



The Two Faces of January

Patricia Highsmith

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Three of them are waiting. Rydal Keener is waiting for something exciting to happen in his grubby little Athens hotel.

At forty-odd, Chester MacFarland has been waiting much longer, expecting his life of stock manipulation and fraud to catch up with him. And Colette, Chester's wife, is waiting for something altogether different.

After a nasty little incident in the hotel, they all wait together. As the stakes, and the tension, in their three-cornered waiting game mount, they learn that while passports and silence can be bought, other things can cost as much as your life.

The Two Faces of January Details

Date : Published January 21st 1994 by Atlantic Monthly Press (first published 1964)

ISBN : 9780871132093

Author : Patricia Highsmith

Format : Paperback 288 pages

Genre : Fiction, Mystery, Crime, Thriller, Mystery Thriller, Cultural, Greece

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From Reader Review The Two Faces of January for online ebook

Simon says

Patricia Highsmith is generally regarded as an author who bridges the gap between Franz Kafka/Albert Camus-style modern existential literature and James M. Cain-style pulp crime fiction. This is the first novel of hers I read and it certainly fits that reputation, as it functions just as well as a gripping tightly plotted crime thriller and a philosophical exploration of three desperate fates crossing paths with terrible consequences for all involved.

The plot revolves around an American businessman and his wife who are on vacation on Greece while they're under investigation for fraud back home. They cross path with another American expatriate, a washed-up lawyer who desperately needs to get back home, when they accidentally kill a police officer while resisting arrest. The lawyer then witnesses the manslaughter and offers the couple a chance to flee if they pay for him to get them fake passports. Of course, as usual in this type of novel things do not go as planned for anyone involved since everyone involved has their own agenda... especially not when the businessman's wife falls in love with the lawyer, who shows himself a much more competent man.

The first thing to stand out about the storytelling is that there is no clear protagonist/antagonist pattern. While the plot revolves around a conflict between three people, the point-of-view is split evenly between them and nobody are assigned a moral high ground. The person who ends up the closest thing to the story's hero still acts in a completely amoral manner, being motivated exclusively by own self-interest. Likewise, the character filling the villain role, or at least doing by far the most horrifying acts in the story, comes across as less malevolent than just dangerously impulsive and short-sighted - as a consequence being more a figure of pity than genuine revulsion. This is one of the most morally ambiguous novels I've ever read, and for this it stands out.

While the plot is as you can guess rather complex, I also appreciate that the writing's complexity is very subtle in that it's only apparent to the readers when they start thinking about it. Highsmith frequently shifts gears between the inner lives of three people in constant mutual conflict *and* in-depth description of the Greek locations, and she does it so effortlessly that I perhaps would not be so impressed by her if I didn't keep getting flashbacks to David Goodis' "The Wounded and the Slain" which proceeds from a similar plot concept only with much less finesse.

In regards to the novel's themes, there's a lot of interesting stuff going on not just regarding the Kafkaesque underworld business bureaucracies the main characters go through in order to help escape from the proper authorities, but also how much modern social structures require a separation between people's public persona and their real selves that make it easy for sociopaths to operate undetected perhaps without knowing they're doing anything wrong.

There is some intriguing commentary on gender roles tied into the second theme I mentioned, by the way, especially when the love triangle between the protagonists enters the equation and complicates the conflict further: Both of the male characters appear to hang up much of their self-image regarding social status on their relations to women, much more so than I wager most heterosexual men admit to doing in real life, but many of the exact patterns I can recognize from real life. Perhaps what Patricia Highsmith was trying to do here was bringing the implicit up to the surface, it did *not* surprise me when I later found out she was bisexual and would hence have something of an outsider perspective on the so-called "battle between the sexes".

"The Two Faces of January" seems to be one of Highsmith's less well known books and I might have erred in making it the first one I read, but so far that does not appear to be the case and I can highly recommend it to anyone with an interest in any of the literary niches the novel can be categorized under.

Lesley says

Patricia Highsmith did well with this book! A good con artist story. This is set in Greece, and reminds me of her Tom Ripley stories!

Lou Robinson says

There's a film of "The Two Faces of January" out this month, starring a favourite of mine, Viggo Mortensen. I'm also getting to the end of the Ripley books that Patricia Highsmith wrote (although I'm trying to ration myself with the last one, as there won't be any more!). So time to try some of her other books. I just love her writing style, it's not overly verbose and there is always plenty of action and humour. The Two Faces of January is like reading about another Ripley in another city. An enjoyable read and now I can't wait to see it at the cinema.

