

TV

Is 'Ripley' based on a true story? All about Netflix's new hit series

Patricia Highsmith, who created the character of Tom Ripley, was the closest to a real-life version of the charming, dark-hearted con man



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By Rande Dawn

The new Netflix series “Ripley,” based on the first of author Patricia Highsmith’s five books about Tom Ripley (1955’s “The Talented Mr. Ripley”), is a riveting watch — even if you might not normally tune into a black-and-white eight-part miniseries that features frequent subtitles.

A big part of that is Andrew Scott’s smooth portrayal of the enigmatic, charming con man who finds his purpose in stealing a wealthy heir’s identity. But the story of Tom Ripley himself is equally fascinating: He’s a terrible human being, yet it’s almost impossible to turn away from him — and the wreckage he causes.

But is Tom Ripley based on a real person? Unless Highsmith, who died in 1995, never shared a secret — the answer is no: Ripley is a complete fiction.

But there's more than the words on the page to both Tom Ripley and his creator — and here's what else you should know about both:

'Highsmith was Ripley'

If you had to find a real-life counterpart to Tom Ripley, as author Tom White wrote in *The New York Times Magazine* in 2021, all you had to do was [look at the author](#).

“Patricia Highsmith was Tom Ripley without the charm,” he wrote.



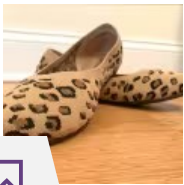


Patricia Highsmith **Denize Alain / Sygma via Getty Images**

A woman who collected snails, Highsmith was equally bigoted against most minorities, hypersexual (White noted that she claimed to have sex ten times a day with women she'd pick up in bars) and a social climber.

She also spoke of Ripley's doings like he was a real person, said White — and even signed some of her letters “Tom,” as The Independent wrote earlier this year.

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We've seen Ripley's games before

Before Scott and Oscar-winning “Ripley” writer/producer/director Steven Zaillian brought “Ripley” to Netflix, he'd already found a place in TV and film. Modern movie fans likely immediately think of Matt Damon in the title role of 1999's “The Talented

Mr. Ripley,” a lush, sun-soaked Italian fever dream co-starring Jude Law and Gwyneth Paltrow.

But “Mr. Ripley’s” first outing was as the 1960 French film “Purple Noon,” starring Alain Delon. At the time, Delon was considered one of Europe’s pre-eminent sex symbols, with high cheekbones and a talent for the dead-eyed stare Ripley deploys.



Alain Delon in 1960's "Purple Noon" **Fotos International / Getty Images**

There’s also “Ripley Under Ground” (2005) starring Barry Pepper; and “Ripley’s Game” and “Ripley Under Ground,” portions of which were turned into “The American Friend” in 1977 by Wim Wenders, starring Dennis Hopper as a cowboy version of Ripley.

“American Friend” revealed that post-“Talented,” Ripley became a successful art

forged.

Remade in 2002, “Game” starred John Malkovich as Ripley — a delightful Easter egg for fans who’ll spot Malkovich appearing late in the new “Ripley’s” run.

Ripley has found places in other media, including a 1956 episode of the anthology series “Studio One” and a BBC radio adaption of all five Ripley novels (aka “The Ripliad”) in 2009.

And in a 2014 play “Switzerland,” playwright Joanna Murray Smith has Ripley come to life and [visit Highsmith](#), with plans to kill her.

We're no 'stranger' to other Highsmith works

“Ripley” adaptations aside, Highsmith’s most prominent title was her 1950 thriller “Strangers on a Train,” which modernized the concept of “I’ll kill someone for you if you kill someone for me” and was adapted by Alfred Hitchcock into a movie by the

same name the following year. (In 1987, the dark comedy “Throw Momma from the Train” also used her story as inspiration.)

In 2014, Highsmith’s novel “The Two Faces of January” became a film starring Viggo Mortensen, Kirsten Dunst and Oscar Isaac; again, the tale dives into the worlds of con artists, strangers, and private detectives.

Then in 2015, Highsmith’s “The Price of Salt,” a romance novel from 1952 that she originally published under the pseudonym “Claire Morgan,” was released as “Carol.” Directed by Todd Haynes and starred as Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara, it told the story of a glamorous, wealthy, married woman who falls for a young woman working in a department store — in 1952. Both actors earned Academy Award nominations.

Meanwhile, her 1957 novel “Deep Water” has been filmed more than once; most recently in 2022.

Ben Affleck and Ana de Armas play a couple who don’t want to separate — but also

don't have much love for each other, and her affairs take a dark turn.

Highsmith's stories have also ended up in various TV series or anthologies. But as she told critic Gerald Peary in 1988, she wasn't a movie buff and never wanted to be very involved with others' interpretations of her books.

"I started screenplays two or three times, and I can assure you that I failed," she said. "I don't think in the way a playwright thinks. So, if people have bought something of mine (to adapt), they know by now that I will decline writing it for the movies. Anyway, I don't want to know movie directors. I don't want to be close to them. I don't want to interfere with their work. I don't want them to interfere with mine."

Randee Dawn

Randee Dawn (she/her) is an entertainment journalist and author based in Brooklyn. In addition to writing for TODAY.com, Variety and The Los Angeles Times, her debut novel, *Tune in Tomorrow*, about a reality TV show run by mythic creatures, published in 2022. She's also the co-author of *The Law & Order: SVU Unofficial Companion*. When not interviewing the stars or dabbling in speculative fiction, she dreams of the next place she can travel to, or cuddles her Westie. More at [RandeeDawn.com](https://www.RandeeDawn.com).

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