

Ripley: A new series based on the Patricia Highsmith novel

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Ripley is an eight-part television series on Netflix written and directed by Steven Zaillian and based on the 1955 novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley* by Patricia Highsmith. The mini-series is a carefully and elegantly made work, which is well worth viewing. Whatever the shortcomings of either the original novel or this new adaptation, the latter demonstrates an exemplary degree of artistic seriousness and intelligence. It is a slap in the face of contemporary cultural backwardness and degradation, and for that alone, Zaillian deserves credit.

Zaillian has only directed a few feature films previously, including *Searching for Bobby Fischer* (1993), about the famed chess player, *A Civil Action* (1998), which treats corporations poisoning a town's water supply, and the remake of *All the King's Men* (2006), with Sean Penn as the Southern populist demagogue. Zaillian also directed numerous episodes of the valuable series *The Night Of* (2016), which he co-created. He is better known, however, for scripts for such films as *Awakenings*, *Schindler's List*, *Gangs of New York*, *American Gangster*, *Moneyball* and numerous others.

The essential drama in *Ripley* is simple enough. In 1960 or so, Tom Ripley (Andrew Scott), an unscrupulous, small-time criminal and conman, living in dire conditions in New York City, is invited to meet a wealthy shipbuilder who has a prospective job for him. Herbert Greenleaf (Kenneth Lonergan) mistakenly believes that Ripley is a close friend of his son Dickie, now living abroad and determined to be a painter. Greenleaf senior would like Tom to travel to Italy, at the family's expense, and prevail upon Dickie to return to New York.

Ripley gladly accepts the assignment, and the cash and comforts that go with it. He duly arrives in Atrani, a small, picturesque town south of Naples perched on the Amalfi Coast, and makes the acquaintance of Dickie (Johnny Flynn) and his girlfriend Marge Sherwood (Dakota Fanning). Tom falls in love with Dickie's wealth and lifestyle, and, secondarily or simultaneously, Dickie himself. He and Marge take an instant dislike to one another. Soon enough, Dickie invites Tom to live at his luxurious cliffside residence, which has plenty of space.

Dickie is perfectly pleasant (and amused by his father's hiring of Ripley), but complacent and lazy, with little aptitude for painting or anything else. Marge is authoring an inconsequential travel book about Atrani. Ripley does what he can to insinuate himself into Dickie's life, but his presence is always a somewhat awkward one. He doesn't truly "fit in" anywhere. Despite his best efforts, the fact that his hidden, disturbing self is at variance with his affable public one tends to emerge in unfortunate ways.

Dickie takes Tom on an excursion to Sanremo where he plans to give this unwanted intruder into his life the final brush-off. Out on a small boat, Dickie begins to broach the subject of Tom's returning to the US, but Ripley strikes him fatally with an oar several times and then drops the dead body into the sea, tied to a weight. This occurs in the third episode of Zaillian's *Ripley*, "Sommerso" ("submerged" or "sunken" in Italian).

The rest of the series concerns Tom's efforts both to conceal his guilt

and appropriate Dickie's identity (and portion of the family's money). He sets himself up in Rome as Dickie Greenleaf, complete with fake passport, bundles of travelers' checks and a monthly trust fund allotment. He breaks up with the unfortunate, highly confused Marge by letters composed on Dickie's typewriter, but runs into difficulties when one of Greenleaf's friends, Freddie Miles (Eliot Sumner), shows up at his door, expecting to meet Dickie. Ripley takes drastic, lethal action here too, and subsequently faces the questioning and general nosing about of Italian police Inspector Ravini (Maurizio Lombardi). Who will outwit whom?

Zaillian has decided to shoot the series in black and white, in part apparently to push Amalfi-Atrani's extraordinary beauty into the background. The production and design help create a subdued, even depressive atmosphere. This is not intended to be "the Elysian realm" near Naples "of soft winds and sunny skies" celebrated by poets. Rome and Venice especially are grey and damp, and often ragged and rundown.

Events proceed at a leisurely pace, except at certain hectic junctures. Perhaps too leisurely. Seven and a half hours is a good deal of time. The 1965 Soviet adaptation of Tolstoy's monumental *War and Peace* only lasted six and a half! *Ripley* is overly long and drawn-out, particularly in some of the middle episodes, but this may well be how the packaging and marketing of such things inevitably function these days. A limited series like this is considered the equivalent of what used to be an entire television season.

