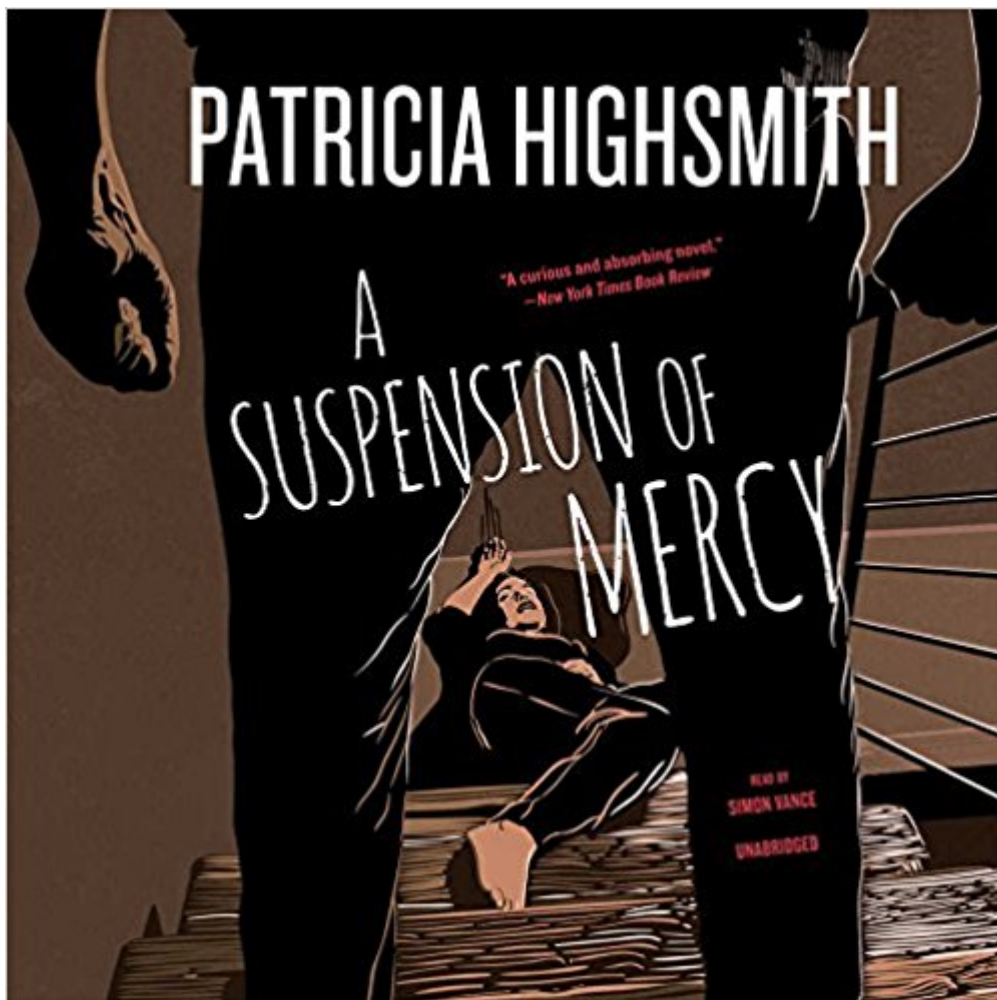


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A Suspension Of Mercy



Synopsis

[Read by Simon Vance] A masterpiece of noir fantasy. Throughout her career, Patricia Highsmith brought a keen literary eye and a genius for plumbing the psychopathic mind to more than thirty works of fiction, unparalleled in their placid deviousness and sardonic humor. With deadpan accuracy, she delighted in creating true sociopaths in the guise of the everyday man or woman. In *A Suspension of Mercy*, a masterpiece of noir fantasy, Highsmith revels in eliciting the unsettling psychological forces that lurk beneath the surface of everyday contemporary life. Sydney Bartleby has killed his wife. At least, he has thought about it, compulsively, repeatedly, plotting schemes, designing escapes, forging alibis. Of course he has; he's a thriller writer. He even knows how to dispose of her body. But when Alicia takes a long, unannounced holiday, Sydney descends into the treacherous world of his own fantasy.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Six years after her death, Patricia Highsmith is in the middle of a renaissance. Since the release of Anthony Minghella's film of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, her stock has been steadily rising among readers. Two reissues, *A Suspension of Mercy* and *Strangers on a Train*, feed the flames. In *A Suspension of Mercy*, American freelance writer Sydney becomes obsessed with the putative murder of his English wife, Alicia; in *Strangers on a Train*, the source for Hitchcock's 1953 classic, one man's guilty conscience disrupts two men's criminal plans. The movie rights to *A Suspension of Mercy* have been optioned by Warner Bros. for Heyday Films. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the MP3 CD edition.

