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Ein Film von Eva Vitija

PRIX DE
SOLEURE
NOMINIERT
2022

Loving Highsmith

Die Leben und Lieben der Patricia Highsmith

Mit der Stimme von Gwendoline Christie

Mit Marijane Meaker, Monique Buffet, Tabea Blumenschein, Judy Coates, Courtney Coates, Dan Coates • Buch und Regie: Eva Vitija • Produzentinnen: Franziska Sonder, Maurizius Staerke Druх, Carl-Ludwig Rettinger • Bildgestaltung: Siri Klug • Montage: Rebecca Trösch • Musikkomposition: Noël Akchoté • Originalton: Juliane Van • Sound Design: Jascha Viehl • Mixing: Alexander Weuffen
Color Grading: Felix Hüskan • Compositing & Animation: Fabian Kaiser & Fabian Engeler • Herstellungsführung: Lina Rettinger • Redaktion: Kätlin Brinkmann (ZDF/Arte), Urs Augstburger (SRF), Silvana Bezzola Rigolini (RSI), Denise Chervet, Barbara Seiler (Redaktion Sternstunde) • Eine Produktion der Ensemble Film in Koproduktion mit Lichtblick Film, arte/ZDF, SRF, RSI • www.lovinghighsmith.ch

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Solothurner Filmtage
Opening Film
Nominated for the «Prix de Soleure»

LOVING HIGHSMITH

Directed by Eva Vitija

Switzerland/Germany, 2022, 83 Minutes

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Synopsis

Loving Highsmith is a unique look at the life of celebrated American author Patricia Highsmith based on her diaries and notebooks and the intimate reflections of her lovers, friends and family. Focusing on Highsmith's quest for love and her troubled identity, the film sheds new light on her life and writing.

Most of Highsmith's novels were adapted to the big screen, best known are *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. *Carol*, a partly autobiographic novel, was the first lesbian story with a happy end in 1950s America. But Highsmith herself was forced to live a double life and had to hide her vibrant love affairs from her family and the public. Only in her unpublished writings she reflected on *the ever present topic* for her.

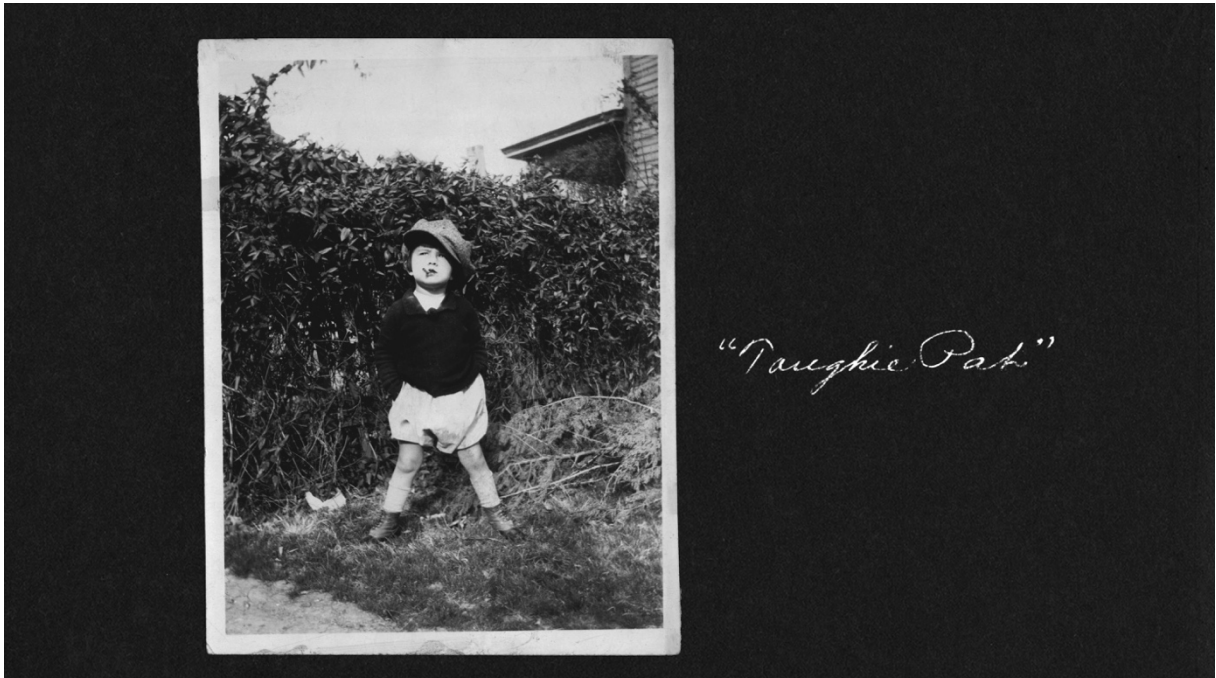
Excerpts from these notes voiced by Gwendoline Christie (*Game of Thrones*, *Top of the Lake*), beautifully interweaved archive material of her and her most famous novel adaptations create a vivid and touching portrait of one of the most fascinating female writers to date.



