

# *The Two Faces of January*: Three Americans joined together by crime

David Walsh  
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*Written and directed by Hossein Amini; based on the novel by Patricia Highsmith*

In *The Two Faces of January*, Chester MacFarland (Viggo Mortensen), an American financial swindler of some sort, is traveling in Greece in the early 1960s with his wife Colette (Kirsten Dunst). In Athens they meet a young American, Rydal Keener (Oscar Isaac), a bit shady himself, whose interest is piqued by Chester's money and Colette's beauty and who spends an evening with the couple.

Later that night, after Chester accidentally and fatally injures a private detective acting on behalf of a group of angry investors back in the US, Rydal helps him dispose of the body. The trio of Americans quickly leave the hotel. Their fates are now intertwined.

Having left behind in their haste their old passports at the hotel's front desk, MacFarland and his wife need new ones. Rydal has a friend who can organize that, but he suggests they all wait on the island of Crete until the papers are ready. When they arrive there, because of the lack of documents, the three are forced to spend the night first in a bar and later in the open air. Colette and Rydal dance and seem attracted to one another.

They travel by bus to a smaller town on Crete, where Chester becomes convinced that Rydal and his wife have slept together. He tries to kill the younger man in the ruins at Knossos, the ancient site associated with the myth of King Minos and the Minotaur, the half-man, half-bull who dwelt at the center of a labyrinth. The denouement of *The Faces of January* plays itself out in Istanbul.

The effort to suggest assorted "archetypal" relationships, accentuated by the ancient Greek and mythological settings, is not terribly subtle. Chester distinctly reminds Rydal of his estranged father, who has only recently died and whose funeral he chose not to attend. At one point, to confuse the authorities, the pair pretend to be actual father-and-son. (In American writer Patricia Highsmith's 1964 novel, on which the film is based, moreover, Colette reminds Rydal of his cousin, with whom he had a brief affair that ended disastrously.) Various Oedipal and incestuous undercurrents are at work here. Rydal and Chester battle it out, with the "son" eventually vanquishing and overthrowing the "father," purging himself of numerous emotional burdens from the past in the process, although at a high cost.

Writer-director Hossein Amini was born in Tehran in 1966 and emigrated with his family to England when he was 11 years old. He began writing film scenarios in the early 1990s and is best

known for his script work on *Jude* (1996), *The Wings of the Dove* (1997), *Killshot* (2009), *Drive* (2011) and *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012). *The Two Faces of January* is his first feature film as a director.

Amini's film is decently constructed, decently shot and decently acted, but it does not exude any strong reason for having come into being. It is rather flat, almost throughout. Isaac (*Inside Llewyn Davis*, 2013) and Mortensen do their best, but the drama never fully comes to life. Dunst, who did some remarkable work a decade ago, now, after years of making mostly mediocre studio films (such as the *Spider-Man* series), seems a little duller and less interesting. In any event, she is not given much to do here except be vaguely fought over.

Because of the generally subdued and even limp feel of the film, the implausibilities of the story, largely inherited from the novel, tend to stand out. Things go on that don't make a lot of psychological sense, almost from the beginning. For one major thing, is it really so easy to become a killer, or an accomplice to a killing? Furthermore, *The Two Faces of January* requires Chester and Rydal to remain within sight of one another, so to speak, for much of the film, but they would have to be more mentally unbalanced than they are portrayed as being not to head for the hills in opposite directions at numerous points. That the two men are inextricably bound to one another is a given of the story, but it remains something schematic for the most part, existing "on paper," and not dramatically proven, not deeply felt.

The writer-director explains in numerous interviews that he has loved Highsmith's novel for a long time and been trying to make it into a film for almost two decades. However, he never convincingly specifies why, apart from the fact, as he told Ioncinema, that Highsmith "writes characters which I find fascinating because they are complex and dark."

Why adapt a given novel? Presumably, because it brings out a problem or a theme in a unique or remarkable manner, because it contains an element that would be lost if the screenwriter simply "started from scratch." The German director R.W. Fassbinder, for instance, explained to an interviewer that he made Theodor Fontane's novel, *Effi Briest* (1894-95), into a film in 1974 because what interested him was "Fontane's attitude to the story [and German society]. Of course you could make a lively film just telling the story (a young woman marries an older man, is unfaithful to him, and so on), but if you're just telling a story like that there's no real need to film Fontane's novel. You might as

well find a similar story yourself.”

Exactly. If Amini simply wanted to make a film about two men, one younger and one older, locked in a struggle for power, in which a woman is a kind of “collateral damage,” why film Highsmith’s novel? Why not “find a similar story” himself?

