

### Three Vixens of Fifties Fiction

I was born , as Dr. Major would say, “In the year of our Lord 1952“, and so, consequentially, my memories of that decade consist primarily of starting to school, having the chicken pocks, and begging my parents for a bicycle.

We are told that the Fifties were the first decade to inspire a sense of nostalgic longing for the past and that theory is certainly supported by the popularity of television programs such as “Happy Days” and the Broadway hit musical “Grease” and the subsequent motion picture of the same name with their 1950’s settings.

Sociologists tell us that the 1950’s, however, were not exactly the idyllic time that we recall or rather wish to recall. They tell us that beneath the surface of the nine-to-five presidency of war hero Dwight Eisenhower and the new American made car in every driveway, there lurked just below that calm surface incredible unrest as exemplified by the gyrating hips of Memphis’ Elvis Presley, the origins of rock-and-roll music, and, perhaps, on a more serious note, the beginning of the Civil Rights movement.

If the decades of the twenties, thirties, and forties can be said to have inspired a flowering of American literature, with such authors as Scott Fitzgerald, Robert Penn Warren, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Ernest Hemingway, and James Baldwin writing novels destined for the classics shelf and high school reading lists across the nation, then we can say that the 1950’s presented a “deflowering” of American literature due to the efforts of many, but in particular three women writers whom I like to call “the bad girls of fifties fiction” or the “three vixens of fifties fiction”.

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F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940)

This Side of Paradise (1920)

The Great Gatsby (1925)

Tender is the Night (1934)

William Faulkner (1897-1962)

The Sound and the Fury (1920)

As I Lay Dying (1930)

Absalom, Absalom (1936)

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)

The Sun Also Rises (1926)

For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940)

The Old Man and the Sea (1950)

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Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938)

Look Homeward, Angel (1929)

You Can’t Go Home Again (1940)

Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989)

Night Rider (1939)

All the King’s Men (1946)

“The Circus in the Attic” (1947)

World Enough and Time (1950)

Brother to Dragons (1953)

James Baldwin (1925-1964)

Go Tell It On the Mountain (1953)

Notes on a Native Son (1955)

By the mid-20th Century, authors who were women could hardly be considered a novelty. Edna Ferber had won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1924 for the novel So Big which was made into a motion picture of the same name in 1932 and starred Barbara Stanwick, George Brent, and Bette Davis; Margaret Mitchell won the Pulitzer in 1936 for Gone With the Wind, a novel whose subsequent 1939 movie version attained some degree of success; and Todd County, Kentucky, native Caroline Gordon had won a Guggenheim Fellowship and the O. Henry Award for short stories in 1934. Nevertheless, publishers, booksellers, and critics often found it necessary to supply a defining adjective to describe the writings of women authors, thereby unconsciously limiting their audiences: women wrote “historical” fiction; “romantic” fiction, or the ultimate kiss of death “regional” fiction.

It would be primarily the responsibility of our three vixens of fifties fiction to change many archaic impressions of women authors, but not without more than their share of bumps along the way. We will look at these women in alphabetical order, the same way that their works appear on library shelves still today.

Patricia Highsmith was born in Ft. Worth, Texas, in 1921. She graduated from Columbia University and received a graduate degree from Barnard College in 1942. She began working in the publishing industry and even wrote dialogue for a number of super-hero comic books before having some of her short stories published in such magazines as “Harper’s Bazaar”.

Most of Highsmith’s work focuses on the dark side of humanity. Her characters seem to inhabit an often self-imposed, cloistered, claustrophobic world. Its narrowness seems almost tangible - an invisible character in the story. Many of Miss Highsmith’s characters find themselves trapped in mundane, unappreciated, life-dreary situations as best described by 1960’s lyricist Jerry Herman as “walking the same tightrope as everyone on the block.” An attempt to break free from this morass is often the impetus of the story...with varying degrees of success.