Marita says

3.5-stars

“Somewhere outside, there was a cat fight. Chester saw two mangy cats fighting on the edge of a roof, clinching in battle, falling over the edge together.”

(No spoilers)

American Rydal Keener (25), has a chance encounter with two fellow Americans in an hotel in Athens, and due to a spur-of-the-moment action on the part of young Rydal, their fates become linked. A crime had been committed by conman Chester MacFarland (42), and his young wife Colette assisted him. Rydal allows himself to become involved for apparently no other reason than the fact that Chester resembles Rydal's father, and Colette reminds him of a girl he knew when he was fifteen years old. But is that the real reason for his actions?

Soon the die is cast, and Rydal enters into a symbiotic relationship with the MacFarlands. There is no real reason for Rydal to remain with the MacFarlands, so what possessed him to do what he did, and what is his motivation or agenda? Who is Chester MacFarland alias William Chamberlain alias Philip Wedekind alias...? What is his hold on Rydal? Or is it Rydal who has a hold on Chester? Are they friends, allies or deadly enemies? Are they like the cats observed by Chester in the quote at the beginning of this review?

Janus is the two-faced Roman God after whom January is said to be named. He looks to the future with one face, and to the past with the other. Janus represents many things, such as beginnings and endings, including the beginning and end of conflict. Rydal is facing his past and is trying to come to terms with it through his

relationship with the MacFarlands; Chester is looking to his future back in the United States. What do these men have in common, or are they metaphorically speaking two faces/sides of the same coin?

Head of Janus, Vatican museum, Rome (Wikipedia*)

Soon several people are ready to cash in on Chester's need and naivety, and in the process Chester's paranoia grows and grows. In her inimitable manner Patricia Highsmith adds layer upon layer of intrigue, and ramps up the tension - yes, I confess: part of the way through I peeked at the start of the final chapter.

The carefully crafted plot is an unlikely one, but is nonetheless entertaining. Ms Highsmith is a master of the psychological thriller genre and is well known for Strangers on a Train and her 'Ripley' series, some of which were turned into films. This novel is perhaps not quite in the same class, but it is still very good.

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I have had to be circumspect in my choice of **quotes** in order not to spoil the plot:

“He looks—Well, he doesn’t look like a crook. He’s an American.”

“Would it be wise or unwise? The unwisdom was plain, the wisdom not, yet Rydal sensed its presence.”

“So much the better for my purposes. I use purposes purposely. I am using this man for my own inner purposes. He is helping me to see Papa a little better, maybe to see Papa with less resentment, more humour; I don’t know, but God knows I would like to get rid of resentments.”

“Like all stupid people who hate themselves, he’ll strike out against anybody else.”

“What bores me is the mundaneness of all this – wrong word, I mean prosaicness (prosaism?) its dreariness and drabness and its predictability.”

“Optimism had always won the day for him. A man was no good without optimism, no good at all.”

“And each of them, looking at the same thing, had quite different thoughts in his head.”

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*By Loudon dodd - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index...>

Maria Thomarey says

Εντυπώσεις? και περιπλοκή ιστορία. Μια κλασική Χαισμιθ

Bettie? says

Bettie's Books

Camie says

Two con men , young Rydal Keener living on the cheap while looking for adventure and Chester MacFarland a racketeer fleeing the U.S. accompanied by his young beautiful wife, cross paths in Athens and become entangled in an ill fated triangle of crime and romance. This Best Foreign Novel Award(1964) winning book is the early work of Patricia Highsmith who was an acclaimed English mystery and suspense writer most famous for her (The Talented Mr.) Ripley series . My copy is the reprint (2014) which accompanied the movie release by the same name. This was the August read for my senior citizens Bookclub and though not my usual genre I enjoyed it as a nice change of pace.

3 stars

Maria João Fernandes says

"Eram muitas as coisas sensatas que poderia fazer...mas não fazia nenhuma delas."

Chester MacFarland viaja para a Europa com a sua muito mais nova e bela mulher, Collette, mas em vez de apreciarem o que a Grécia tem para lhes oferecer e usufruírem do tempo livre para descansar, veem-se envolvidos numa trama que envolve morte, troca de identidades, perseguição e fuga. Contudo, para pior ou melhor não estão sozinhos: Rydal Keener irá acompanhá-los durante todo o percurso.