"For eliciting the menace that lurks in familiar surroundings, there's no one like Patricia Highsmith."
--Time, praise for the author "[Highsmith] has an uncanny feeling for the rhythms of terror." --Times
Literary Supplement, praise for the author

Sydney Bartleby is an American living in Suffolk with his English wife Alicia; she lives quite comfortably on her inheritance, while Syd is a struggling mystery writer, hacking away at his great mystery novel while failing to sell crime-show screenplays to television studios. Their marriage on the rocks, after one spat too many Alicia heads to London and leaves Syd alone for a few weeks--and both look forward to the quiet and solitude. Syd's writing picks up and he makes sales, but as the weeks pass and his wife fails to return, suspicion begins to fall on Syd. Why hasn't she contacted anyone? Why hasn't she collected her weekly inheritance of £50? And why did his neighbor Mrs. Lilybanks see him walking around one night, carrying a heavy carpet over his shoulder--who buries a carpet in the middle of the night? The Police change their investigation from a missing persons case to a murder; and to complicate things, Sydney begins living out his own murder-mystery plots, play-acting the game of murder under the watchful eye of the investigators. While Highsmith does an excellent job building tension around this concept---a murder without a corpse---Syd's character I found a bit frustrating. Highsmith has a reputation for trapping her characters in unavoidable circumstances, usually through their own guilt and frantic attempts to escape. But I felt Syd wasn't so much "trapped" as "merely accepting the circumstances and refusing to challenge them"---whenever he learns something that would remove suspicion from himself, he keeps it hidden, continuing to play chicken with the investigators. He knows he's innocent and doesn't worry, at which point why should I? Yet Highsmith still crafts a tense, foreboding atmosphere. Not a 100% success for me, though I will try again with another Highsmith and see if that one is a better fit.

My exposure to the work of Patricia Highsmith is sadly lacking; although I've read most of the Ripley books (which are outstanding, in case you haven't read them), all of my other exposure to her worlds are through the film adaptations of her work. Having finished *A Suspension of Mercy*, I get the feeling it might not have been the ideal one to jump back into her books with, but it's still well-written, beautifully crafted suspense with a flair for the ghoulish and the dark. As with most of Highsmith's work, much of the beauty of the book comes from watching the plotting unwind, so I'll just say that *A Suspension of Mercy* is about a writer who ends up entertaining himself by imagining

all the ways he might murder his wife, only to find those "harmless" games resulting in some very real consequences. Several reviewers have commented on some of the more unlikely character actions that drive the book, but by and large, they worked for me; it helps, of course, that Highsmith has such a strong grasp on her morbid and damaged characters, so much so that even the most implausible of actions seems to work within their way of viewing the world. (What's more, so much of it feels like Highsmith's variation on Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse," where a man finds himself reacting absurdly simply out of absurd self-destructive tendencies.) It all builds to an ending that seems to have been a deal-breaker for a lot of people, but worked beautifully for me; it's a gloriously ironic and tense series of events that plays out beautifully, all in the capable hands of Highsmith. I'll concede that *Mercy* isn't the strongest of Highsmith's work; yes, some of the actions and coincidences strain credulity, and yes, you're going to have to just trust yourself to Highsmith's hands for it all to work. (I can't help but feel that the original title, *The Storyteller*, would give people a very different perception of the book and shape their reactions to it.) But it's still some beautifully psychological suspense, and it's a joy to watch Highsmith plot it all together like a spider spinning a web.

"A Suspension of Mercy" is a good book, although:¹. Sidney's reasons for being fed up by Alicia are a bit rushed. I would've liked to see more interaction between them to be able to say it was a sick relationship.². "The Whip" is more of a cartoonish character whose "adventures" have nothing to do with the plot, so, to be honest, everytime I had to read about each "episode", I was annoyed.³. Sidney's character isn't as well developed as other characters in other Highsmith's books. There are interesting details about his personality, but I would've liked to know more about him.⁴. The ending is a huge let down. I understand that this novel was written in the 1960's, but I can't believe the police could be so naive back then. If I told you why, I'd be giving away the ending. However, this is a one of a kind plot and that's why, in spite of all this, I gave it 3 stars. The novel is a real page turner and it keeps you interested and wondering how everything will be solved until the very end. The way Patricia Highsmith conceived and developed the plot, where only the reader and Sidney know the truth of it all, is remarkable, and it definitely would make a great film. The book has potential to be great, but because of its ending, I cannot give it more than three stars.

I love Patricia Highsmith. There is no one like her to confuse evil with crime. And I loved this book only found the ending just a bit "off". Doesn't matter. It is still a great experience to read.

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