Patricia Highsmith - Ellen Rifkin Hill / Courtesy Swiss Social Archives



Patricia Highsmith, 1942, at 21 - Rolf Tietgens © Keith de Lellis (Please credit with ©)



Patricia Highsmith as a child in Fort Worth, Texas, "Toughie Pat" - Courtesy Family Archives

Background Information about Patricia Highsmith

Patricia Highsmith was born in 1921 in Fort Worth, Texas, just nine days after her mother had divorced her biological father J. Bernhard Plangman. The unwanted child spent the first six years of her life with her grandmother, Willie Mae, who had moved to Texas from the southern state of Alabama and also took in an orphaned cousin of Patricia's. He and Patricia – who called him *Brother Dan* – had a relationship like that of brother and sister throughout their lives. Patricia also regarded her grandmother as a very positive figure... in contrast to her mother, with whom she had a love-hate relationship throughout her life.

Not until she was six years old was Patricia brought to New York by her mother, who had embarked upon a career as an illustrator together with her new husband Stanley Highsmith. Patricia grew up with her mother and stepfather in simple middle-class conditions in Manhattan. When she started elementary school and her grandmother from the deep South discovered that she attended school with black children, she wanted Patricia to transfer to a private school. Racial segregation was still practiced in the South.

When she was 12 Patricia was again sent to her grandmother in Texas by her mother: a traumatic, lonely time for the young New York girl. Her mother had promised to get a divorce but proceeded to leave Pat in Texas for a whole year and remained with her husband. A betrayal that Patricia, who idolized her unattainable mother, resented her mother for the rest of her life. Finally Patricia attended the renowned Barnard College in New York and published her first short stories in the school's own literary magazine. As if to herald her later literary creations, the theme of confused identity is an early part of her life: her mother Mary Highsmith failed to have Patricia's birth name Plangman changed. Since she had already published her first stories under the name Highsmith, she was obliged to have herself adopted by her stepfather at the age of 21 so she could keep that name.

While Patricia would say of herself: "My character was essentially made before I was six," she also achieved a kind of literary maturity by the age of 20. Her story *The Heroine* (1945) contains everything which is so distinctive in the later Highsmith. The young author takes the readers by the hand and allows them an insight into her soul... until they suddenly realize how insane the main character is – after identifying with her. Just like her later novel character, the famous Tom Ripley, an unscrupulous and charming killer who fascinated an international readership in five novels from the 1950s until the 1990s. At the age of 17 Pat began to keep what she called *cahiers*, notebooks which – together with her unpublished diaries – form the foundation of LOVING HIGHSMITH.

In her psychological crime novels Highsmith succeeds in depicting one part of the uncertain identity and devastating double life which she herself was confronted with at an early age. Patricia is a lesbian and has to conceal her sexual identity from her family and the general public throughout her life. However, she conducts a wild, homosexual underground life in the New York of the 1940s and 50s. Until she can live from writing Highsmith composes comic texts for the company which will later become Marvel, stereotyped stories of heroes with double identities as well. A literary grant from the artistic colony Yaddo enables her to write the novel *Strangers on a Train*. This is published in 1950 and becomes her first literary

success while also being the first of many film adaptations of her works: Alfred Hitchcock's version of *Strangers on a Train* is generally regarded as a brilliant film.