Amini has gone to the trouble to set the work in 1962 or so, faithfully following the book, but his work tells us next to nothing about the period and next to nothing about Highsmith’s attitude toward the times and the society. It is simply a “timeless” drama that more or less accidentally happens to take place in such and such a year. Why 1962 and not 1982, why Greece and not Italy, why three Americans and not three Germans? These questions have no satisfying answers.

Highsmith (1921-1995) is an interesting figure. Her matter of fact variety of postwar psychological tension and angst has been tempting to numerous (especially French) filmmakers. Alfred Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train* (1951) was the first film adaptation, but it has been followed by many others, including René Clément’s *Purple Noon* with Alain Delon (1960, based on *The Talented Mr. Ripley*), Claude Autant-Lara’s *Enough Rope* (1963, based on *The Blunderer*), Wim Wenders’ *The American Friend* (1977, loosely adapted from *Ripley’s Game*), Claude Miller’s *This Sweet Sickness* (1977) with Gérard Depardieu, Michel Deville’s *Eaux profondes* (*Deep Water*, 1981, with Isabelle Huppert), two versions of *The Cry of the Owl* (including one in 1987 directed by Claude Chabrol), Anthony Minghella’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), with Matt Damon, and several more.

Highsmith suffered from an unstable childhood, split between Fort Worth, Texas and New York City. She knew she was gay at a relatively early age, and the unhappiness of her family situation and the need to suppress her sexuality in public seem to have combined to make her depressed and largely unapproachable for much of her life.

Like many others of her generation, Highsmith was propelled to the left by the events of the 1930s, at home and abroad, joining the Young Communist League in the late 1930s at the time of the Spanish Civil War. Biographer Joan Schenkar observes that she “persuaded her reluctant parents to attend a birthday celebration for Lenin in [New York’s] Madison Square Garden, and wrote a play that was criticized as ‘too communist’ by her drama professor” at Barnard College.

Also like many other intellectuals of her generation, the traumas and tragedies of the Second World War, the Holocaust and the Cold War turned her inward and made her far more pessimistic about human possibilities. Another biographer, Andrew Wilson, notes that “the themes and philosophical arguments that lie at the heart of her fiction reflect the bleak existentialist writings of Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Kafka, Sartre and Camus, all of whom she read.”

If the reflection of those “bleak writings” was all there was in Highsmith’s novels, they would very likely not interest us terribly much. In fact, she retained a certain spark of mischief and even reluctant optimism from her background. Highsmith’s novels often center on the relationship between an amoral individual and a “normal” one, or treat an individual who, often quasi-accidentally, is put in the position where he or she appears to have

committed a crime and cannot defend him or herself, either because the “victim” has disappeared or for some other reason. Often, the “crime” is something the accused has fantasized about carrying out, and so prompts feelings of guilt and anxiety.

The postwar, “existentialist” mood is no doubt present: the free-floating characters have been thrown into a universe where no official institution or ideology does them much good. Highsmith once wrote that “art has nothing to do with morality, convention or moralizing.” Her favorite and most popular character, to whom she devoted five novels, was Tom Ripley, who, as one commentator notes, “is a small-time con man and bisexual serial killer ... Without conscience, Ripley is incapable of remorse. He survives against all odds, like a strange, new kind of creature.”

The impact and weight of a novel or film, or any work of art, has much to do with the concrete historical circumstances and atmosphere in which it comes before the public. In the Eisenhower era, saturated with state-sponsored conformism and the supposed glories of the “American way of life,” reinforced culturally in part by a host of sanitized films and situation comedies, Highsmith’s unpunished amorality had a certain piquancy and even punch to it. “The feeling of menace,” as another critic put it, “behind most Highsmith novels, the sense that ideas and attitudes alien to the reasonable everyday ordering of society are being suggested, has made many readers uneasy.”

In the end, however, the “unsettledness” in her work doesn’t go terribly far, it merely remains unsettling. There are not many deeper insights into the social order in Highsmith’s work. That was not her interest; she focused, somewhat uninterestingly, on humanity’s ambiguous, and possibly murderous, character.

In our present day, America is known for torture, “black sites” and drone strikes, and the cultural accompaniment all too often takes the form of the porno-sadism of Tarantino and a host of imitators. Treated uncritically, ahistorically and without Fassbinder’s focus on the author’s “attitude to the story” and the contemporary state of things, Highsmith’s level of violence and mayhem is likely to seem rather modest and the results are likely to be tepid and without compelling purpose. And this is what we in fact encounter in Amini’s *Two Faces of January*.



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