
In December of 1948, Patricia Highsmith was a twenty-seven-year-old
aspiring writer with a murderous imagination and an outsized talent for
seducing women. Her first novel, “Strangers on a Train,” was complete, but
it would be more than a year before it was published. A Texas native with
thick black hair and feral good looks, Highsmith made a habit of standing
at attention when a woman walked into the room. That Christmas season,
she was working behind the toy counter at Bloomingdale’s, in Manhattan,
in order to help pay for psychoanalysis. She wanted to explore the sharp
ambivalence she felt about marrying her fiancé, a novelist named Marc
Brandel. Highsmith was a Barnard graduate, and, like many sophisticates
at the time, she viewed homosexuality as a psychological defect that could
be fixed; yet she had enough self-respect and sexual appetite to reject any
attempt to fix her own. When her analyst suggested that she join a therapy
group of “married women who are latent homosexuals,” Highsmith wrote
in her diary, “Perhaps I shall amuse myself by seducing a couple of them.”
She never married Brandel —or anyone else.

One day, a woman in a mink coat drifted into the toy department.
Highsmith later recalled, “Perhaps I noticed her because she was alone, or
because a mink coat was a rarity, and because she was blondish and
seemed to give off light.” Like Alfred Hitchcock, Highsmith was captivated
by frosty blondes, all the more so if they were married and rich. The
shopper, who slapped her gloves into one hand as she scanned the
merchandise, made Highsmith feel “odd and swimmy in the head, near to
fainting yet at the same time uplifted.” With an abstracted air, the woman,
Mrs. E. R. Senn, bought a doll from Highsmith.

That night, Highsmith wrote an eight-page outline for a novel: a love story
about Therese Belivet, a diffident nineteen-year-old who lives on her own
in New York City, and Carol Aird, a wealthy suburban wife and mother in
her thirties. Highsmith conjured what Therese would feel upon catching her
first glimpse of Carol: “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.”

Highsmith published the novel, “The Price of Salt,” in 1952, under the
pseudonym Claire Morgan. She was understandably wary of derailing her
career, but she also may have been uncomfortable with the book’s
exaltation of love. Highsmith never wrote another book like it; indeed, her

work became known for its ostentatious misanthropy. And for the next four
decades she publicly dodged any connection to a book of which she had
every right to be proud.

Highsmith was a pared-down, precise writer whose stories rarely strayed
from the solipsistic minds of her protagonists—most of them killers (like the
suave psychopath Tom Ripley) or would-be killers (like the unhappy
husbands in several of her books). “The Price of Salt” is the only Highsmith
novel in which no violent crime occurs.

Therese is not an eloquent or self-revealing character, and her dialogue
with Carol is sometimes banal. Yet the novel is viscerally romantic. When
Therese visits Carol’s home for the first time, Carol offers her a glass of
warm milk that tastes of “bone and blood, of warm flesh, salt less as chalk
yet alive as a growing embryo.” The two women embark on a road trip, and
the descriptions of it read like a noirish dream—stiff drinks, wood-paneled
motel rooms, a gun in a suitcase. A detective hired by Carol’s husband
pursues the couple, and you can feel Highsmith’s thriller muscles twitching
to life.

The love story is at once hijacked and heightened by the chase story.
Therese’s feelings, massing at the edge of her perception like the storm
clouds out the car window, are a mystery to her. The weight of what goes
unsaid as she and Carol talk about the towns they pass or where they might
stop for breakfast builds in an almost ominous way. Like a girl in a fairy
tale who has been put under a spell, Therese falls silent on the open road:
“She did not want to talk. Yet she felt there were thousands of words
choking her throat, and perhaps only distance, thousands of miles, could
straighten them out.”