A história do livro "As Duas Faces de Janeiro" é contada em capítulos que alternam entre os pontos de vista dos dois homens. Patricia Highsmith analisa a relação entre estes dois seres do sexo masculino, sem colocar de parte a presença tão influente do sexo feminino. Diria mesmo que tem um pequeno toque, ainda que discreto, de noir, destacando-se o impacto da femme fatale nos destinos dos envolvidos.

A complexidade da personagem de Rydal é o foco principal do enredo. Por um lado, ele é jovem, tem um bom coração e tenta fazer o que está certo. Por outro lado, as decisões por ele tomadas conduzem-no a um destino obscuro.

A autora e mestre do suspense consegue, uma vez mais, ganhar a simpatia do leitor através da amoralidade. Highsmith manipula na perfeição a mente do leitor, tal como o faz com as suas personagens. A verdade é que, por vezes, os criminosos conquistam o nosso coração com mais facilidade que uma pessoa honesta e bondosa. Porque será?

Como em todos os seus romances, as personagens são sedutoramente infantis, deliciosamente amorais e por demais perspicazmente complexas. Em acréscimo, as descrições minuciosas permitem-nos visualizar os pormenores mais ínfimos e os cenários mais surpreendentes. Apesar disso, sinto que a batalha psicológica entre os dois homens se alongou no final, tornando-se cansativa e repetitiva.

É sempre um prazer ler Patricia Highsmith, nunca me canso de ver retratada a natureza humana.

Sketchbook says

3d-rate Highsm makes a terrible movie. In fact, milady is vastly overrated. Hitchcock brought her attention w "Strangers on a Train." He altered huge chunks of the novel, which one must do, and then added ingenious Hitchenery "moments." In 1961, French director Rene Clement made a ssh! hot & sexy film version of "The Talented Mr Ripley," which was called "Purple Noon." It pushes aside the bloated Minghella paraphrase w the young and gorgeous Alain Delon as Tom Ripley -- not to be missed.

I dumped "2 Faces" after reading...argghhh...but was curious to see this film, which is the amateur hour - lousy direction, lousy script, and down-syndrome casting. Do I make myself clear?

Margo says

I can understand why do many authors site Patricia Highsmith as an inspiration. This novel was filled with twists and turns in it's mad dash through Greece, yet still it managed to keep a second, simpler storyline moving along nicely.

The story became a bit convoluted in the latter parts but the last line nailed it.

Michael Nutt says

Patricia Highsmith was the finest exponent of the psychological thriller. Her most famous works - 'Strangers on a train' and the Tom Ripley cycle of novels - are some of the most enjoyable reads of my life. And now I must add the recently filmed 'The Two Faces of January', her ninth novel, first published in 1964, as one that I can thoroughly recommend.

The rather curious title refers to the connection between the month of January, in which the story unfolds, and the Roman god Janus, in whose honour the Romans named the month. Janus is usually depicted as having two faces, as he looks both to the future and to the past. To the ancient Romans, Janus was the god of beginnings and transitions, and thereby associated with gates, doors, and passageways, as well as endings and time. You can find these themes appearing throughout the novel.

The story begins with a passenger ship slipping through the Corinth Canal at night. On board are an American couple - Chester MacFarland and his young wife Colette - taking a vacation in Europe and arriving now in Greece. The opening descriptions are of a passage from one world to another, a transition between countries, but also an image that evokes birth, a new beginning. We soon learn that the man is a shyster on the run from the American authorities, trying to escape his past.

They are observed by a slack young American, Rydal Keener, who is struck by Chester's resemblance to his recently deceased father (whose funeral he chose to miss), while Colette reminds Rydal a little of his cousin Agnes, his first, ill-fated love from some ten years ago. Rydal is using an inheritance to fund a couple of years away in Europe writing poetry and avoiding a planned career in law back in the States. He amuses himself by playing games of chance, and starts to include the American couple, so uncannily reminiscent of those people from his past, in his latest scheme even if he is unsure quite what it might be yet.

Rydal is a particularly Janus-like character, looking both to the past and to the future. He carries the psychological scars of his relationship with his late father and his cousin Agnes, and this unfinished business in his past keeps drifting into the present and casting a fog over his future. Unwittingly, Chester and Colette drift onto his radar. By chapter three their worlds have collided - or dovetailed, it would be more accurate to say, as Chester and Colette find themselves locked in an unspoken pact with Rydal over an incidental murder.

