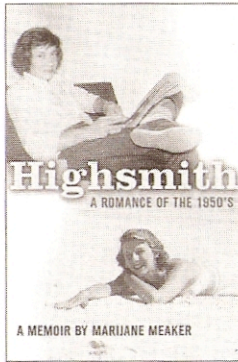


**Highsmith: A Romance of the 1950s, A Memoir** *Marijane Meaker*



{CLEIS PRESS}

It takes a particular brand of courage to look backward nearly 50 years and write, in aching detail, the story of an influential and tumultuous love affair—and resist taking comfort in hindsight. In *Highsmith: A Romance of the 1950s*, Marijane Meaker displays that kind of courage.

Patricia Highsmith is best known today for her Mr. Ripley novels, but in 1952, she used the pseudonym Claire Morgan to write *The Price of Salt*, which, for many years, was one of the few lesbian novels with a happy ending. It's now considered a lesbian classic, along with *The Well of Loneliness* and *We, Too, Are Drifting*. Highsmith was already a successful novelist, but *The Price of Salt* made her a celebrity in the underground lesbian bars of Greenwich Village. It was in one of those bars that Meaker bumped into Highsmith and began the two-year affair she records in candid detail in *Highsmith*.

Meaker was also a successful writer, penning lesbian pulp novels as Ann Aldrich and publishing her own now-classic lesbian novel *Spring Fire* under the name Vin Packer. She would continue to write under both pseudonyms, but it was her work under the clever moniker M.E. Kerr that made her famous. As Kerr, she became one of the country's best-selling young-adult fiction authors, thanks to such classics as *Shockproof Sidney Skate* and *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack!*

As an author, Meaker knows that developing credible, memorable characters is the result of showing, not telling. To show things as they happened—with little

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regard for how naive she may appear—is the gift she brings to this story. Meaker’s memoir follows her as she begins the relationship with a decided disadvantage. Highsmith is Meaker’s writing idol, and she is too overcome by the fact that she has won Highsmith’s affection to make demands. She risks her writing career with their late-night drinking sessions, gives up a rent-controlled apartment in New York, and falls prey to fits of jealousy and insecurity. Highsmith eventually becomes aware of this imbalance, later chiding Meaker for being in love with her before they met and the unreal expectations she placed on their affair. It isn’t easy living up to one’s jacket copy.

Still, the relationship is intense, it works sexually, and while there is some suggestion of professional jealousy (Meaker had yet to have a hardcover book published), there is the sense that as writers, both women share an unspoken understanding of the other’s need for privacy and independence. It should have been a match made in heaven.

But it wasn’t. With a handful of carefully chosen remembrances, Meaker shows her lover to be a tremendously complex, perhaps tormented woman. Highsmith achieved much fame early in her career, and Meaker captures her almost desperate attempts to hold on to it. With a single letter, she depicts Highsmith’s demanding mother and the smothering, almost sexual hold she has over her daughter. Meaker’s descriptions of closeted lesbian life in the 1950s reveal another factor that cast a shadow on the relationship, as Highsmith chafes and rebels against these conventions, longing for the freedom of Europe.

Meaker’s writing style, which often borders on reportage, and unswerving candor are spellbinding. What emerges is an intimate account of a complicated relationship, in which neither woman is victim or villain. Readers are offered a uniquely personal portrait of Patricia Highsmith, a rare insider’s view of the New York literary world when it shone a little brighter, and a glaring reminder of how the internalized homophobia of the 1950s scarred so many women. The book also details the author’s own coming of age as a writer and highlights how Highsmith left a lasting imprint on Meaker’s work and life. *Highsmith* is a startlingly honest look at two fascinating, creative women, the passion that brought them together, and the public prejudices and private obsessions that tore them apart. —JOY PARKS