

PLOTTING
AND WRITING
SUSPENSE
FICTION

AUTHOR OF

THE TALENTED MR. RIPLEY
AND *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN*



PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

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SUSPENSE FICTION**

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PREFACE

This is not a how-to-do-it handbook. It is impossible to explain how a successful—that is, readable—book is written. But this is what makes writing a lively and exciting profession, the ever-present possibility of failure.

Therefore, I have dwelt as much on my failures as successes here, because one can learn a lot from failures. By revealing my sometimes formidable losses of time and effort and the reasons, perhaps I can save other writers from suffering the same things. I was not exactly successful in the first six years of my career, and then a few lucky things happened. I don't believe in luck, however, as a force that one can woo or count on. Maybe much of luck for a writer comes from having the right publicity at the right time, and this I do discuss here.

Plotting and Writing starts from the ground up, and is addressed to young and beginning writers, though of course a beginner of mature age is young, too, as a writer, and the spade-work is always the same. To all beginners, I give credit for being writers already, since they intend, for better or worse, to risk exposing their emotions, their quirks, their attitude toward life, to public scrutiny.

For this reason, I begin with events of everyday life, which may spark off a story. A writer goes on from there—the writer and then the reader. The art is a matter of capturing the reader's attention by telling him something amusing or worth spending a few minutes or hours with.

In this book, I speak a lot about the odd happenings, the coincidences which have led to my writing a few good stories or books. It is the unexpected and often minor events that can inspire a writer. Because I had more difficulties than usual with *The Glass Cell*, I describe my inspiration for this, my difficulties in getting background material, then troubles with editors, a rejection, and an acceptance finally, and then a bit of icing on the cake, the film made from it under the same title.

Many beginning writers think that established writers must have a formula for success. Above all, this book dispels that idea. There is no secret of success in writing except individuality, or call it personality. And since every person is different, it is only for the individual to express his difference from the next fellow. This is what I call the opening of the spirit. But it isn't mystic. It is merely a kind of freedom—freedom organized.

Plotting and Writing will not make anybody work harder. But it will, I hope, make people who want to write realize what is already within them.

—PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

FOREWORD

I wrote this book more than two decades ago at the suggestion of The Writer, Inc., a Boston-based house that publishes magazines and books of the sort that help writers with their craft and help them to find markets for their works. There is no book, I realize, that can tell a beginning writer how to succeed, how to write something saleable—which in fact may not be every writer's objective. It was, however, my objective when I was young, because I chose to earn my living, or to try to, by writing short stories and books, and I had no private income. Therefore in this book, I talk about my beginnings, the short stories, my first attempt to write a novel, and the first novel of mine that was published, *Strangers on a Train*. I write also about my failures and mistakes; I learned from them, and perhaps others can learn from them too.

In the last years, many American magazines that used to buy short stories have folded. There are few in the suspense category, and I think first of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and of another monthly, *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*. What is suspense? I try to answer that question by saying, a suspense story is one in which the possibility of violent action, even death, is close all the time. I do not try to confine my imagination to themes of violence, but this book is about suspense

writing in the trade use of the term, which means violence, and sometimes murder.

Today's suspense market may be smaller, but I think the quality of stories and novels is higher now, which makes suspense more satisfying to write. Yet the ingredients, the process of writing a suspense story or novel remains the same, at least to my mind. "Where do you get your ideas from?" This question still turns up in almost every interview that I have with journalists. The question used to make me squirm, because I could not answer it, I knew, in words that would be satisfactory to the person interviewing me. "Out of thin air," I would reply, and I still reply that, but with a smile now. Ideas come to a writer, a writer does not search for them—at least that's the kind of writing and the kind of writer's imagination that I am addressing in this book. "Ideas come to me like birds that I see in the corner of my eye," I say to journalists, "and I may try, or may not, to get a closer fix on those birds." Ideas are my favorite form of blessing, so I spend some time in this short and simple book suggesting ways of keeping one's mind open and receptive to ideas. And then I describe my own casual and unstrained way of letting that idea develop into a short story or a book.

If some old markets have closed for the short story, new ones have opened. New York's *Omni*, for instance, the glossy and open-to-ideas magazine, caters to writers and readers of imagination and fantasy. Then there is

television with its proliferating channels and growing appetite for short story and novel dramatizations. France has just bought thirteen of my blackest and/or funniest short stories, each to have a different director and nearly an hour in length. These stories were culled from four short story volumes of mine, each with at least ten stories. Two or three of the stories are among the four I wrote on weekends in a Rome apartment, which was elegant—in a genuine palazzo in fact—but so noisy I could scarcely sleep at night. During the Monday-to-Friday part of the week, I was working on *The Glass Cell*, a novel I discuss at length in *Plotting*. I had a difficult time writing it, and then cutting it. It too suffered at least one rejection before it was accepted. Some of my short stories have begun with the slenderest of ideas. One never knows what can make a memorable short story, a classic short story.