The acting in *Ripley* is uniformly fine. Scott is one of the more remarkable performers currently working, capable of suggesting various moods and emotional shadings, including malevolent ones, with a slight movement or change of expression. Dakota Fanning is excellent as a largely oblivious victim of Ripley's plotting and loathing. Ripley is clever and devious enough and events conspire in such a manner that the viewer does not feel that Marge is obtuse, but simply naïve, a Midwest American girl, and certainly not up to the level of Tom's cunning and planning. But why should she guess at something so terrible? Effective as the persistent (but not persistent enough!) Roman police inspector, Maurizio Lombardi conveys precision and some degree as well of authoritarianism.

There are minor implausibilities in Zaillian's series, largely taken over from the novel. For all his persistence, Inspector Ravini seems blind to certain obvious possibilities. Moreover, even in 1961, is it likely that Ravini never requests, or even comes across by accident, a photo of the real Dickie Greenleaf? Is it probable that he would be unable to recognize the now-disguised Ripley when they finally meet? The introduction toward the end of John Malkovich as the slimy "art dealer" (actually, the highly crooked) Reeves Minot seems an unnecessarily cynical touch—or does it merely indicate that plans are afoot to film further novels in the *Ripley* series? (Highsmith wrote five in all about the character.)

In any event, the compelling question in *Ripley* ought to be the central character's ruthless resolve to obtain access to the life he covets. In the novel, when Tom first visits Dickie in Italy, sees his house and boat, he wonders to himself, "Why should Dickie want to come back to subways

and taxis and starched collars and a nine-to-five job? Or even a chauffeured car and vacations in Florida and Maine? It wasn't as much fun as sailing a boat in old clothes and being answerable to nobody for the way he spent his time, and having his own house with a good-natured maid who probably took care of everything for him. And money besides, to take trips if he wanted to. Tom envied him with a heartbreaking surge of envy and self-pity."

The Netflix series conveys this too. There are hints of Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, including its scene of death on the water, and a host of striving upstarts in Stendhal (Julien Sorel in *The Red and the Black*) and Balzac, as well as Fitzgerald's more felonious (but also less malign) *Gatsby*.

Ripley is a narcissist, who has no strong feelings for anyone but himself. His emotional attachment for Dickie, of a vaguely sexual character, takes second place to his fierce pursuit of self-interest. By the time he realizes that Dickie is planning to "shove him out in the cold," Tom hates the other man. On the train to Sanremo, Highsmith writes, Ripley watches Greenleaf sleeping, and stares "at his bony, arrogant, handsome face, at his hands with the green ring and the gold signet ring." He now despises Dickie, "because, however he [Tom] looked at what had happened, his failing had not been his own fault, not due to anything he had done, but due to Dickie's inhuman stubbornness. And his blatant rudeness! He had offered Dickie friendship, companionship, and respect, everything he had to offer, and Dickie had replied with ingratitude and now hostility. ... If he killed him on this trip, Tom thought, he could simply say that some accident had happened. He could—He had just thought of something brilliant: he could become Dickie Greenleaf himself."

The weakness ultimately, in both the novel and the series, is that Ripley proves to be a deviant, whereas Clyde Griffiths in *American Tragedy* or Julien Sorel simply follows implacable social logic. They act as they do, reluctantly or otherwise, because having a better life, the life they desire, the life society manipulates them into wanting, requires certain actions. Ripley takes sadistic pleasure in his deceptions and his crimes, so that a commentator can assert that "Highsmith was in peak form with this novel, and her ability to enter the mind of a sociopath and view the world through his disturbingly amoral eyes is a model that has spawned such latter-day serial killers as Hannibal Lecter."

This is why Highsmith, as gifted and sharp as she was, was not a Dreiser or a Stendhal. She created a character who might have spoken to the nature of her epoch, the postwar boom and the Cold War years, in a more powerful manner, but shied away from such a course, arguing in her journal, for instance, that the "real artists do not overly concern themselves with their age's social problems. They concern themselves with themselves, working from that germ plasm that has not changed for millions of years in their race, which never will."