In the short story “Woodrow Wilson’s Neck Tie”, (my personal favorite!) Miss Highsmith presents an eighteen year-old high school dropout protagonist trapped in a mundane job with no future who longs for fame; notoriety; recognition; escape. He murders three employees of a neighborhood wax museum and teasingly, ludicrously, tauntingly places their bodies in the museum’s tableaux. He readily confesses to the crime - twice - but each time his confession is rebuffed by the authorities who know that such an innocent young fellow could never commit such a heinous crime. The story ends with its anti-hero as unrecognized and mundane as ever before.

Miss Highsmith wrote a total of twenty-two novels. The first, Strangers on a Train in 1950 involves two strangers (Bruno and Guy) who meet on a train and eventually agree to “exchange” murders; that is, each one will kill someone of the other’s choosing, and, with no apparent motive or even connection to the victim, each would literally “get away with murder”. In 1951, director Alfred Hitchcock made a highly successful motion picture of the same name based on the novel. The plot still resonates today with a stage version appearing on the West End in London in 2013 and as a plot device on ABC television’s “Castle” in 2009 in which the movie was mentioned by name.

“I try to avoid labels,” Miss Highsmith said in 1989, “it is American publishers who love them.”

Miss Highsmith continued to defy labeling with her next novel The Price of Salt written in 1952 under the pseudonym “Claire Morgan”. Again, the main character, Therese, finds herself trapped in a suffocating job in a New York department store, when she meets and falls under the sway of Carol, a wealthy Manhattan socialite. Despite the fact that her own publishers refused to publish the book, advising Highsmith that it would be the equivalent of “professional suicide”, the novel sold over a million copies before its 1990 republication as Carol with Highsmith clearly identified as the author. She noted that the source of the story was her own experiences working in the toy department of Bloomingdale’s at Christmas in 1948. It has been called “the only lesbian novel in American literature with a happy ending”. The author received hundreds of fan mail letters, many thanking her and noting “I thought I was the only one”.

The 2016 movie version of the novel starring Cate Blanchett premiered at the Cannes Film Festival. It earned Miss Blanchett an Academy Awards nomination for best actress and won the Golden Globe award for Best Picture of 2016.

It was in 1955, however, when Patricia Highsmith created her most memorable character: Tom Ripley. Tom makes his debut in The Talented Mr. Ripley and will appear in five of Highsmith’s most successful novels. Tom is young, ambitious, handsome, and poor...a condition he sets out to remedy by murdering a wealthy young friend and assuming his identity. He does it with so much success and aplomb that in the subsequent four Ripley novels, Tom gains assurance, sophistication, a wife and a French estate, never hesitating to commit a murder or two along the way if necessary. Tom often finds himself in a situation vaguely reminiscent of the narrator in Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart”, but never with the same result. The ultimate antihero, Tom thrives on his game of cat-and-mouse, secure in the knowledge that he can always outsmart any authorities and, if not, oh, well, *c’est la vie*. The novels beg the question: what would any of us do if we were certain we would never be caught. Tom Ripley is clearly Patricia Highsmith’s favorite character. She even signed notes and cards to close friends “Tom”. At Miss Highsmith’s death at age seventy-four in Switzerland in 1995, Tom was still alive and quite well.

Our second fifties *femme fatale* is the irresistible Shirley Jackson. Born Shirley Hardie Jackson in 1916 in San Francisco, the daughter of upper middle class WASP parents, most of her life was spent rebelling against her domineering, judgmental mother even going to far as to become a writer, gain weight, and marry a Jewish intellectual. She attended the University of Rochester and Syracuse University where she was the editor of the campus humor magazine. She later met and eventually married Stanley Edgar Hyman, a successful literary critic. In the early days of their relationship, he was the successful one whose name was recognized by everyone. Today, his original manuscripts sit in an unclimate-controlled warehouse in New Jersey, while hers are at the Library of Congress. An anecdote from this period demonstrates the status of women writers in mid-20th Century America. When Jackson went into the hospital to have the third of her four children, a hospital administrator asked about her employment. “I am a writer,” she replied. The administrator responded, “I’ll just put down ‘housewife’.”

