you put in parentheses may be discarded, an extra not central to the sentence. Secondly, I got tired of the precious "cahier" for notebook, and the repetition of seemingly unimportant phrases, e.g. that Patricia Highsmith was once again battling her mother's sunny brand of Christian Science.

Jessica says

Though initially (for at least the first half), Schenkar's tone grated on me, I did ultimately come to admire her

work. She seemed kinder (less presumptuous) to Highsmith in her old age and self-imposed isolation in her fortress of a house in Switzerland. I think Schenkar felt sorry for her--one does--and her admiration comes through more. Still, Schenkar reminds me of the sort of person who'd drive you crazy if she were your friend: always presuming to know what you're thinking and what your motivations are and were... I do admire the book because there will never be a more thorough biography written on Highsmith. The reading (lists, journals, notebooks, novels, stories, letters, etc) and interviews Schenkar did are prodigious.

Here's an example of her irksome tone:

After a paragraph discussing Patricia Highsmith and Jane Bowles (they knew one another), Schenkar writes: "Although sexually uninterested in Jane, Pat was still alert to the opportunity: '[I]f we go to Africa no doubt something would happen.'" (246). Schenkar then goes on to say: "Luckily their African trip never came off. Jane Bowles had phobias about trains, tunnels, bridges, elevators and making decisions, while Pat's phobias included, but were not confined to, noise, space, cleanliness, and food, as well as making decisions. A journey to the Dark Continent by Patricia Highsmith and Jane Bowles in each other's unmediated company doesn't bear thinking about." (247)

And in this way, Joan Schenkar dismisses what would have surely been a fascinating, if aborted, journey by two of the most talented and original writers of their time.

This hefty biography--I am not yet halfway through--is both fascinating and annoying. Fascinating because Highsmith is such a great writer and so enigmatic and contradictory a person; annoying because the author is so damn thorough (no slip of paper or scrap of conversation escapes her notice) and intent on reading nefarious intentions into all of these. Hence, something as simple as the fact that Highsmith loved to iron her clothes, that some of her story ideas came to her while she was ironing, is met with lots of speculation about Highsmith's penchant for creased, sharp clothing, and yet (I paraphrase) "Highsmith's villains were never murdered with an iron as a weapon..."

Huh? Schenkar seems oblivious to the fact that many writers get their best ideas while engaged in some mundane chore, be it dishwashing, driving, showering, lawn mowing, as the body is engaged but the mind is not... Any writer could have told her this.

Highsmith, of course, is not just any writer, but Schenkar too often looks for murderous impulses, treating her as if she is evil, practically homicidal.

Highsmith is always "Pat," as if biographer and subject are on the most intimate terms imaginable...

Carl Rollyson says

Patricia Highsmith is best known for her "Ripliad" -- five novels featuring an engaging murderer, Tom Ripley. This criminally attractive man is the enemy of all things conventional, as was his creator.

Moments before her death, Highsmith urged a visiting friend to leave, repeating, "Don't stay, don't stay." Highsmith wanted nothing more than to die alone, according to her biographer, who concludes, "Everything human was alien to her."

Highsmith, a native Texan, was born restless, her mother said. The novelist kept moving to new venues all over Europe, acquiring and discarding female lovers and denouncing all of them. They were poor substitutes for the mother she loved and hated.

This mother fixation was just one of the Highsmith passions that provoke biographer Joan Schenkar to eschew a chronological narrative. Instead, the chapters in "The Talented Miss Highsmith" (St. Martin's Press, \$35) are organized around Highsmith's obsessions.

The result of this unorthodox approach is an intricate, novel-like structure that suits Schenkar's own wit. Highsmith's mother, Mary, makes several entertaining entrances -- for example, arriving in London to see her daughter "with rather less warning than the Blitz."

"Miss Highsmith" is full of wonderfully realized scenes, like the opening chapter describing with mesmerizing, miraculous detail exactly how Highsmith composed her work. She gripped her "favorite Parker fountain pen, hunched her shoulders over her roll-top desk -- her oddly jointed arms and enormous hands were long enough to reach the back of the roll while she was still seated."

