

Teacher's notes

Strangers on a Train

by Patricia Highsmith



SUMMARY

S *trangers on a Train*, published in 1950, was Patricia Highsmith's first novel. It is a taut crime thriller, with a highly unusual plot.

An American, Guy Haines, is on a train to his home town to meet his unfaithful wife, Miriam, whom he wants to divorce. He has dinner with a rich young man called Charles Bruno. Bruno, who becomes very drunk, tells Guy that he hates his father. He suggests that he should murder Miriam and that Guy should murder his father. This, he says, would be the perfect murder. Guy is disgusted and resolves never to see Bruno again.

Bruno, however, is mad. He finds out where Miriam lives and murders her. Guy suspects that Bruno is the murderer but knows that if he goes to the police Bruno will simply say that Bruno asked him to kill Miriam.

Guy tries to live a normal life with his new fiancée, Anne. But Bruno phones him, writes to him and finally meets him. He threatens to tell the police that Guy paid him to kill Miriam, unless Guy kills his father. Finally Guy breaks and does as Bruno wishes; he murders Bruno's father.

From this point on Guy is haunted by terrible guilt. He feels that he is split into two men – the murderer, and the good man with his charming fiancée. He marries Anne, and Bruno appears at his wedding. He hates Bruno, but at the same time feels a close and terrible bond with him. Meanwhile, a detective, Arthur Gerard, is hot on the trail of both Bruno and Guy. Guy feels utterly trapped. There is nothing he can do. By now, Bruno is a friend of Anne. They go sailing, and Bruno, drunk as usual, falls into the sea and drowns. Guy feels terribly lonely. He has lost his brother. He goes to visit Miriam's fiancé and confesses the story of the murders. Unknown to him, Arthur Gerard is listening. 'Take me,' says Guy.

Strangers on a Train is a crime story with a difference. It is a psychological study of madness, entrapment and guilt. Patricia Highsmith once commented that she is 'interested in the effect of guilt' on her heroes. This novel is a study of guilt, and of the kind of pressure that destroys a man's soul.

ABOUT PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

Patricia Highsmith was born in Texas, America, in 1921. She was an only child and her parents separated before her birth. Her mother remarried when she was three. When Patricia was six years old the family moved to New York. Patricia went to school and college there.

From a very early age Patricia Highsmith was interested in people who behaved strangely. When she was nine years old, her favourite book was a psychiatric book called *The Human Mind* by Karl Meninger. It was a book of case histories of people with mental disturbances such as kleptomania. Highsmith was fascinated by psychiatric disturbances. She started writing when she was fifteen, and her stories were always about unusual, unpleasant or criminal behaviour. Her first story began because she had been in the school library and had wanted to steal a book. She decided not to, and instead wrote a story about it. When she was sixteen she decided to become a professional writer and wrote a story called *A Mighty Nice Man*. It was about a man who persuades two little girls to get into his car. After a while, fearing he will be caught, he lets them out. One of the girls, talking about him later in the day says: 'He was a mighty nice man.' In her last year at college, Highsmith edited the college magazine.

Patricia Highsmith published short stories throughout her twenties, then achieved worldwide success with her first novel, *Strangers on a Train*, published when she was twenty-eight. It was a best-seller and is still her best known novel. Alfred Hitchcock made a film of it the following year, in 1951. From this point on, a steady stream of novels and short stories followed and she became a highly successful writer of suspense and crime fiction, particularly in Europe.

Highsmith lived in England for a number of years, and then France, before finally settling in Switzerland, in a village in the Alps, in 1986. She built her house herself, with the help of an architect, and filled it with a fascinating collection of paintings, including some of her own. She was a talented artist and sculptor and exhibited some of her works. Other hobbies included gardening and carpentry. She never married, and died, in her early seventies, in February 1995.

INTERMEDIATE

STRANGERS ON A TRAIN



Teacher's notes

WORKS AND THEMES

Suspense is the key word to describe Patricia Highsmith's writing. One is always on the edge of one's seat, knowing something frightening will happen at any moment. The famous English author, Graham Greene, wrote that she was 'a writer who has created a world of her own – a world claustrophobic and irrational which we enter each time with a sense of personal danger ... It is not the world as we once believed we knew it, but it is frighteningly more real to us than the house next door.'

Some of her best-known novels are about a character called Tom Ripley. He is a murderer and psychopath with an extremely attractive character and many friends. He only murders occasionally and always manages to escape being caught. Highsmith's first Ripley novel, *The Talented Mr Ripley*, was published in 1957, when she was thirty-six. She received an award for the novel from The Mystery Writers of America. Highsmith described Ripley as a 'hero-psychopath' and it was often said that she was in love with him. Some years later she wrote about the book, 'No book was easier for me to write, and I often had the feeling Ripley was writing it and I was merely typing.' Alfred Hitchcock's film was quite different from the original, but retained the suspense that made the book so exciting. Highsmith wrote five Ripley novels in all, the most recent being *Ripley Under Water*, published in 1991. She wrote twenty-seven books in all.

Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopyable Student's Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers but, with the exception of discussion and pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

In pairs, students look at the title of the book. Then they write two different suggestions as to what the book could be about. Then they look at the chapter headings and write another suggestion about what the book could be about and give reasons for their ideas.

ACTIVITIES WHILE READING THE BOOK

Chapters 1–3

- In pairs, students discuss the following questions.
 - Do you think Bruno is dangerous? Say why/why not.
 - What do you think Guy should do about Bruno, if anything?
 - Does Miram sound a nice person? Give reasons for your opinion.
- In pairs, students discuss the following question. If you were Guy, would you accept his dinner invitation? Why/why not?

Chapters 4–7

In small groups, students discuss the following questions. Then have a whole class discussion on the subject. Elicit and write down the class conclusions on the blackboard.

- We know that Bruno is a murderer and a bad man. But is he mad as well? Give reasons for your opinion.
- If Bruno is mad, does this mean he is not responsible for his actions? In other words, perhaps he is not really 'bad'.

Chapters 8–10

- In pairs, students discuss the following question.
 - What is your opinion of Guy? Give reasons for your opinion.
 - Do you think Bruno's murder plans are clever? Say why/why not.
- In pairs, students do the following. Imagine you are Anne. Write in your diary your feelings after you see Guy at the end of Chapter 11.

Chapters 11–15

In pairs, students discuss and write down all the reasons why Guy should now be a worried man. Then have a class discussion. Students can write up the reasons for homework.

Chapters 16–19

- In small groups, students discuss the following question. Gerard now knows the whole story. What mistakes did Bruno and Guy make, in your opinion?
- In pairs, students answer the following question. How did Gerard manage to trap Guy? What did Gerard have to do or know? Do you 'believe' the ending? Say why/why not.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Teach students the words *review* and *plot*. In pairs, ask students to write a review of the book under these headings

Plot: (Is it good? Why/why not?)

Characters: (Are they believable?)

Is this story trying to say anything? Or is it just fun to read?

Do you like this kind of story? Say why/why not

Glossary

It will be useful if your students know the following new words. They are practised in the 'Before You Read' sections at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Chapters 1–3

architect (n) someone whose job is to design buildings

divorce (n) the legal ending of a marriage

pregnant (adj) having an unborn baby growing inside your body

Chapters 4–7

inquest (n) a legal process to find out the cause of someone's death

Chapters 8–10

scratch (v) to make a small cut by rubbing something sharp against the skin

truth (n) the true facts about something



Student's activities

Photocopiable

Students can do these exercises alone or with one or more other people. Pair/group-only activities are marked.

Activities before reading the book

Work in pairs. Read the Introduction at the front of the book. Then together, write down as much of the information as you can remember. Then look at the Introduction again and write down the things that you forgot.

Activities while reading the book

CHAPTERS 1-3

Chapter 1

- Match the two parts to make sentences.
 - Guy wants to divorce his wife, Miriam and
 - Guy's wife is pregnant
 - Guy works as
 - Bruno gets money from
 - Bruno would like to
 - Bruno drinks
 - Bruno suggests that he could murder Miriam
 - too much.
 - and Guy could murder Bruno's father.
 - by another man.
 - murder his father.
 - his mother.
 - an architect.
 - marry his girlfriend, Anne.
- The chapter ends: 'He never wanted to see Bruno again.' Why does the chapter end like this? Give as many reasons as possible why Guy felt this.

Chapter 2 & 3

- Answer these questions.
 - How pregnant is Miriam when Guy sees her again?
 - What does Miriam ask Guy and why does he refuse?
 - How does Guy feel about Miriam and why?
 - Why does Guy refuse the job in Florida?
 - Where does Guy meet Anne?
 - How is Ann different from Guy?
 - What does the telegram from Guy's mother say?
- Work in pairs. What kind of parents do you think Bruno has? What kind of childhood did he have, do you think? Why is he so strange and unpleasant? Write a paragraph about your ideas.

Strangers on a Train



CHAPTERS 4-7

Chapters 4 & 5

- Complete the sentences.
 - Bruno decides to kill Miriam soon because ...
 - When he is with his mother, Bruno feels unhappy because ...
 - Bruno goes to Metcalf because ...
 - Bruno goes to Magnolia Street because ...
 - Bruno knows the red-haired woman is Miriam because ...
 - The men shout when they find Miriam because ...
 - Bruno needs a drink because ...
- Answer these questions.
 - Write down the things that Bruno does to find Miriam and kill her.
 - Write down Bruno's reasons for disliking Miriam.
- What do you think happens after the two men find Miriam? Write one or two paragraphs about this.