She meets Marc Brandel and attempts to change her sexual orientation by means of conversion psychoanalysis, which is common at the time, in order to marry him. However, she soon realizes that this endeavor is doomed to failure and notes in her diary that she would far rather seduce the other women in the group therapy sessions who have the same "problem".

Strangers on a Train provides Highsmith with the financial means to travel to Europe, shortly before her second novel *The Price of Salt* (later republished and adapted to screen under the name *Carol*) is published in the USA. This lesbian love story departs from the literary conventions of the time in that the love of two women has a hopeful rather than a tragic ending. Although *Carol* is very successful, Highsmith insists that all the editions are published under a pseudonym. Only 40 years later, in 1990, does the writer publish the novel under her own name.

Themes such as guilt, madness and changing or double identities run through many of her works. In 1962 Highsmith moves to Europe permanently in order to be close to a married lover in England. However, for the rest of her life she travels frequently between the USA and Europe, living in Italy and, from 1967, in France. Highsmith always remains an outsider of the American literary scene. Her works are repeatedly rejected by publishers in the USA. However, in Europe she receives the literary recognition she deserves, winning major prizes and becoming famous. She publishes 22 novels and countless short stories. Many of her novels are filmed in the USA, France, Britain and Germany.

In 1981 she moves from France to Switzerland, to Tessin, where she spends the last 13 years of her life. She dies early in 1995 at the age of 74 and bequeaths her considerable fortune to the artistic colony Yaddo. Her diaries and notebooks are found after her death in a laundry closet. Her literary heritage is published by the Zürich publisher Diogenes (her main publisher since 1980), while her estate is stored in the Swiss Literary Archive in Bern.

Bibliography, awards, film adaptations:

<https://www.diogenes.ch/leser/autoren/h/patricia-highsmith.html>

Crew and Protagonists

Crew

Writer and Director	Eva Vitija
Voice of Patricia Highsmith	Gwendoline Christie (ENG) Maren Kroymann (DE)
Narrator	Annina Butterworth (ENG) Eva Vitija (DE)
Cinematographer	Siri Klug
Editing	Rebecca Trösch
Music	Noël Akchoté
Original Sound	Juliane Vari
Sound Design	Jascha Viehl
Mixer	Alexander Weuffen
Color Correction	Felix Hüsken
Compositing and Animation	Fabian Kaiser & Fabian Engeler
Producers	Franziska Sonder Maurizius Staerkle Drux
Coproducer	Carl-Ludwig Rettinger
In Coproduction with	Lichtblick Film SRF, Schweizer Radio and Television (Executive Producer: Urs Augstburger (SRF). Denise Chervet (Sternstunde) RSI Radio Televisione Svizzera (Executive Producer: Silvana Bezzola) SRG SSR (Executive Producer: Sven Wälti) ZDF in Cooperation with / in Kooperation mit Arte (Producer: Anne-Kathrin Brinkmann)

Protagonists

Marijane Meaker	Writer and friend of Patricia Highsmith, East-Hampton, NY
Monique Buffet	Former English teacher and translator, friend of Patricia Highsmith, Paris
Tabea Blumenschein	Artist, costume designer, director, actress, friend of Patricia Highsmith, Berlin
Judy Coates	Daughter-in-law of Highsmith's cousin "Brother Dan"
Courtney Coates-Blackman	Granddaughter of Highsmith's cousin "Brother Dan"
Dan Coates	Grandson of Highsmith's cousin "Brother Dan"

Technical Details

Shooting Format:	2K
Screening Format:	2K DCP
Länge:	83 minutes
Originalversion:	Englisch, German, French

