

ing whether the conductor had had his way with her. She died from falling drunkenly down the stairs and breaking her neck.

But Epstein, long on quotation and short on analysis, fails to substantiate the great claims he makes for her work. Her poetry lacks intellectual content, has mechanically predictable rhymes (fear-year, fall-call), and often descends into the romantic gush of an aging *ingénue*: "I am in love with him to whom a hyacinth is dearer / Than I shall ever be dear." Epstein absurdly compares this stuff to the brilliantly complex poems of Donne, to the elegies of Milton and Shelley, to the visionary tradition from Blake to Rimbaud, to Pascal's "geometry of belief" and Kierkegaard's existential terror.

When you place Millay's lines next to the truly great poetry from which they are derived, her mediocrity becomes obvious:

then you must speak
Of one that loved not wisely but
too well [Shakespeare, *Othello*].

I had not come so running at the
call
Of one who loves me little, if at all
[Millay].

The grave's a fine and private
place,
But none, I think, do there em-
brace [Marvell, "To His Coy
Mistress"].

And scarce the friendly voice or
face,
A grave is such a quiet place [Mil-
lay].

Milton! thou shouldst be living at
this hour:
England hath need of thee
[Wordsworth, "London, 1802"].

You who have stood behind them
to this hour,
move strong behind them now
[Millay].

Do not go gentle into that good
night . . .
Rage, rage against the dying of the
light [Dylan Thomas, "Do Not
Go Gentle"].

I am not willing you should go
Into the earth where Helen went
[Millay].

Epstein calls *The King's Henchman*, an obscure and now forgotten work on which Millay collaborated, "an important event in the history of opera." And, claiming Millay's love letters "rival the greatest love letters of all time," he quotes the bogus Keatsian line: "an enchanted sickness comes over me as if I had drunk a witch's philtre."

Epstein, himself a poet, frequently lapses into cliché: "The letters from Camden came *fast and furious*. . . Her mother and sisters were *frantic without her*, could not understand *why on earth* they had heard nothing from her." He is extremely repetitious, mentioning at least a dozen times that Millay had red hair. He also offers many trivial and boring details while neglecting a number of crucial points: the beliefs of Millay's Congregational Church, her friendships with the poet-suicide Sara Teasdale and composer Deems Taylor. He dismisses her round-the-world trip in two sentences (names of ports will not do) but spends half a page on the clothes she wore during a poetry reading.

Everyone in Millay's circle, except Edmund Wilson, was third rate, and it is difficult to get excited by poet-lovers like George Dillon and Arthur Davison Ficke (beware of authors with three names). Epstein tries desperately to inflate these people. The mediocre Claude McKay is "the great black poet." And Witter Bynner—whom D.H. Lawrence satirized in *The Plumed Serpent* as Owen Rhys ("so empty, and waiting for circumstance to fill him up. Swept with an American despair of having lived in vain, or of not having *really* lived")—is "one of the most gifted poets of his generation." Epstein also makes some notable blunders. He calls Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, rather than *The Rainbow*, "scandalous," and substitutes "frozen field" for "foreign field" when misquoting the famous lines of Rupert Brooke.

Epstein also fails to explain the complex dynamics of Millay's fascinating sex life. As with Dora Carrington, the elusive bisexual siren of the Bloomsbury Group, it is difficult to see, from photos and descriptions by men who adored her, the extraordinary physical attractiveness of this tiny, skinny woman. Pale, freckled, flat-chested, and chinless, Millay was certainly not beautiful. But she was androgynous, very sexy, and—with 100 certified lovers—always available, responsive, and willing, indeed eager, to sleep with any man who struck her fancy or was able to

advance her career. (Editors were her specialty.) Men never had time to seduce Millay, who would ravish them before they got the chance.

On July 18, 1923, Edna married the eager-to-be-cuckolded Eugene Boissevain on the very day she had a major operation for intestinal adhesions. Ficke became a neighbor, and Millay, with Eugene's active encouragement, continued her promiscuous affairs. He seems to have achieved sexual excitement and covert homosexual pleasure (rather than jealousy) by sharing his wife with other men.