CHAPTERS 6 & 7

- Put these sentences in the same order as the story.
 - Bruno talks to his mother about Guy.
 - There is an inquest about Miriam's murder.
 - Bruno gets a letter from Guy.
 - Guy's mother tells him that Miriam has been murdered.
 - Bruno sends Guy a letter.
- Answer these questions.
 - How does Guy know that Bruno killed Miriam?
 - Why does Bruno get a terrible pain in his chest?
- Work in pairs. Imagine that Guy meets Bruno by accident. Make their conversation.
- Imagine that Bruno writes a letter in reply to Guy's letter. Write that letter.

CHAPTERS 8-10

Chapter 8

- Choose the right answer.
 - Bruno is surprised when he meets Guy outside his flat because Guy is
 - with his mother.
 - with Anne.
 - Guy doesn't go to the police because Bruno says
 - he will kill Guy.
 - he will tell the police that Guy paid Bruno to kill Miriam.

E

1

2

3

4

5

6

INTERMEDIATE

STRANGERS ON A TRAIN



Student's activities

- (c) Bruno sends
 - (i) a map and letters to Guy. (ii) a map, letters and a gun to Guy.
 - (d) Bruno says that Guy must kill his father before
 - (i) the middle of March. (ii) the middle of January.
 - (e) Guy starts to feel bad about Anne because he realises
 - (i) she has stopped loving him. (ii) he is keeping secrets from her.
 - (f) When Guy sees a man in his garden, Guy
 - (i) thinks it is a stranger. (ii) knows it is Bruno.
 - (g) Bruno sends a letter to Anne saying that
 - (i) Guy knew about Miriam's murder. (ii) Guy killed Miriam.
- 2 Work in pairs. Discuss this question.
- (a) Find the word 'trap' in your dictionary. Guy is in a trap. What is the trap?
 - (b) How would you feel if you were Guy?
 - (c) What advice would you give Guy?
 - (d) What do you think will happen next? Write one or two paragraphs about this.

CHAPTERS 9 & 10

- 1 Complete these sentences.
- (a) Mr Frear doesn't give Guy a because he got a from Bruno.
 - (b) One night Guy wakes up and sees in his room.
 - (c) Bruno gives Guy a and some
 - (d) It is easy for Guy to find Bruno's father's bedroom because he has a
 - (e) Guy uses his to kill Bruno's father.
 - (f) Guy loses the in some trees.
 - (g) When Anne looks at Guy's hands she sees that there are..... on them.
- 2 Describes Guy's feelings when he enters Bruno's family house. Describe how he feels during and after the murder.

CHAPTERS 11-15

Chapters 11-13

- 1 Work in pairs. Answer these questions:
- (a) Imagine you are Gerald. Write down the reasons why you think Bruno murdered his father.
 - (b) List the ways in which Guy's behaviour shows his problems.
 - (c) Explain how how Bruno makes Guy feel bad at his wedding.
- 2 Work in pairs. Make this conversation.
- Student A: You are Anne. You are talking to a friend after your wedding. Tell your friend that you love Guy but that you are worried about him because he has changed. Also, he has been acting strangely. Also, tell your friend about meeting Bruno at the wedding.

Student B: You are a friend of Anne's. Listen to he and ask questions. You were at her wedding. You saw Bruno but did not speak to him.

Chapters 14 & 15

- 1 Work in pairs. Write a summary of these chapters without looking at the book Then compare your summary with the summaries of two or three other pairs. Discuss the differences. If necessary, change or add to your summary.
- 2 How do you think Bruno feels about Guy? Give reasons for your opinion.

CHAPTERS 16-19

Chapters 16 & 17

- 1 Complete these questions.
- (a) Gerard knows that Guy and Bruno are lying about when they met because ...
 - (b) When Gerard questions Anne she gives him useful information because ...
 - (c) When Anne tells Guy about this, Guy says he lied about Bruno because ...
 - (d) Gerard tells the Chief of Police that he thinks Bruno murdered Miriam because ...
- 2 Imagine you are Gerard. Write about your feelings for Bruno and Guy.

Chapters 18 & 19

- 1 Say what you know about these things:
A pregnancy Anne's boat a large wave Owen Markham a phone
- 2 Why do you think Guy writes a letter to Anne? And why does he tell Owen Marham the truth about the murders?

Activities after reading the book

- 1 In groups, students discuss the following question. Then have a class discussion about the subject.
If you were a judge, and you knew the whole story, what kind of sentence would you give Guy?
- 2 Do this quiz.
- (a) Complete Bruno's telegram to Guy: All good wishes from the Golden
 - (b) What is Bruno's full name?
 - (c) Where does Guy tell Anne he met Bruno?
 - (d) Where does Bruno live?
 - (e) What is the name of Anne's boat?
 - (f) In what month is Miriam murdered?
 - (g) What is Bruno's favourite drink?
 - (h) Where does Owen Markham live when Guy makes his confession to him?
 - (i) How many bottles of whisky are there on the floor in Bruno's private room on the train?
 - (j) At the beginning of the story, Anne invites Guy to another country with her. Which country is it?