Miss Jackson’s career began with short stories and essays, depicting life in mid-century suburbia. Life Among the Savages, featuring such stories as “Here I am Washing Dishes Again” and “In Praise of Dinner Table Silence”, have been favorably compared to the works of Jean Kerr of Please Don’t Eat the Daisies and Erma Bombeck of The Grass is Always Greener Over

the Septic Tank. Miss Jackson also penned a young adult nonfiction book entitled Witchcraft of Salem Village. A life-long interest in the events of 17th Century Salem history led to many falsehoods and misconceptions about the author's connection to witchcraft, a subject she studied, but did not openly practice.

It was, however, the short story "The Lottery", the work for which Miss Jackson is best known out of her 200-plus stories, that catapulted her to literary fame. Anthologized in countless high school and college American literature texts, teachers have been known to assign it as in-class reading assignment, simply to enjoy watching students' facial reactions to the work.

The story first appeared in the June 26, 1948, issue of "The New Yorker" magazine. Miss Jackson said that she wrote it in one day, between grocery shopping and picking up her kindergartener from school. It initially received bad notices, surprising both Miss Jackson and the magazine. "The New Yorker" received hundreds of letters, the largest response to any article or story in the periodical's long history as a result of "The Lottery". Many readers canceled their subscriptions and sent hate mail to Miss Jackson and "The New Yorker". The story was banned in South Africa. Miss Jackson's own mother wrote "Dad and I did not care at all for your story in "The New Yorker". It does seem, dear, that this gloomy kind of story is what all you young people think about these days. Why don't you write something to cheer people up?"

"The Lottery", like much of Jackson's fiction, begins with a seemingly innocent, mundane item or event...then things begin to spiral into what at first appears to be a semi-logical, ordered fashion until the reader is swept up in a riptide current of the macabre; the unexpected; the incomprehensible. What seemed impossible seconds before quickly become gripping reality. What would have once repulsed the reader becomes the accepted norm. Mass hysteria enters the realm of sanity in ordered lives of ordinary people. The denouement comes quickly; things settle rapidly into their orderly, expected, ordinary fashion, leaving the reader to wonder when or what will cause them to erupt again.

One pundit said, "'The Lottery' gives a new meaning to 'peer pressure'."  
Another nicknamed Miss Jackson "Virginia Werewoolfe".  
She laughed all the way to the bank.

Jackson's two most famous novels, also, remain amazingly popular nearly six decades after their publication. The Haunting of Hill House (1959) remains one of American literature's spookiest Gothic ghost stories, hailed by critics as "the perfect work of unnerving terror". Nominated for the prestigious National Book Award in 1960, it lost to Philip Roth's Goodbye, Columbus. Stephen King cites Hill House and its author as inspirations for his work.

1962's We Have Always Lived in the Castle is the quintessential psychological thriller complete with fratricide, patricide, matricide, and mass hysteria. The shocking conclusion is one sentence long.

Shirley Jackson died in 1965 at age forty-nine.

No discussion of women writers of the 1950's could be complete without mentioning Grace Metalious. Born in Manchester, New Hampshire, in September, 1924, to French-Canadian, lower-middle-class parents, armed with a high school diploma and a manual typewriter, Mrs.

Metaliouis would shock, entice, and titillate readers around the world with her portrayal of life in a staid, New England town she named "Peyton Place".

Everything you have heard is completely true. Her husband George did lose his job as a high school principal due largely in response to her novel; she is buried at the extreme edge of a lonely New Hampshire cemetery; and at her death in 1964 at age thirty-nine, she was more than \$100,000 in debt - but she did what she had set out to do...to expose the hypocrisy and degeneration of stuffy, self-righteousness small town New England life...and no one before or after has ever done it better or more successfully. The novel's original, working title "The Tree and the Blossom" was soon replaced with the name of a fictional town which tourists still today try in vain to find. Peyton Place appeared in 1957, the same year that a gyrating Elvis Presley first appeared on national television. To many, both were an apocalyptic omen of civilizations' end or, to others, a breakthrough in post-war repression and denial.

