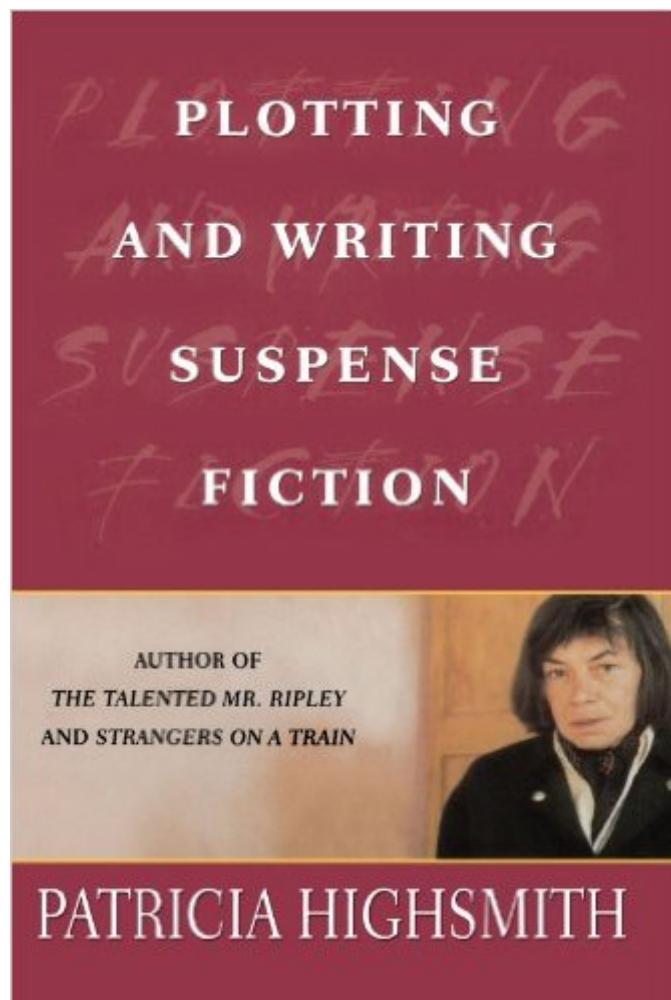


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Plotting And Writing Suspense Fiction



Synopsis

Patricia Highsmith, author of *Strangers On a Train*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, *Found In The Street*, and many other books, is known as one of the finest suspense novelists. In this book, she analyzes the key elements of suspense fiction, drawing upon her own experience in four decades as a working writer. She talks about, among other topics; how to develop a complete story from an idea; what makes a plot gripping; the use (and abuse) of coincidence; characterization and the "likeable criminal"; going from first draft to final draft; and writing the suspense short story. Throughout the book, Highsmith illustrates her points with plentiful examples from her own work, and by discussing her own inspirations, false starts, dead ends, successes, and failures, she presents a lively and highly readable picture of the novelist at work. Anyone who wishes to write crime and suspense fiction, or who enjoys reading it, will find this book an insightful guide to the craft and art of a modern master.

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Customer Reviews

I'm glad I bought this book. As an author of suspense myself, I found it very worthwhile. It won't teach you how to write--but I've found no book can really do that. In the same vein as Stephen King's book *On Writing*, it is more an account about how this highly successful author developed her craft over the years, her successes and failures. If you want a how to guide you would be better off with another title. It also enhances the enjoyment of this book if the reader is familiar with Highsmith's books. I found it interesting to know where she got her ideas and how she developed a small incident into a novel.

I enjoyed a few of Highsmith's novels and short stories, and was impressed enough to become curious about how the author came up with her detailed insights into the psychology of the likable criminal. Common sense told me it was observation - but I still wanted to find out from the horse's mouth so to speak. While I found it interesting to read about Highsmith looking back at the circumstances under which she wrote, I felt that Highsmith herself was not whole-heartedly interested, or confident about writing about her particular process of writing. It was mildly irritating that she apologised several times (usually at the beginning of a chapter) for having the audacity to presume to write about how to write. Fair enough: it is wise not to assume you speak for everyone or be totally pompous about it (like Sol Stein, ugh) but still, by the time a reader picks up a book like this, they really WANT to know how that particular author writes. I also felt that there was a fair amount of distance between the time she analysed her process, and the time she actually wrote her stories, so the book lacks the intricacy that one gets from reading a more immediate record. However, there were some useful and interesting bits, especially Highsmith's opinions on thickening the plot, and the use of coincidence. It would help very much to have read her work widely as she quotes from some of them and uses the Glass Cell as a case study.

In her introduction to Plotting and Writing Suspense, prolific suspense author Patricia Highsmith tells us that this will not be a how-to book, but a book that collects her own ideas and thoughts on the craft of writing. She isn't there to give us a grammar lesson. She wants to tell us how she does it and, hopefully, teach us a thing or two in the process. It's great fun to read this legendary author's thoughts. After all, Highsmith has written some of the best novels of suspense; The Two Faces Of January, The Blunderer and, of course, The Talented Mr Ripley series. In this book, she collects her thoughts on the genre and on the process of writing. And she tells us quite bluntly that what worked for her as an author might not work for us. But I think that any author (or fan) could and will learn a thing or two from this author's lessons. The best parts are when Highsmith takes her own books apart to show her readers that not even the established writer is safe from the typical mistakes most writers will make at one time or another. And if there is one thing that you'll come away with from reading this book is that writers (pros and beginners alike) have to learn to practice and practice and practice some more. Practice, according to Highsmith, does make better. And that is one lesson I will not forget.

A modestly written, terse, readable and nuts and bolts book about how plots come to be put

together, how a writer makes a living (or doesn't) and how to tell the story. What I found most charming about this "How-To" book was that it wasn't chirpy, wasn't preachy, didn't have a whiff of unreality arising from its advice, and was eminently practical. The only crime writing manual so far that I have picked up, browsed in, bought, took home and actually finished reading from cover to cover (sometimes doing the reading on a bus, that's how gripping it is). Recommended.

I read this book after experiencing a couple of Patricia Highsmith's Tom Ripley novels. Since I liked her mysteries so much I thought this book would provide interesting insight into the mind and technique of the author, which it did. In terms of revealing the brain child behind the Ripley books it was quite revealing. Although I am not a professional writer of fiction, I found the advice in this book interesting and helpful because it was supplemented with real life examples. Highsmith fills this book with examples of what she did right and what she did wrong throughout her career. She explains the general--and fairly sensible--principles that guide her writing as well as the little details that can enhance or ruin a novel. If I were an aspiring author, I think I would derive useful and interesting information from this book.

Patricia Highsmith doesn't sell out, despite writing in the suspense genre. The reason, as one gathers from this book, is that she sees suspense as a necessary ingredient of all fiction; the suspense genre simply focuses on the most extreme kinds of dread and excitement. I found the book just about right as to depth vs. chattiness. It's true there's only so much one can teach about the writing process. Everything an aspiring writer encounters in his own practice is covered: plotting, first drafts, second drafts, revision. Highsmith's telescoped prose is a lesson in itself and worth the price of the book. We need as many encouraging monographs like this, written by masters who take the time to address the rest of us, as we can get.

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