A homosexual herself, and thus existing "semi-legally" at the time, Highsmith harbored various, ill-defined resentments against the prevailing culture and social order, along with well-founded fears, of public "exposure," disapproval and so forth. Leading a double or hidden life much of the time, she had reason to be concerned with the "flux-like nature of identity," according to biographer Andrew Wilson (*Beautiful Shadow*), and a central premise of the novel is that "one man losing his identity" happens "as easily as a snake sheds its skin." Ripley becomes Greenleaf, and then Ripley again, without batting an eye. In some fashion, Highsmith associated herself with her chameleon-creation, even signing a letter to a friend, "Pat H., alias Ripley."

The focus on Ripley's criminal "brilliance" and amorality is a distraction that takes up a healthy portion of the novel and series and transfers attention away from the economic and social sphere into the area of "abnormal" psychology, diluting the socially critical elements. The reader or viewer is able to distance him or herself from this "monster" a bit too much.

To a certain extent, this shift to primarily psychological factors was the product of Highsmith's development and the cultural-social climate of the time.

Born in Fort Worth, Texas in 1921, Highsmith attended Barnard College from 1938-1942 where for much of that time she belonged to the Young Communist League and generally considered herself a Communist. She resigned from the Stalinist youth movement in November 1941, on the eve of US entry into World War II, and like many members of her generation, drifted during the war and postwar years toward, in the words of biographer Wilson, "the bleak existentialist writings of Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Kafka, Sartre and Camus." Absurdism and meaninglessness, as in Camus' *The Stranger* (1942), now appealed to her (not coincidentally, one of her novels, adapted as a film by Alfred Hitchcock, was entitled *Strangers on a Train* [1950]).

The anti-rationalist Dostoevsky remained her favorite author (the title of one of the Ripley novels, *Ripley Under Ground*, echoes that of the Russian author's *Notes from Underground*), and *Crime and Punishment* her favorite among his novels, the story of a student who robs and murders a vile pawnbroker, reasoning that such crimes when committed by "extraordinary" men are justifiable, but ends up tormented by the deed.

Unlike Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's book, however, Ripley is not troubled in the least by his crimes and always prepared for new ones. Highsmith's "amorality" is legendary, and an element of her enduring allure. (Her novels and stories have been adapted more than 40 times for film and television, including by directors Hitchcock, René Clément, Claude Autant-Lara, Wim Wenders, Claude Miller, Michel Deville, Claude Chabrol, Anthony Minghella, Liliana Cavani, Roger Spottiswoode, Hossein Amini, Todd Haynes and Adrian Lyne.)

In her diary, Highsmith wrote in 1954, "What I predicted I would once do, I am doing already in this very book [*The Talented Mr. Ripley*], that is, showing the unequivocal triumph of evil over good, and rejoicing in it. I shall make my readers rejoice in it, too. Thus the subconscious always precedes the conscious, or reality, as in dreams."

First of all, this seems a slightly unworthy ambition. In addition, Highsmith's argument doesn't really hold much water. The events and characterizations in the book and series are strongly stacked so that we lean toward sympathizing with Ripley, despite his misdeeds. A murder in a novel is different from a murder in real life. So is a murderer. Moreover, audiences usually—unless the character involved is an out-and-out fiend—would like to see him or her evade the authorities. Most people have excellent instinctive reasons for hating and fearing the police. It takes a great deal to convince us that someone should be handed over to them. Also, when we see a middle-aged Italian policeman in 1960, it is difficult not to envision him only 15 or so years before taking part in round-ups of Jews or left-wing political opponents under the fascist Mussolini regime. Why in the world should we "pull" for Ravini?

Furthermore, in the conformist conditions of 1955, Highsmith's amoral Ripley could be, and was, perceived as someone thumbing his nose at official society, albeit in a very limited fashion. And, indeed, despite her new fondness for existentialist icons Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Jaspers, at the expense, as she once noted, of both "Freud and Marx," the novelist did not entirely abandon her youthful radicalism. In 1957, two years after the publication of the first *Ripley* book, in response to the ongoing anti-communist crusade in the US and the suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising by Soviet troops, Highsmith noted in her diary that there was still "truth in Communism. Axiomatic, of course, ideal, Communism. The time is ripe for a new Communism of the purer sort."

For its straightforward and effective storytelling, its psychological and social precision, its thoughtfulness and aesthetic refinement, this *Ripley* deserves recognition and widespread public interest.



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