I came away from this interesting but disappointing book with quite a different impression of Millay than Epstein intended to convey. Manipulative and selfish, cynical and callous, reckless and destructive, Millay—always the sexual predator—had a pathological desire for "fresh wreckage." If you are not enthralled by her charms, the poetry fails.

Jeffrey Meyers' *Inherited Risk*: Errol and Sean Flynn in Hollywood and Vietnam will be published next June by Simon & Schuster. He is now writing a life of Somerset Maugham for Knopf.

Happenstance Phenomena

by Bruce Ware Allen

The Selected Stories of
Patricia Highsmith
by Patricia Highsmith
New York: W.W. Norton & Co.;
672 pp., \$27.95

Patricia Highsmith is a peculiar taste, nasty and unpalatable to many. Readers who like her, however, tend to like her enormously. She was born in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1921, the unwanted daughter of a graphic artist who attempted to abort her by drinking turpentine. Her father left home before she was born, and she moved with her mother and stepfather to New York at age eight. In due course, she graduated from Barnard College and took jobs that included writing the storylines to the Superman comics.

Highsmith's big break came in 1951 with the publication of *Strangers on a Train*. Alfred Hitchcock, in need of a good story to bolster his credibility with the Hollywood studios, bought the film rights for \$2,000. The author was disappointed, but Hitchcock assured her that this would be the making of her career. Certainly, it meant the revival of his.

Hitchcock reshaped the story to conform to Hollywood sensibilities, and the usual innocent-man-on-the-run story ends happily with the death of the criminal. Similar liberties were taken with both film versions of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the stylish French version *Plein Soleil* and the even more unsatisfactory Matt Damon vehicle of 1999. Again, neither France nor Hollywood, even at this late date, could let the eponymous hero get away with murder.

Such tampering misses Highsmith's vision entirely. As in life, murder in her world, more often than not, is never solved, nor are her malefactors brought to justice. Indeed, justice itself, when it appears, is a happenstance phenomenon. Highsmith cut slack only to animals. Something of a misanthrope but a devoted cat owner, she wrote a series of stories collected in *The Animal-Lover's Book of Beastly Murder*, which makes up the first of the collections in this volume. The common theme is that of various members of the animal world taking their revenge on cruel owners or mankind in general. These are the only truly predictable stories in her work—she appar-

ently could not bear to let the dumb chums get the short end of the stick.

Highsmith had no such qualms about members of her own human sex. In the second collection in this volume, *Little Tales of Misogyny*, we get short portraits of various types of women, chiefly 20th-century middle-class American, some sympathetic, most appalling; among them the 12-year-old who, encouraged by her mother, dresses like a trollop and finds some pleasure in complaining about the commotion she can cause. More than once, the price is rape, but she finds satisfaction in the punishment the law metes out to her own pathetic Humbert Humbert. Coquettes, conniving wives, wives distracted by serial enthusiasms, and the men who lose all in pursuit of them make up the bulk of this decidedly "politically incorrect" work.

Consider the "The Mobile-Bed Object":

There are lots of girls like Mildred, homeless, yet never without a roof—most of the time the ceiling of a hotel room, sometimes that of a bachelor digs, of a yacht's cabin if they're lucky, a tent of a caravan.

For five pages, we follow Mildred's short, disgusting, fitfully satisfying life until she is murdered quite matter-of-factly by her last squire and immediately forgotten by those few people who knew her. There is genuine mischief in this volume, stuff that might have given pause even to Dorothy Parker or Claire Booth Luce.

The first two books are thematically unified, even gimmicky. The final three (*Slowly, Slowly the Wind*; *The Black House*; and *Mermaids on the Golf Course*) are generally straightforward stories. As with Mildred, chance encounters with violence or even chance escapes mark the lives of Highsmith's characters, set the small dramas on their way, or finish them abruptly. The optimistic American view that you can do or be anything you want to is scotched firmly and often in Highsmith's universe. Those who try to manipulate affairs to satisfy their preferences tend to find that life is indeed hazardous.