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Zürcher Filmstiftung

Film- und Medienstiftung NRW

Kulturfonds Suissimage

Kanton St. Gallen Kulturförderung / Swisslos

MEDIA Desk Suisse

Ernst Göhner Stiftung

UBS Kulturstiftung

Volkart Stiftung

Alexis Victor Thalberg Stiftung

Kulturfonds der Société Suisse des Auteurs (SSA)

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Director's Statement

Patricia Highsmith made a lasting impression upon me even as a small child. When my family and I would spend our summer vacations in the village of Tegna in Ticino, my parents would tell me that there was a very famous writer who also lived in the same village – all alone with her cats. And this innocuous statement gave me a pleasant shudder of excitement combined with awe. I remember well that I was preoccupied for a long time with the question of why the woman lived alone with her cats. I must have been about seven years old.

The curious fascination which gripped me as a child has only become stronger since I began to examine Patricia Highsmith's life more closely. This mysterious attraction is also something that many of her readers are unable to escape from. Various episodes from Highsmith's life stand out: how she was stalked by admirers, how fans would break into her house, how one of her later lovers gained access to her by adopting a false identity. And here we are already in Highsmith Country, as her work was known due to its curious, unique nature: a land of obsessions, double identities, secrets and desire.

Highsmith's image is determined to a great extent by the last years of her life in Switzerland, and by her reputation as a grim, misanthropic crime writer – just as she was portrayed to me as a small child. When I began to study Highsmith's notebooks (cahiers, as she called them) and diaries in the Swiss Literary Archive and met with her former friends in various country, I was extremely moved and surprised to discover a completely different person behind the familiar image: a beautiful young writer with an extremely romantic streak and a poetic style who led an incredibly active love life in the wild New York of the post-war years – and also a moving and unforgettable personality who fell in love with new women again and again.

It became clear to me during the course of my research and the filming of this work how powerfully the themes of her writing are determined by love. Love is a permanent theme, not only in her unpublished novels and diaries. Highsmith's famous psychological thrillers are also interwoven with themes of obsessive love which disrupts identity. In the final analysis she always writes about love, though most of the times encoded. This is why I wanted to bring Highsmith's "ever-present subject", as she refers to her thoughts about homosexuality in her diaries, into the foreground in *LOVING HIGHSMITH*.

In the early 1950s *Carol* is one of the first novels that allows the hope that love between women is possible. In fact, Highsmith displayed the courage in her writing that she could not maintain in life. During Patricia Highsmith's time being lesbian was, as an American (and even worse, as a Texan girl from a Protestant family which may have rejected the Pope but was closely linked to the church), a source of lifelong guilt and mechanisms of self-destruction. In her works Highsmith succeeds brilliantly in transcending these subjects, but they must have been very damaging for her loving relationships. Most of these ended in disappointment. And Highsmith destroyed herself with long-term alcoholism.

Highsmith's was not the only life to be marked by feelings of guilt and the obligation to hide. The women who had relationships with Highsmith, though open about their homosexuality in lesbian circles and with friends, were often forced to lead a double life with their families. I'm extremely grateful that three of these women decided to share their stories about Patricia Highsmith with the public in this film. It was moving to talk to them about their

difficult histories but also beautiful to discover the humorous and creative strategies they developed in order to deal with social disapproval. For many, the invisibility of lesbian women was both a blessing and a curse. They were able to conduct their lives underground, undisturbed and with enjoyment. At the same time, they were even *further* away from social acceptance than homosexual men. LOVING HIGHSMITH is therefore intended also to be a plea for the women of Highsmith's generation who fought it for the right to live and love in accordance with their true identities. The life and work of the incomparable Highsmith thus provided a completely new face for lesbian women.

LOVING HIGHSMITH is a "Love-biography" of Patricia Highsmith on film. I hope that the viewers will join me in falling in love a little with Patricia Highsmith, getting to know her better, parting from her in the end but never forgetting her...

Eva Vitija, Zürich, January 2022

Producer's Statement

Patricia Highsmith has had a crucial influence on the thriller genre, from Hitchcock to Minghella. Her stories reach a broad readership and fan community, while the film versions of her works appeal to mass audiences. Consequently her characters are known to people all around the world. However, the life of the writer herself largely remains a mystery to the general public.