Highsmith's love life is described with loving specificity garnered from sources who do not wish to be identified by their real names.

"In the delicate balance of competing truths that biography is always on the verge of upsetting, both the living and dead deserve a little protection from each other," Schenkar writes.

This panoply of lovers is new material not to be found in other books, which also failed to unearth Highsmith's surprising seven-year career writing for comic books.

For those who want the straight dope, there is a substantial appendix titled "Just the Facts." But Schenkar is at pains to reiterate that Highsmith did not develop over time; indeed, the biographer notes that Highsmith "forged chronologies to give order to her life, altering the record of her life and the purport of her writing to do so."

You don't have to buy Schenkar's thesis. In "Beautiful Shadow," Andrew Wilson produced a rather good chronological biography of Highsmith.

Nevertheless, Schenkar's methods and deep research into Highsmith's deceptive practices have yielded one of the year's best literary lives, which is also a bracing rebuke to the usual way we read biography.

Elaine says

This is maybe the worst biography I ever read. First of all, the woman can't write. Clunky, repetitive and inapt. Words like quondam and intermittent (as a verb) or the phrase *avant la lettre* which draw attention to themselves because of their oddness are used over and over again so that they start to seem like tics or vocabulary exercises (use "quondam" in 5 sentences).

Second, the conjecture and over-striving to make this something more dramatic than a biography of one of the foremost suspense/lesbian/female/expatriate (pick your adjectives)writers -- which should have been an exciting enough project -- are painfully annoying, and border on offensive. She repeatedly suggests that Pat's loves, ways of dealing with life etc. were "criminal" or "murderous" in an overstrained attempt to wed life and art. The evidence (at least what she shows us) doesn't even come close to supporting her indictment -- promiscuous when young, lonely when old? Check. Drunk, suffering from OCD and social awkwardness? Also check. Criminal? WTF??? One seriously bizarre episode is when she suggests that the suicide of a

woman Pat glimpsed but never spoke to was somehow caused by Pat or Pat's art. Trying too hard, methinks.

Third, the compulsive listing of detail (does anyone care to know that one 1 of a dozen people listed as a sometime neighbor of Pat Highsmith was the granddaughter of some not-so-prominent industrialist or the fourth cousin of Teddy Roosevelt? I don't) makes your eyes glaze over. This is not 560 action-packed pages -- there is way too much nonsense here. Pat had OCD, and her biographer seems to have some form of the same. But what was her editor's excuse? More seriously though, the detail substitutes for description or for conveying any real mood or atmosphere. None of Pat's lovers or friends emerges as any sort of a "character" -- the writer has no talent for finding the TELLING detail, only for telling all the details. For a book largely set in lesbian NY of the 1940s, and which repeatedly alludes to Pat's sense of guilt, shame, etc. over her lesbianism, there is absolutely no time -- not one page -- spent trying to set the social stage or to convey any sense of what this world was actually like (or of how it felt to be a lesbian child in Texas in the 30s, for that matter). Rather an endless parade of women (who all know each other -- how?) leap in and out of bed with each other and the occasional man. There's obviously a fascinating social story here (bars? Barnard? both?) but we're not meant to know -- at least not from this book.

Fourth, the writer asserts at the beginning that she can't tell a linear story about Highsmith (why?) and then proceeds to use that as an excuse for repetition, doubling back, and bizarre leaps from topic to topic. The effect is bewildering -- and more "criminally" as the author would say -- you think that she will double back to seemingly important topics (the love affair she claims was Pat's most important and most lasting, the critical reception/sales/success or lack thereof of Pat's more important books) but she never does.

What a huge waste of time. I felt that she wanted me to dislike Highsmith, or to fear her, when I was done. I didn't. I only wanted to reread her books to get rid of the horrible annoyed feeling this biography left me with, and to offer an apology to Highsmith for having spent so much time in the company of this horrible woman, her biographer.