Thus, in "The Baby Spoon," we meet Claud Lamm, professor of literature and poetry at Columbia. Married to a nice but unsophisticated woman who irritates his soul, he finds cruel satisfaction in her loss of a keepsake spoon, apparently to the petty thievery of his most promising

ex-student, now a starving poet who hits him up for sympathy and money. In time, however, he finds the loss of the spoon works changes in his wife, breaks her out of her childishness, even makes her into someone of whom he can actually be fond. Imagining that others are playing out roles in his own mental drama and for once wanting to share his understanding, he tips a wink to the thief, thanking him for his action. The poet—possibly innocent, certainly overwrought—is offended at the suggestion and, instead of acknowledging his part in the affair, turns violent.

There are flashes of other writers and other stories, chiefly those sharing Highsmith's jaundiced view of life. Evelyn Waugh's watchful Pekinese in "On Guard" finds its more self-concerned counterpart in a Siamese cat in "Ming's Biggest Prey"; his gentle lunatic strangler in "Mr Loveday's Little Outing" gains a less laughable counterpart in "The Button."

Not only is Highsmith deadpan, she is free of sentimentality. Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," that hopelessly obvious chestnut, gets its workover in "Not One of Us." "It wasn't merely that Edmund Quasthoff had stopped smoking and almost stopped drinking that made him different, slightly goody-goody and therefore vaguely unlikable. It was something else. What?"

What indeed? Certainly Quasthoff is a bore; beyond that, he is the kind of person who somehow makes your claws extend. It does not take much to make a group of Upper East Side sophisticates conspire to mistreat this weakest link in their circle so cruelly as to inspire suicide. Patricia Highsmith cuts a little closer to the bone than Shirley Jackson. Straight delivery triumphs over message or jokiness every time, and you quickly begin to see why she is not for everyone.

And so it should come as no surprise that, once she had hit her stride, Patricia Highsmith found more awards and far better sales in Europe than she did in America. Indeed, *Little Tales of Misogyny* was first published in German translation as *Kleine Geschichten für Weiberfeinde*. The affection Europe felt for her was mutual, and after 1963, she spent the bulk of her life living and working alone in France, England, and Switzerland, where she died in Locarno in 1995.

Bruce Ware Allen currently works as a systems analyst in New York.

LIBERAL ARTS

GEORGE W. BUSH: ANTISEMITE?

"If President-elect George Bush's Cabinet is supposed to look like America, how come no one looks like me? I don't mean drop-dead handsome with a rakish smile. No, I'm talking about something else. I'm asking how come none of his appointees is Jewish.

"The closest he came was with Linda Chavez, who, while not a Jew, is at least married to one."

—from Richard Cohen, "No Jews in This Cabinet" (Washington Post, January 16, 2001)

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What should the response of the Christian be when civilization is collapsing all around him? Boethius reminds us of our duty to live joyfully amidst the chaos and find happiness in misfortune by embracing Providence. Saint Benedict encourages us to form small communities of virtue. Saint Augustine reminds us that, ultimately, we will be restless until we rest with our Creator. We can, like so many on the "right," point to pathetic political victories and pretend we are not living in a dying age, or we can consult the wisdom of great men who, by their courage and their faith, endured the collapse of Rome and left the world a better place.



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by Samuel Francis

How Do I Hate Thee? Let Me Count the Ways

The cinders of the World Trade Center had barely fallen to the earth before George W. Bush had it all figured out. "America was targeted for attack," the President explained to the nation barely 12 hours after the first plane hit the Manhattan skyscrapers, "because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world." Perhaps that explanation provided some comfort—though not much enlightenment—to the mystified and terrified millions who were wondering what was happening and why; but it was an explanation upon which the President and many others soon enlarged. By September 20, Mr. Bush could offer the country an expanded account of the motives behind the bloodiest single act of mass murder in history. "Americans are asking, 'Why do they hate us?'" he said during his address to a joint session of Congress, and again he had the answer at his fingertips:

They hate us for what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.