When the women at last make love, Highsmith describes it with a
sacramental intensity appropriate to the young Therese: “Her arms were
tight around Carol, and she was conscious of Carol and nothing else, of
Carol’s hand that slid along her ribs, Carol’s hair that brushed her bare
breasts, and then her body too seemed to vanish in widening circles that
leaped further and further, beyond where thought could follow.” It makes
for a stark contrast with the way Highsmith once described an attempt to
have sex with a man, which felt to her like “steel wool in the face, a
sensation of being raped in the wrong place.”

This month, “Carol,” a film adaptation of “The Price of Salt,” directed by
Todd Haynes, opens in theatres. Haynes is known for his meditations on
lush mid-century genres: women’s pictures, Technicolor melodrama.
Instead of treating such material as kitsch, he teases out emotions that
were latent in the originals, showing what once could not be shown. Both
“Carol” and “Far from Heaven” —his 2002 homage to the movies of Douglas
Sirk—feel like fifties films that somehow eluded the Hays Code. Haynes’s
direction largely hews to the conventions of old Hollywood: in “Carol,”

there’s a sex scene between the two women, played by Cate Blanchett and
Rooney Mara, but it’s more swoony than libidinous. The characters don’t
use the word “lesbian”; the dialogue is mannered. Haynes’s approach suits
the novel, which is neither prim nor explicit about the women’s affair.
Our image of the fifties still tends to be shaped by “Father Knows Best”
clichés of contentedly conforming nuclear families. But the era offered
some surprising freedoms. “The Price of Salt” depicts a world where a
suburban matron could take a salesgirl she’s just met out for Old-
Fashioneds in the middle of the day—and where two women in love might
live together, hiding in plain sight as roommates, more easily than two gay
men or an unmarried heterosexual couple might. In a recent interview with
Film Comment, Haynes said that the “indecipherability” of lesbianism at the
time—the “unimagined notions of what love between women might even
look like” —is the engine of Highsmith’s plot.

Though homosexuality was invisible to most Americans at the time, it was
increasingly discussed among intellectuals, many of whom were in the
thrall of psychoanalysis. The question most often asked about same-sex
attraction was still whether it could be overcome, but people were finally
beginning to acknowledge the range of possible sexual identities and
behaviors. By 1953, the Kinsey Reports, on male and female sexuality, had
been published, broadening the discussion even further.

In 1955, Ann Aldrich, the pseudonymous author of the best-seller “We
Walk Alone,” an informal ethnography of lesbian life, observed, “If
homosexuality itself is not on the increase, mention of it among people
today is far more prevalent than ever before.” Aldrich attributed this higher
profile to a “climate of concern with all things psychological.” In her view,
“intelligent people are preaching tolerance of inversion” —as homosexuality
was sometimes called— even if they “are not regarding the invert as a
healthy person.” Aldrich, who was gay, suggested that lesbianism was
usually a case of arrested sexual development and an artifact of penis envy
or a domineering mother. Psychoanalysts, Aldrich believed, could address
the condition, though she acknowledged that “the ‘incurable’ lesbian as I
have known her is not usually the tragic heroine of a lesbian novel who
lives in abject misery, nor is she the psychotic case material in some
psychiatrists’ files.” She added, “While I hesitate to say that she is a
thoroughly happy person, at the same time I cannot in all honesty judge
her to be an unhappy person.” Despite its carefully couched ambivalence,
“We Walk Alone” brought its author hundreds of letters from American
women who felt emboldened to ask her where lesbians could find jobs,
bars, and other lesbians.

Many of Aldrich’s readers also bought cheap new paperback novels with
titles like “Odd Girl Out,” “Dormitory Women,” and “I Prefer Girls.” If these
books were partly created for the delectation of men —the cover art often
featured smoldering babes in lingerie— they at least made it clear that
lesbians existed. Such novels were often written by gay women, who tried
to allow their heroines some honest enjoyment within the confines of the
genre, which required its busty Sapphists to find real love with a man, go
mad, or commit suicide. As Ann Bannon, a former pulp author, notes in her
foreword to the 1999 book “Strange Sisters: The Art of Lesbian Pulp Fiction
1949-1969,” she and other writers spoke, in part, “to an audience of
women who were starved for connections with others, who thought they
were uniquely alone with emotions they couldn’t explain.”