One thing is certain: The public, readers, television viewers, want to be entertained, gripped by a *story*. They want something unusual that they can remember, shiver at, laugh with, talk about and recommend to their friends. Between the germ of an idea and a big appreciative audience lies a long road. Consequently here, I describe economic difficulties I've had, physical ones, too—noise, other people—and I also speak about the publicity efforts that a writer has to make for himself, because he cannot always count on his agent to make these efforts for him. Agents, like anyone, can be lazy,

especially with the clients who are not earning so much. It is often up to the writer to bestir himself and think of ways to advertise his talent.

Every human being is different from the next, as handwriting and fingerprints prove. Every painter or writer or composer has consequently something different to say from the next (or should have). A Rembrandt or a Van Gogh is identifiable from a distance and at once. I believe in individuality, in being oneself, in using the maximum of one's talent. That is what this book is all about. That is what the public finally loves—something special and individual.

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CHAPTER 1

THE GERM OF AN IDEA

THE first person you should think of pleasing, in writing a book, is yourself. If you can amuse yourself for the length of time it takes to write a book, the publishers and the readers can and will come later.

Every story with a beginning, middle, and end has suspense; a suspense story presumably has it more so. In this book I shall use the word *suspense* in the way the book trade uses it, as meaning stories with a threat of violent physical action and danger, or the danger and action itself. Another characteristic of the suspense story is that it provides entertainment in a lively and usually superficial sense. One does not expect profound thought or long sections without action in a suspense story. But the beauty of the suspense genre is that a writer can write profound thoughts and have some sections without physical action if he wishes to, because the framework is an essentially lively story. *Crime and Punishment* is a splendid example of this. In fact, I think most of Dostoyevsky's books would be called suspense books, were they being published

today for the first time. But he would be asked to cut, because of production costs.

Developing story germs

What is the germ of an idea? It is probably all things to all writers: A child falling on a sidewalk and spilling his ice cream cone. A respectable-looking man in a grocer's surreptitiously but as if under a compulsion pocketing a ripe pear without paying for it. Or it can be a brief sequence of action that pops into the head out of nowhere, from nothing seen or heard. Most of my germinal ideas are of the last type. For instance, the germ of the plot for *Strangers on a Train* was: "Two people agree to murder each other's enemy, thus permitting a perfect alibi to be established." The germinal idea for another book, *The Blunderer*, was not so promising, was more stubborn about developing, but showed a hardihood by sticking in my head for more than a year, and nagging at me until I found a way to write it. This was: "Two crimes are strikingly similar, though the people who commit them do not know each other." This idea would not interest many writers, I think. It is a "so what" idea. It needs embellishments and complications. In the book that resulted, I had the first crime done by a more or less cool killer, the second by an amateur attempting to copy the first, because he thinks the first killer has gotten away with his crime. Indeed, the first man would have, if not for the blundering effort of the second man to imitate

him. And the second man did not even go through with his crime, only went to a certain point, a point at which the similarity was striking enough to attract the attention of a police detective. Thus a "so what" idea may have its variations.

Some story ideas never develop by parthenogenetic method, but need a second idea to get them going. One such ineffectual story germ was the original of *This Sweet Sickness*: "A man wants to cash in on the old insurance game, insuring himself, then apparently dying or disappearing, and finally collecting." There must be some way, I thought, to give this idea a new twist, to make it fresh and fascinating in a new kind of story. I labored over this for weeks in my evening hours. I wanted to have my criminal-hero set himself up in a different house with a different name, a house into which he could move permanently when his real self was presumably dead and gone. But the idea did not come to life. One day the second one appeared—in this case a far better motive than I had thought of until then, a love motive. The man was creating his second house for the girl he loved but never won, as the story turned out. He was not interested in insurance or money, because he had money. He was a man obsessed with his emotion. I wrote in my notebook under all my fruitless notes: "All the above is rot," and proceeded to work on my new line of thought. Everything came suddenly alive. It was a splendid feeling.

The writer's imagination

Another story that needed two story germs to come alive was "The Terrapin," a short story which won a Mystery Writers of America award and has since been anthologized. The first germ came from a story a friend told me about someone she knew. One does not expect such stories to be fertile germs, because they are not one's own. The most exciting story told by a friend with the fatal remark, "I know you can make a terrific story out of this," is pretty sure to be of no value to the writer whatever. If it's a story, it's already a story. It doesn't need a writer's imagination, and his imagination and brain reject it artistically, as his flesh would reject the grafting of someone else's flesh upon it. A famous anecdote about Henry James relates that when a friend started to tell him "a story," James stopped him after a very few words. James had heard enough, and preferred to let his imagination do the rest.