Peyton Place's success was unparalleled and phenomenal. It stayed on the New York Times best-seller list for fifty-nine weeks. In an age when the average first novel was fortunate if it sold two thousand copies, Peyton Place sold more than sixty thousand copies within the first ten days of its official release. By year's end, almost one in twenty-nine Americans had purchased the book (nearly always as a "gift" for a "friend", a "cousin", or a "neighbor"...never for themselves!).

In the first few sentences, Mrs. Metalious seriously tweaked the mythologies of touristy old New England, as critic Ardis Cameron said, "turning the familiar post-card portrait into a voluptuous pin-up poster."

*"Indian Summer is like a woman. Ripe, hotly passionate, but fickle, she comes and goes as she pleases so that one is never sure whether she will come at all, nor for how long she will stay. One year, Indian Summer came to a town called Peyton Place".*

"I think I began Peyton Place the day I was born," wrote Metalious. "I wrote ten hours a day for two and a half months." When commenting on reaction to the book, she stated, "If I'm a lousy writer, there sure are a lot of lousy readers." When asked about the possible longevity of the book, Mrs. Metalious stated that in just a few years she expected it to be long forgotten.

The public library in upscale Beverly Farms, Massachusetts, posted a sign on its front lawn: "This library does not carry Peyton Place. If you want it, go to Salem."

Contemporary critics agreed that the book was well written...it was simply the subject matter to which they objected. Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Hal Boyle wrote "Peyton Place brings Tobacco Road up north and gives it a Yankee accent". Merle Miller wrote in "Ladies' Home Journal" that Peyton Place proved that "Puritan New England had all the southern vices and a few others that not even William Faulkner had come across."

The 1957 motion picture based on the novel, though considerably scrubbed (a moonlight swim becomes a slow dance at the high school gym; an abusive father becomes a step-father,...)still the movie created considerable controversy as well. With a cast of well-known and highly respected actors including Lloyd Nolan, Arthur Kennedy, Mildred Dunnock, David Nelson, Hope Lange, and Lana Turner in her first "mature woman" role, the movie was the

second highest-grossing motion picture of 1958 (\$16,100,000), due in part to the scandalous murder of Miss Turner's mobster boyfriend Johnny Stompano and the subsequent trial of her teenage daughter Cheryl Crane. Despite nine Academy Award nominations, the picture did not win a single Oscar. The 1958 best picture Oscar went to "The Bridge Over the River Kwai" and Best Actress Oscar went not to Miss Turner, but to Joanne Woodward for "The Three Faces of Eve".

Over a decade after its publication, Peyton Place inspired an ABC television prime time continuing story that ran from September, 1964, until June, 1969. In its heyday, "Peyton Place" was seen three times per week in living color!

Today the novel is taught in university classes devoted to mid-20th Century literature and the work of American women authors. It is hailed for its portrayal of independent women, inequality, prejudice, class warfare, of the town drunk and the town bully; of underpaid teachers and parsimonious school boards; as well as the quiet heroics of ordinary people. The scene depicting the abuse of a child is recognized by social workers today as one of the most accurate depictions of such a tragedy in print. They tell us that it reminds us of the evils often ignored in today's society by those whom Mrs. Metalious describes as people "who pay their taxes and mind their own business".

In 2013, Mrs. Metalious' hometown, which for over half a century had ignored her as a native writer, conducted a symposium devoted to her work and even offered a showing of the movie. Would she have been impressed? Probably not.

The pebbles cast into the literary pond by these three pioneer authors continue to resonate in American literature. They helped make way for such late 20th Century greats as Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, Katherine Ann Porter, Ellen Gilchrist, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Harper Lee.

And so as spring wanes and another summer looms on the horizon; as you begin to prepare your own summer, 2018, reading list, I hope that you will consider including one or two titles by American women writers of the mid-20th Century. Much pleasure, insight, and nostalgia await you - and remember, as the great HCC literature professor Frances Thomas once said, "there are no bad books."

Wayne Goolsby  
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