Highsmith spent the last years of her life in Ticino, Switzerland, and left her literary estate to the Swiss Literary Archive. This includes Highsmith's diaries and notebooks, which form the backbone of LOVING HIGHSMITH:

"I'm determined to make a good thing of every catastrophe of my life."

The protagonists of this production – Patricia Highsmith's lovers and family – along with scenes from the most important film adaptations (*Carol* by Todd Haynes, *The Talented Mr Ripley* by Anthony Minghella, *Strangers on a Train* by Alfred Hitchcock, *The American Friend* by Wim Wenders) ensure that LOVING HIGHSMITH is a film which not only presents a biography of Highsmith's emotional life but is also a portrait of a generation of women who found the courage with Highsmith's novel *Carol* to fight for their right to love and express their true identity.

Until now a cinema documentary about Patricia Highsmith has been conspicuous by its absence. In 2021 she would have celebrated her 100th birthday. The headquarters of Diogenes Publishing, which made Patricia Highsmith so well-known in Europe and has the rights to her total work to this day, is in Zürich. In the fall of 2021, to mark this anniversary, Patricia Highsmith's diaries and notebooks were published – making it the ideal time for a cinema film about her.

Franziska Sonder, January 2022

Background to the Protagonists

Marijane Meaker (born 1927)



Marijane Meaker achieved fame as an American writer who is credited with launching the lesbian pulp fiction genre with her novel *Spring Fire*. She also wrote mystery and crime novels with great success under the pseudonym Vin Packer. She has used various names for different genres: as Ann Aldrich she wrote nonfiction

books about lesbians, and as Mary James she has written books for younger children. She also functioned as her own agent, representing all her literary identities. Meaker met Highsmith in the late 1950s and moved with her to New Hope, Pennsylvania, where they lived together. She was the last of Patricia Highsmith's lovers to officially share her home. Meaker wrote about her time with Highsmith in her nonfiction memoir *Highsmith: A Romance of the 1950s*. She lives in East Hampton, New York.

Monique Buffet (born 1952)



Monique Buffet met Patricia Highsmith in 1978 and came to love her. The Frenchwoman, several years younger than Highsmith, maintained a friendly relationship with her until her death. She worked as an English teacher and translator and today lives outside Paris.

Tabea Blumenschein (1952 - 2020)



In the 1970s and 80s Tabea Blumenschein was one of the most flamboyant personalities in the film and art scene of West Berlin. An artist, actress, director and costume designer, she created films, make-up and costumes for Ulrike Ottinger, Herbert Achternbusch and Walter Bockmayer and developed fashion for

Claudia Skoda. In her films *Laokoon und Söhne*, *Die Betörung der Blauen Matrosen*, *Madame X* and *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, which were created together with Ulrike Ottinger and featured her as the main protagonist and costume designer, she became famous in the late 70s and early 80s. It was during this time that she met Patricia Highsmith; they maintained their friendship for many years. In 1985 Tabea Blumenschein and her girlfriend Isabell Weiß featured as the first lesbian couple in Germany under the headline *Women who Love Women* on the front page of Stern magazine. Following her television film *Zagarbata* (Kleines Fernsehspiel ZDF, 1985), made on Super 8 together with Christoph Dreher, she withdrew almost entirely from the public gaze and devoted herself to painting and drawing. In the early 1990s she was homeless for some time and then lived in modest circumstances in the Berlin suburb of Marzahn.

Judy, Courtney & Dan Coates



As a child Patricia Highsmith lived for several years with her grandmother in Fort Worth, Texas, together with her cousin Dan O. Coates. Highsmith and her “Brother Dan” (as she called her cousin) had a relationship like that of brother and sister throughout her life. Thus Dan’s daughter-in-law Judy Coates and her children

Courtney and Dan knew their cousin Patricia Highsmith well from her visits to Texas. Judy and her children live on a large farm near Fort Worth, Texas. Both her father-in-law and her late husband Dan W. Coates were rodeo announcers and Texas Longhorn breeders. The family has close connections with the rodeo.