However, this story: "A widow who is a commercial artist browbeats and pesters her ten-year-old son, makes him wear clothes too young for him, forces him to praise and admire her art work, and is generally turning the child into a tortured neurotic." Well, it was an interesting story, and my mother is a commercial artist (though not like this mother), and it did stay in my mind for about a year, though I never had an impulse to write it. Then one evening at someone's house, I was browsing in a cookbook and saw a horrify-

ing recipe for cooking a terrapin stew. The recipe for turtle soup was hardly less grim, but at least one began the job by waiting until the turtle stuck his neck out and then coming down on it with a sharp knife. Readers who find that thrillers are beginning to pall may like to skim sections in cookbooks that have to do with our feathered and shelled friends; a housewife has to have a heart of stone to read these recipes, much less carry them out. The method of killing a terrapin was to boil it alive. The word killing was not used, and did not have to be, for what could survive boiling water?

As soon as I had read this, the story of the brow-beaten little boy came back to my mind. I would have the story turn upon a terrapin: the mother brings home a terrapin for a stew, a terrapin which the boy at first thinks is to be a pet for him. The boy tells one of his school friends about the terrapin, thereby trying to raise his status, and promises to show it. Then the boy witnesses the killing of the terrapin in boiling water, and all his pent-up resentment and hatred of his mother come out. He kills her in the middle of the night with the kitchen knife she had used to carve up the terrapin.

For months, maybe more than a year, I wanted to use a carpet as a means of concealment for a corpse, a carpet which perhaps someone carries in broad daylight, rolled up, out the front door of a house—ostensibly to the cleaners, while actually a corpse is inside it. I had not much doubt that this had been done. Someone told me, rightly or wrongly, that Murder,

Inc. used such a means for getting some of their corpses from one place to another. Still, the idea interested me, and I tried to think how I could make the corpse-in-rug theme different and fresh and amusing. One obvious way was to have no corpse in it at all. In this case, the person carrying the carpet would have to be suspected of murder, would have to be seen carrying the carpet (perhaps in a furtive manner), would have to be a bit of a joker, in short. The germ was beginning to stir with life. I combined it with another tenuous idea I had about a writer-hero who finds a very thin and transparent line between his real life and the plots he dreams up, and gets the two a little mixed sometimes. This kind of writer-hero, I thought, could be not only amusing—and I mean in a comic sense—but could explore the rather harmless, everyday schizophrenia which everywhere abounds—yea, even in thee and me. The book that resulted was published as *The Story-Teller* in America and *A Suspension of Mercy* in England.

Recognizing ideas

The germs of story ideas, then, can be little or big, simple or complex, fragmentary or rather complete, still or moving. The important thing is to recognize them when they come. I recognize them by a certain excitement which they instantly bring, akin to the pleasure and excitement of a good poem or line in a poem. Some things that appear to be plot ideas are

not; they neither grow nor do they stay in the mind. But the world is full of germinal ideas. It is not really possible to be out of ideas, since ideas can be found everywhere. But there are several things that can cause a feeling of being "idea-less." One is physical and mental fatigue; because of pressures, some people are unable to remedy this very easily, even though they know how to and would if they could. The best way, of course, is to stop work and all thought of work and take a trip—even a short, cheap trip, just to change the scene. If you can't take a trip, take a walk. Some young writers drive themselves too hard, and in youth this works quite well, to a point. At that point, the unconscious rebels, the words refuse to come out, the ideas refuse to be born—the brain is demanding a vacation whether a vacation can be afforded or not. It is wise for a writer to have some sideline by which to earn some money, until he has enough books behind him to provide a constant trickle of income.

Another cause of this lack of ideas is the wrong kind of people around a writer, or sometimes people of any sort. People can be stimulating, of course, and a chance phrase, a piece of a story, can start the writer's imagination off. But mostly, the plane of social intercourse is not the plane of creation, not the plane on which creative ideas fly. It is difficult to be aware of, or receptive to, one's own unconscious when one is with a group of people, or even with a single person, though that is easier. This is a curious thing, because sometimes the very people we are attracted to or in

love with act as effectively as rubber insulators to the spark of inspiration. I hope I will be forgiven for switching from bacteria to electricity in order to describe the creative process. It is difficult to describe. I also do not want to sound mystical about people and their effects on the writer, but there are some people, often most unlikely people—dull-witted, lazy, mediocre in every way—who are for some inexplicable reason stimulating to the imagination. I have known many such people. I like to see and talk to them now and then, if I can. It does not bother me that people may ask me, “What on earth do you see in X or Y?”

Invisible antennae

I have never found other writers stimulating. I have heard other writers say the same thing, and I do not think it is because of jealousy or mistrust. I understand French writers usually do not feel this way and are fond of getting together to discuss their work. I cannot think of anything worse or more dangerous than to discuss my work with another writer. It would give me an uncomfortably naked feeling. It is a rather Anglo-Saxon and American attitude that a writer should keep his work to himself, and evidently I am stuck with it. I think the mutual discomfort among writers comes from the fact they are all somehow on the same plane, if they write fiction. Their invisible antennae are out for the same vibrations in the air—or to use a greedier metaphor, they swim along at the same depth, teeth