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Leisure & Arts -- Masterpiece: Bound for Perdition --- Highsmith's 'Strangers on a Train' is fueled by anxiety

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[Anatomy of a classic]

Mention "Strangers on a Train" to suspense buffs and you'll likely evoke memories of Alfred Hitchcock's 1951 thriller about a celebrity athlete who fends off a debonair psychopath who's trying to frame him. But before Hitchcock's movie came Patricia Highsmith's 1950 novel. Highsmith's original "Strangers on a Train" is a moody and disturbing excavation of guilty paranoia that bears little resemblance to the film beyond its initial premise.

Otto Penzler, veteran editor and publisher of crime writing, said of Highsmith's fiction that "you don't know who are the good guys and the bad guys because there are no nice people." "Strangers on a Train" doesn't appear to fit that description at first. The story proceeds from a chance meeting on a train between two men, the indolent Bruno and the industrious Guy. Each has a family member he wishes he could be rid of, so Bruno proposes that they trade murders, with each doing the other's dirty work to avoid suspicion. "It's the idea of my life!" declares Bruno -- but Guy doesn't agree.

Bruno goes ahead and kills Guy's estranged wife anyway, throwing Guy into a panic of fear and guilt. Then Bruno starts stalking Guy to get Guy to fulfill his end of a bargain that he never agreed to. Under pressure, Guy gives in and kills Bruno's father. Now both men have something to hide. They're also joined by a bond "closer than brotherhood," a tie that proves as corrosive as it is intimate.

The relationship between the two may also be described as queer. Bruno isn't straight ("he didn't care too much about sleeping with women"), but he's not exactly a homosexual, either. He lives with his mother and loves her rather too well, but he loves Guy best of all. Yet he also tortures Guy, threatening him with exposure until Guy cracks and murders for him. Guy resents Bruno and yet he protects him and even weeps for him. And he keeps the deal that Bruno pushes him into, leading him to wonder whether Bruno isn't his own "cast-off self, what he thought he hated but perhaps in reality loved."

Such contradictions highlight the way that Highsmith perverts the workings of sympathy in her suspense stories. Sympathy means imagining oneself in another's place, but Highsmith makes it difficult for the reader to sympathize with the characters, or for the characters to sympathize with each other. Bruno feels connected to one person only by murdering another, and Guy's descent offers no relief for a reader looking for someone to root for.

The shared decline of Bruno and Guy is less a morality play than an ugly spectacle of disintegration. "I find the public passion for justice quite boring and artificial," Highsmith wrote, "for neither life nor nature cares whether justice is ever done or not." Instead of illustrating a moral, "Strangers on a Train" throbs with a pervasive and inexorable tension, a gnawing pressure that erodes the characters from the inside.

That tension is Highsmith's creative signature. "Strangers" was her debut novel, but her sense of anxious foreboding was already fully formed in the crucible of Cold War paranoia that surrounded her. For Highsmith, who was gay, that paranoia was shot through with anxiety, for American Cold War politics intertwined with an intense homophobia that branded homosexuals as an official national security risk. Highsmith's creative goal, she wrote in her notebook at the time, was "Consciousness alone, consciousness in my particular era, 1950."

She expressed that consciousness through guilt, but of an unusual sort. Beginning with the character of Guy in "Strangers on a Train" and continuing through 18 novels and scores of short stories, Highsmith's inverted version of guilt creates the crime, not the other way around.

Alfred Hitchcock acquired "Strangers" shortly after its publication for an anonymous bid of \$7,500. He commissioned Raymond Chandler to write the screenplay, but the two clashed because, as Chandler recounted it, he tried to focus on story and character, while Hitchcock thought in terms of "the shots he wants to make." Hitchcock fired Chandler and had the screenplay rewritten by Czenzi Ormonde before he began shooting the movie in 1951.

Hitchcock's film conventionalizes most of the disturbing elements of Highsmith's story. Bruno, for example, is remade from a dissolute mama's boy into a charismatic dilettante, portrayed by Robert Walker in a memorable display of amoral charm. Guy (Farley Granger) is turned from a brooding architect into a tennis player whose good looks are matched by his sterling integrity.

But the most important inversion centers on the movie's treatment of the murder swap: Guy simply refuses to go through with his assigned killing, and he and Bruno become enemies. Most of Hitchcock's story focuses on Bruno's attempted revenge on Guy for breaking their "deal." Hitchcock presents some memorable visuals (such as a crowd at a tennis match wagging their heads back and forth to follow the ball -- all except Bruno, who stares eerily ahead at Guy). But gone is the skittish discomfort that attends Guy's slow moral collapse in the novel.

"A Hitchcock picture has to be all Hitchcock," complained Chandler. Indeed so -- and Hitchcock's distinctive style helps to account for his lasting appeal. So too with Patricia Highsmith. "Strangers on a Train" began Highsmith's career-long tour of the minds of characters who aren't comfortable in the world, and her edgy, original thrillers have always defied easy categorization. Even more popular now than when she was alive and writing, Highsmith stands as an utterly unique genre writer. She is, in the words of Graham Greene, a "poet of apprehension" whose work offers "cruel pleasures."

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