Again and again in Highsmith’s fiction, one character develops a deadly
obsession with another. In “The Talented Mr. Ripley” (1955), Tom Ripley
both desires and resents Dickie Greenleaf, a wealthy scapegrace who is
gallivanting around Italy. Ripley bludgeons Dickie to death and —in the
ultimate act of erotic ownership— assumes his identity. In “Strangers on a
Train” (1950), the oleaginous Charles Anthony Bruno proposes a murder
pact to someone he’s just met, then acts on it by killing the man’s
adulterous wife, placing the two men in a queasy bond. Walter Stackhouse,
the suburban husband at the center of “The Blunderer” (1954),
contemplates killing his wife, then gets inescapably entangled with a man
who has committed such a crime. The moral compass in Highsmith’s
thrillers is always jittery, and passion repeatedly leads people to violence.
Joan Schenkar, the author of the artful biography “The Talented Miss
Highsmith” (2009), writes, “Pat thought about love the way she thought
about murder: as an emotional urgency between two people, one of whom
dies in the act.”

There’s nothing like reading the Freudians of the nineteen-fifties to make
one wary of glib psychological claims, but it’s not a stretch to say that
Highsmith had a terrible mother. Mary Coates Highsmith, a narcissistic
beauty and a moderately successful illustrator, taunted and competed
with Patricia, her only child. Highsmith loved and hated her mother as a
result, and, when Mary divorced her husband and remarried, Patricia
resented her stepfather for coming between them. At twenty, Highsmith
wrote in her diary, “Could I possibly be in love with my own mother?
Perhaps in some incredible way I am.” According to two biographies of
Highsmith, her mother liked to tell people that she’d tried to abort Patricia
by drinking turpentine. Once, while visiting Patricia in Paris, Mary Highsmith
pretended to be her daughter and gave an interview to journalists. She
called it a joke, but Highsmith, in a letter to a cousin, wrote, “I think a
psychiatrist would put another meaning to it.”

Schenkar characterizes Highsmith’s relationship with her mother as a folie
à deux: “They could not bear each other’s company, and they could not
leave each other alone.” Surely that relationship contributed to Highsmith’s
habit of seducing and philandering, to the conflation of obsessive love and
homicidal ideation in so many of her characters, and to a particular strain
of perversity in “The Price of Salt.” Carol tucks Therese into bed while giving
her that warm, embryonic milk, and the gesture feels bizarrely maternal.
(The scene, one of the novel’s best, has an almost witchy feel. Therese
downs her drink with fatalistic obedience, and it affects her like a truth
potion: her voice rises “suddenly in a babble” as she tells Carol about her
secret loneliness.)

The day after Highsmith finished the manuscript of “The Price of Salt,” she
decided to track down Mrs. Senn. She had memorized her address —315
Murray Avenue, Ridgewood, New Jersey— from the sales receipt. She took
the Erie Railroad from Penn Station; before boarding a bus to Murray
Avenue, she drank two ryes to get her courage up. In Senn’s residential
neighborhood, Highsmith felt conspicuous, but, as she wrote in her diary,
she lingered until she saw “a pale aqua automobile... driven by a woman
with dark glasses and short blond hair, alone, and I think in a pale blue or
aqua dress with short sleeves.” Maybe it was her quarry; maybe not.
If Mrs. Senn established the template for Carol Aird, Highsmith’s passionate
affair with a woman named Virginia Kent Catherwood allowed her to fill in
the lines. Catherwood was a sexual outlaw with a Main Line pedigree: she
had been a Philadelphia débutante. By the time she took up with Highsmith,
she was a wealthy divorcée who bore a resemblance to Katharine Hepburn
(and, evidently, to Mrs. Senn). Virginia, the daughter of Arthur Atwater
Kent, an inventor and the founder of a radio company, had married a
banker named Cummins Catherwood, in a wedding that made the society
pages. She met Highsmith at a party in New York, and in 1946 they became
lovers. They were together for only a year—Highsmith’s affairs rarely lasted
much longer than that—but Catherwood remained an ideal. In her diary,
Highsmith rhapsodized, “My green and red goddess, my jade and garnet,
my moss and holly berry, my sea and sun, my marrow and my blood, my
stop and go baby, I adore you, I worship you, I kiss you, I cherish you, I
defend you, I defy you ever not to love me, I caress your nipples with my
tongue.”