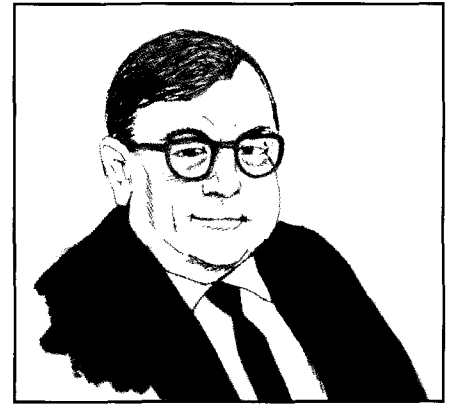
Among those statesmen who admired both the President's rhetorical gifts as well as the profundity of his political philosophy was the largely forgotten football star Jack Kemp, who advised the public in his syndicated column that "I would add . . . they also hate our democracy, our liberal markets and our abundance of economic opportunity, at which the terror attacks were clearly directed." But even this incisive analysis failed to exhaust the creative powers of the ruling class and its spokesmen in fabricating flattering, self-serving, misleading, and transparently false explanations of the motives of the terrorists who planned and carried out the September 11 attacks.

National Review, once the leading conservative magazine in America, echoed the themes sounded by the President and

Mr. Kemp. "The United States is a target because we are powerful, rich, and good," it bustled in an October 1 editorial. "We are resented for our power, envied for our wealth, and hated for our liberty." And, like many of those offering such reasons for the attack, NR was especially concerned to smother any suspicion that it may have been the result of U.S. support for Israel. Two weeks later, Senior Editor Ramesh Ponnuru sallied forth to explain it once more:

The radical Islamists' broader quarrel is with American power: not with the uses of that power, but with the fact of it. We are infidels. And we are liberal, capitalist, modern, powerful, and rich; therefore hated. Benjamin Netanyahu made the point well when he wrote in the aftermath of the September massacres that the Islamists do not hate the West because of Israel; they hate Israel because of the West. They call us, not Israel, "the Great Satan."

Mr. Netanyahu's point, as dubious as it was, is nonetheless something of an insult: Arab attacks on Israel have nothing to do with Palestinian claims to the land on which Israel now sits nor with continuing complaints of Israeli repression but are really the fault of the United States and the "West" in general (the unstated implication, of course, is that the United States and the West therefore owe Israel their continuing and unbounded support, since there would be no attacks on Israel without the West). Norman Podhoretz, after a ranting attack in a letter to the *New York Post* on conservative columnist Robert Novak for even mentioning the role American support for Israel may have played in the September 11 attacks, unbosomed in the *Wall Street Journal* sentiments largely identical to those of Mr. Netanyahu. So did George Will, who assured us that the terrorists' targets were "symbols not just of American power but of its virtues," explicitly quoted the former Israeli premier as telling us,



"They hate 'Zionism as an expression and representation of Western civilization,'" and added that "they hate America because it is the purest expression of modernity—individualism, pluralism, freedom, secularism." Columnist Paul Greenberg, apparently unable to think of any further virtues for which we were attacked, contented himself by telling us that

the haters need no reason to hate us. It is enough that we are who we are—a free and powerful people. . . . They can't bear our happiness, our prosperity, our power, and most of all the realization that others want to model themselves on us and build their own free societies.

The list could go on, but it soon became apparent that suggesting that U.S. policies in the Middle East—either U.S. support for Israel or our role in the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq—had played a part in the events of September 11 was a certain road to ruin. Nevertheless, the barest acquaintance with what Osama bin Laden and his merry band of cutthroats have said and are saying about the private war they are waging shows that hatred of "democracy," the "West," "liberal markets," and the "virtues" of which Mr. Will boasts have absolutely nothing to do with it.

In 1995, for example, as the *Washington Post* reported on September 23, authorities in the Philippines arrested a gentleman of Pakistani extraction who was discovered to be planning the bombing of 11 American commercial airliners on behalf of bin Laden's network. The draft communiqué in the suspect's possession was quite explicit about the motives that drove him and his accomplices:

The U.S. government gives mili-