It is typical of Highsmith that these are deeply flawed characters, psychotic anti-heroes whose appearance of normality hides psychopathic personalities and murderous tendencies. As in her 'Talented Mr Ripley', she describes a world of European exoticism, as her characters tour the sun-drenched Mediterranean; the novel was published a year after its American author had permanently relocated to Europe.

Highsmith keeps the reader guessing about the games these three con artists might be playing. It is a tale of two Ripley's, as Chester and Rydal manoeuvre warily around each other, with a devious woman thrown into the mix for good measure. Gradually, insidiously, Chester becomes increasingly dependent on Rydal as the trio go on the run to Crete, while taking in a spot of tourism along the way as they travel the island. And all the while Colette seems to be taking a seductive interest in Rydal... You know that things can only go badly for these people, and it is not long before the body count rises and events take on their own crooked logic.

Highsmith is always adept at pulling off a surprise, taking the story in an entirely different direction from where you thought it was heading. Like a card sharp flicking an ace from the palm of her hand, she throws in a key scene set in the deserted Temple of Knossos that causes the narrative to lurch into a crazy, unexpected turn, tying the two male characters to each other in a mutually destructive relationship. Rydal now plays a dangerous game with Chester, who finds himself unable to free himself from the deadly grasp the other has on him.

This is dark but humorous stuff. You suspend any feelings of disbelief and go along with these miscreants for the ride, which takes us across Europe. Rydal works out his latent hatred and resentment of his father on Chester, who has assumed the role of his substitute father. It is a poisonous relationship reminiscent of that between Guy and Bruno in Highsmith's 'Strangers on a train', except here both parties are as cracked as each other. Who will come out on top? The drink-addled con artist or the hate-filled chancer? And what sort of game is Rydal playing by the time the players get to Paris?

Each chapter leaves you eager for the next and every time I picked up the story again I was excited to be reacquainting myself with these rather nasty people. Highsmith conjures a strange yet satisfying ending that tidies up some unfinished business, completing a transition of sorts. I look forward to reading more of her novels someday soon.

Toby says

I feel like reviews of this book are expected to mention a movie and Tom Ripley, so let's get it out of the way, blahblahblahblahblah Viggo Mortenson, blahblahblahblahblah Tom Ripley.

Except, this was published after the second Ripley book and in Rydal Keener it feels like Highsmith has written an extension of his early character, almost as if she is playing with ideas for future Ripley adventures in a manner similar to the way Simenon worked with Maigret to help clarify his bigger ideas for his more

serious work. Rydal is a twenty five year old American boy in Europe discovering himself after disowning/being disowned by his family. He attaches himself to some other Americans and bad, tension filled shenanigans occur. Sounds familiar right?

The other thing is there is a new movie adaptation featuring Viggo Mortenson as the other male character, Chester MacFarland and Chester MacFarland is your perfect post 9-11 American villain, he's The Wolf of Wall Street without Scorsese's misplaced glamourising of his offensive Ponzi scheme con man grandeur. It's no wonder this is the book they chose to adapt from Highsmith's large back catalogue.

In between these two men there's a woman, naturally. And I feel you'll be hard pressed to beat Highsmith with the misogynist stick that critics so love to wave around when discussing her. Yes, Colette MacFarland is something of a catalyst for the silliness perpetrated by the men but she's not represented in a negative manner, she's not some cut out of a femme fatale for example, she's a young wife of a man who turns out to be something other than what she thought she was getting.

The tension fuelled shenanigans take in some wonderfully evoked exotic sounding places in Greece and France, more than likely written from first hand experience which give the work an extra layer of fascination but don't expect any dramatic insight in to human behaviour here, just turn up and go along for a skilfully written ride thanks to a woman who was a master of her craft who The Sunday Times affectionately (and accurately) calls *"a glittering addition to the meagre ranks of people who can make books that you really can't put down."*

Michael says

Con artist Chester MacFarland is wanted by the police back in America, but here in Greece, he feels free to roam with his young Colette. That was until he accidentally kills a police officer in his hotel room. The young American law graduate, Rydal Keener is there to help them escape the city. This accident has brought the three together but is this for the best or is there something else at play?

Patricia Highsmith is often referred to as the queen of suspense and The Two Faces of January does not do anything to contradict this. The title alone gives the reader a pretty clear idea of what to expect; the month of January is named after the Roman god Janus. Janus has two faces, one looking to the future while the other looks at the past. The term Janus-faced means "having two sharply contrasting aspects or characteristics". In the biography Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith by Andrew Wilson, Highsmith stated that the title was a reference to the flux-like nature of the characters that she likes to create.