Highsmith and Catherwood never spoke again after the relationship ended,
but Highsmith invoked her frequently in her writing, most notably in the
posh, lightly sardonic Carol. Highsmith also stole a critical plot detail from
Catherwood’s life for “The Price of Salt.” Catherwood’s husband had hired
a detective who recorded his wife and a female lover in a hotel room; the
tapes were played in court, and Catherwood, who had a daughter, lost
custody. Carol, too, has a child who becomes the object of a custody
struggle. Children rarely appear in Highsmith’s fiction, however, and in “The
Price of Salt” Carol’s daughter, Rindy, remains an offstage presence. (The
movie, which offers a warmer version of Carol, shows her interacting
sweetly with her daughter.) Highsmith can’t seem to fully imagine a
mother’s longing for her child, but since she’s writing from the perspective
of Therese —who can’t quite empathize with motherhood, either—

something touching comes through. Therese sees Carol’s melancholy as a
mysterious veil that separates them, but readers can sense that it is a
simpler, more devastating sorrow. Highsmith writes, “Therese watched
Carol’s face as she looked at the picture of the little girl with the white-
blonde hair and the serious face, with the taped white bandage on her knee.
‘It’s not a very good picture,’ Carol said, but her face had changed, grown
softer.” It is one of the few poignant passages in Highsmith’s body of work.
In May, 1952, Coward-McCann published “The Price of Salt.” Harper &
Bros., which had released “Strangers on a Train” two years earlier, turned
it down, perhaps because it wasn’t another thriller. Highsmith said later
that the novel’s title was a Biblical reference; Schenkar, her biographer,
traces it to a fragment of Gospel text in André Gide’s “The Counterfeiters”:
“If the salt have lost its flavor wherewith shall it be salted? —That is the
tragedy with which I am concerned.” Highsmith was greatly relieved when
her agent suggested that she could use a pseudonym. She was not
ashamed of her sexuality, but she did not want to be known as a lesbian
author. The novel was respectfully reviewed, though a critic at the Times
seemed puzzled by its “low voltage” eroticism —possibly because it was
more literary than most lesbian pulp. “The Price of Salt” sold exceptionally
well —more than a million copies, after it came out as a twenty-five-cent
Bantam paperback.

In “Beautiful Shadow,” a 2003 biography of Highsmith, the British journalist
Andrew Wilson uncovered new details about Senn, whose first name was
Kathleen. The self-possessed, athletic, charming wife of a wealthy
businessman, she was also an alcoholic who had been in and out of
psychiatric institutions. In 1951, unbeknownst to Highsmith, Senn killed
herself in the garage of her Ridgewood home.
The other inspiration for Carol Aird, Virginia Kent Catherwood, made news
in 1959, when a playboy named David Mdivani filed a million-dollar
lawsuit against her, alleging that she had alienated the affections of his
wife, Virginia Sinclair. One newspaper ran the headline “woman took his
wife from him,” though it can safely be presumed that few readers
understood the full import of this sentence. The media skirted the matter
of homosexuality by stating that Catherwood had lured Sinclair away by
giving her expensive gifts. (Sinclair was also an heiress.) At one point, a
gossip column in the Los Angeles Times described Sinclair and Catherwood
arriving together in the lobby of the Beverly Hills Hotel after a ski trip to
Sun Valley. The reporter, noting that both women had a “deep ecru” tan,
proclaimed, “Very striking—these two blondes!” Mdivani eventually
dropped the lawsuit. Catherwood, an alcoholic, died in 1966, at the age of
fifty-one.

After “The Price of Salt,” Highsmith published twenty more novels, many of
which became movies, and nine short-story collections. She won several

literary prizes and was heralded in France. Generally caustic, she made
crude remarks about Jews and African-Americans. She continued to bed
women and to worship some of them, but she described women in general
—and feminists in particular— as “whining.” Her vitriol took eccentric forms:
according to Wilson, she once declared that she was repelled by the idea
of women reading in libraries while they were menstruating. She loved
snails, which she kept by the hundred as pets and took to parties in a
handbag, where they clung to a head of lettuce.

“The Price of Salt” was a unique expression of candor in a career built on
artifice. In 1949, Highsmith, while working on the novel, wrote in her diary
that she was “grateful” not to have to spoil “my best thematic material by
transposing it” to a “false male-female relationship.” She tried a few times
to write what she called a second “girls’ book,” but abandoned the effort.
Perhaps it’s just as well: one of the plots she sketched out, “The Inhuman
Ones,” was to be about “the types of female homosexuals who have
something missing from their hearts, who really hate their own sex.” For
decades, Highsmith denied rumors that she had written “The Price of Salt”;
Schenkar reports that Highsmith called the novel a “stinking” book.
In 1990, Highsmith agreed to a new edition, without a pseudonym, and
wrote an afterword in which she seemed shyly pleased with the novel’s
devoted readership. But it was a youthful book, and a hopeful one, and she
was now a sour and rancorous older woman. She spent her final years in a
fortress-like house in Switzerland, and died in a hospital in Locarno in
1995, at the age of seventy-four. The last acquaintance to see her was her
accountant.

One evening in 1959, a thirty-two-year-old writer named Marijane Meaker
was having a drink at L’s, a lesbian bar in Greenwich Village. Meaker wrote
lesbian pulp novels for the Gold Medal imprint; her first was “Spring Fire,”
published in 1952, under the pseudonym Vin Packer. She had learned—
because her editor had insisted on it—to make sure that these stories didn’t
end well for their heroines. At the time, paperbacks were often sent to
readers through the mail, making them subject to censorship by the postal
authorities. Although the novels could depict “perverse” sexuality, they
could not be seen to endorse it: those who indulged had to return to the
straight and narrow or be punished. (At the conclusion of “Spring Fire,”
about two lovers in a sorority house, one of the young women rediscovers
her true heterosexuality and moves into a dorm; the other has a car
accident and a nervous breakdown.) Meaker was a woman of multiple
pseudonyms. She was also Ann Aldrich, the author of “We Walk Alone.”
At the bar, Meaker began talking to an attractive dark-haired woman in a
trench coat who was drinking gin and smoking Gauloises. It was Highsmith,
and to Meaker, who was six years younger, she “looked like a combination
of Prince Valiant and Rudolf Nureyev.” By then, Highsmith was a celebrated
author—she had won the Grand Prix de la Littérature Policière—and Meaker
idolized her. She and the other customers at L’s knew that Highsmith had
written “The Price of Salt,” and they loved it for one reason in particular.
As Meaker notes, “It was for many years the only lesbian novel, in either
hard or soft cover, with a happy ending.”

In the final pages of “The Price of Salt,” Carol has lost custody of her
daughter, but nobody has died or been institutionalized. By modern
standards, the book’s ending has the pat feel of a Sirk picture, abruptly
reuniting lovers for whom the obstacles are enormous. Will Carol really get
over relinquishing her daughter? Can the two women truly be left alone to
make a life together? Highsmith almost circumvents those doubts; the
novel’s last scene has the pull of a torch song. Therese finds Carol in a
restaurant, where she’s dining with friends: “It was like meeting Carol all
over again, but it was still Carol and no one else. It would be Carol, in a
thousand cities, a thousand houses, in foreign lands where they would go
together, in heaven and in hell.” Leave it to Highsmith to get hell in there,
too.