When it comes to character development, Patricia Highsmith really shines like no other. She has a great ability to create complex characters that feel authentic, and that is an ability that I find lacking in a lot of suspense novels. In The Two Faces of January, Highsmith creates a love triangle that is actually interesting to read about. There is the homoerotic relationship between Chester and Rydal and Colette is also quite taken by this young law graduate. This turns the book into more of a psychological look at the shifting nature of relationships rather than a thriller. It does depend on how the reader decides to read The Two Faces of January but for me the depth is what stood out for me.

I probably should mention that The Two Faces of January was adapted into a movie back in 2014 starring Viggo Mortensen, Kirsten Dunst and Oscar Isaac. This was the directorial debut for Hossein Amini, who is best known writing the screenplay for the novels Drive and Our Kind of Traitor; he even wrote the script for

The Two Faces of January. I know I need to have more Highsmith within my reading life and I am thinking about re-reading *The Talented Mr Ripley*, before continuing on with the series. I have noticed there are new editions of the Highsmith's novels lately and I think I should take advantage of the availability while they are easily accessible.

This review originally appeared on my blog; <http://www.knowledgelost.org/literatu...>

Maria Clara says

Realmente me ha encantado! Es la primera novela que leo de esta autora y no sabía qué podía encontrarme y, con sinceridad, he disfrutado mucho! Supongo que lo que más me ha gustado es el leer sin tener idea de cómo terminaría todo...

Emma Iadanza says

Last year, when I saw that this movie was going to come out, I thought it would be amazing and I really wanted to see it. Unfortunately, the arthouse film wasn't playing anywhere in my general vicinity. Flash forward to last week, at my library, where I saw the DVD and the book side by side on a shelf. So I instantly picked the book up - I had to read it!

The reviews of the book discouraged me, but the reviews of the movie compelled me. It was going to be an adventurous novel, right? I looked forward to it anyway.

The only reason why this novel is 4 stars and not 5 is because the writing was not out-of-this-world. I really would have loved to given it 5 stars, but the prose was moderate. Nothing special. Nonetheless, the plot was fascinating, and the characters were amazing as well. Here is my examination:

In the beginning of the novel, the characters were given a lot of back-story. I worried that this would inhibit future character development or sudden plot twists due to reveals. The plot twists and reveals were of another nature, actually. And, rather, the character development was awesome!! This is the most character development in a book that I can recall reading! And none of it was cheesy, it was fascinating. Furthermore, the side characters were very supportive and played good roles. They didn't develop much, but greatly helped to push the story along.

Also, the beginning of the book seemed to be only about how the relationships between these characters develop. By the end, it is much more sinister than that. Last year I read a book, *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, and many reviewers said how "this book is full of bad people". To be honest, I didn't see why they were so bad. The characters in this book, *The Two Faces of January*, were very very bad people. This is where the character development comes into play -- in the beginning, they seemed like normal people. By the end, I couldn't decide who's side to root for because both main characters were doing such horrible things to each other!

Furthermore, this invokes the concept of good vs. evil - who is really the evil person? Because people always think that they are right. There might be some problems with their conscience, but they usually think they are right. After all, what terrorist thinks "I'm going to hurt innocent people just because I want to" - no, they

think "I want to hurt people because God/whoever is in charge wants me to, because they are not innocent and must be killed!" (or something along those lines).

This, I believe, is the meaning of the title: the Two Faces of January. The month January comes from a Roman god with two faces - Janus. He was the god of transitions, beginnings, and passages. While beginning to read the book, I thought the title was a reference to classical mythology - now, looking back, it wouldn't make sense in the book, because Janus was a Roman, not Greek, god. Instead, I believe that the title's significance is how the two main characters have both seemingly innocent and truly sinister sides. It may also refer to how the main characters keep trying to escape, and have new beginnings (ie. changing names, moving to different countries). Janus was also the god of ending wars and conflicts, and this played a major part in the book (see spoiler).

And back to the topic of relationships, the idea of love changing judgement was also a major point. The characters' perceptions were often skewed, and they also blamed their problems, on love.

(view spoiler)

And for real finality - the setting in the 19(60?)s made this book happen. It could not happen in modern day, with modern security and passport control, real time news, faster planes, boats, etc... And the author writing in the 60's made it all the better. I don't think it would be easy to write this novel in modern day - it wouldn't work.

This was a great book! I highly suggest it.
