

The Crime Cafe with

Eva Vitija

Presented By:



Debbi (00:54): Hi everyone. My guest today is a screenwriter and director, and she has written feature film screenplays as well as made documentaries that have won prizes and been nominated for awards. And if you go to imdb.com and type in her name you'll discover that she's made some other really interesting documentaries.

(01:24): One in particular I wanna see now is *My Life as a Film*. Oh boy, that looks good. <Laugh> That looks really interesting, but her most recent release is a documentary about Patricia Highsmith. Thus, she is on the show because as you know, if you are a crime fiction fan, you know that Patricia Highsmith was the author of *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, about two very interesting characters. <Laugh> More than two, but anyway, but what you think you know about the author might not be who she really is. So let's talk about that with my guest. The movie is called *Loving Highsmith* and my guest is writer and director Eva Vitija. I hope I'm saying that right.

Eva (02:13): Vitija. (Vit-ee-ya)

Debbi (02:14): Vitija. Oh, I knew it. Darn it. I knew it.

Eva: (02:17): It's fine.

Debbi: (02:17): It's the Spanish pronunciation. <Laugh> Muy mal. <Laugh>

Eva (02:24): No, no, it's good.

Debbi (02:26): Very cool.

Eva (02:27): Actually, it's an Albanian name. So you could--

Debbi (02:30): It's a what?

Eva (02:31): An Albanian name.

Debbi (02:32): I was gonna say, I was looking it up and I was trying to figure out the roots of it. <Laugh> Very interesting. I just wanna say you are the first working screenwriter/director to appear on this show and a woman. So take that patriarchy. Ha ha.

Eva (02:50): <Laugh> Thank you so much for having me.

Debbi (02:54): I'm glad you're here. It seems you've been fascinated with Patricia Highsmith nearly all your life. What was it that provoked you, your interest as a child in her?

Eva (03:07): Actually it we always went to holidays in the village where she lived. It was a, a small village in the Ticino, which is the Italian part of Switzerland. And it was very well known that she lived there. And my parents told me that this famous writer is living here and alone with her cats and this somehow I was, I must have been around seven or something. And this somehow created a little mystery for me because I couldn't, you know, quite figure out why a woman is

living alone with the cats. <Laugh> The first little mystery, but I think I forgot after that. And I, it only came to my mind when I was already working on that film. So, yeah.

Debbi ([03:58](#)): How interesting.

Eva ([03:59](#)): That appeared very early on in my life, somehow.

Debbi ([04:02](#)): That is very interesting. It's unique to have a famous writer like that, that everybody knows living in your little village, right?

Eva ([04:09](#)): Yeah. <laugh>

Debbi ([04:11](#)): To say the least. Almost like being in an Agatha Christie novel <laugh>

Eva ([04:17](#)): Yes. Absolutely.

Debbi ([04:19](#)): Having seen the movie now I can say that *Loving Highsmith* seems like the perfect title for this film. Can you tell me what made you choose that title?

Eva ([04:31](#)): Actually, I knew Patricia Highsmith as probably everybody else knows her, as this a bit very somber and very elegant crime writer. I also had this, you know, image of hers as being a recluse since I knew she lived alone in Switzerland and we knew all her a bit. How's it called in, in English? Sometimes I lack the words, but she had this face, you know, not very friendly when she was older. <laugh>

Debbi ([05:08](#)): Kind of grim?

Eva ([05:10](#)): Grumpy, grim, and quite dark. She had this image. And then I started to read her diaries and her notebooks and they are in an archive in Switzerland because she has been living in Switzerland for the last 13 years of her life there. And when she died, all this came to an archive in Switzerland and I went there and, and I just started reading those private texts, which were not published at that time. And I discovered a woman that was so completely different to everything I had known about her. And that was for, for me, like, you know, this huge surprise because I somehow saw or discovered through these texts a woman that was a very young writer trying to get into profession and always falling in love with women. Every week you could say, or every month, another one. And she was, she had kind of a romantic side to her as well.

([06:22](#)): And this was for me a complete surprise. I would have never imagined such, such a woman. And she somehow was very sympathetic as well. I could all, so from the very first moment I could connect somehow to this, to this woman in these texts. And I think it's from the start, it was very clear that the love, the love biography of hers, which was so present in these private texts would be the main focus of the film. So *Loving Highsmith* is a bit about Highsmith who loves, but also about myself or other people who love Highsmith. So <laugh>

Debbi ([07:05](#)): Exactly, it does seem to have a kind of a double meaning <laugh>

Eva ([07:09](#)): Yes.

Debbi (07:11): There was a side to her that people just didn't see that came out in these journals and interviews you did. Yeah. What was your process of getting access to the journals and the people you could talk to?

Eva (07:23): Mm-Hmm <affirmative>

Debbi (07:24): Actually, what was that process like?

Eva (07:25): The journals were, or already I could, you know, just go and I read them in the archive for the diaries. I needed a little more, it little needed a little more time because they were not, you know, open to the public yet, but after two years I could also read the diaries and I was always in contact with the publisher, of course, who owns all the rights. So they knew what I was doing and I could, you know, go to the archives, but actually a lot was already, you know, open to the public. And then I contacted at the very first moment, actually, the remaining family of Patricia Highsmith, which doesn't have the same name. They're called Coates, not Highsmith. And I was in Texas for a film festival. I just, you know, called them and asked them if I could come by sometime, and half a year later when I was there again, I could visit them. And they were quite open to my request and to my interest somehow. Also, maybe they didn't know how famous her aunt from Europe was probably. <laugh>

Debbi (08:44): I got the sense that they didn't know a lot about her. <Laugh>

Eva (08:47): Yeah. Somehow they told me, ah, you know my dentist is he's Spanish. And he says that in Europe she's very well known. I mean, they knew that she was writing, they knew she was a writer. They, she had written all those famous books adapted to the screen for films. They knew about that, but somehow they were not aware how big she is, and they told me they still have some boxes of material of hers. And I could just look, look it through. They didn't know what is, what is inside basically. And it was full of this gorgeous photographs of her as a child and as a young woman. And this was a bit, the start of the filmmaking process, because for a film, you need images. You cannot, cannot only work with texts, of course, which is always the problem when you try to make a film about a writer.

(09:46): You have lots of texts and sometimes nearly no images. And especially when the writer is already passed away. So <laugh>, but with Patricia Highsmith, there was quite a lot of really beautiful photographs of her. And she was a, she was also this very attractive, she was this very attractive, very interesting young woman. So you could immediately imagine to make a film starting from that. And then I contacted her ex-girlfriends. The first that I contacted was also a writer, Marijane Meaker. And she had written this book about Patricia Highsmith because she had lived with her, she had a relationship with her and she had written a book about that time. So it was, it was, I think the first one, I contacted. Also, reading that book, I had a bit, the feeling that she sees it a bit the same as, as I see it.

(10:55): We both had the same vision of the young Patricia Highsmith a bit. She knew her personally, of course, but what, what I had read from her personal diaries I had a bit the same impression. So I wanted to contact her and she was open to a little visit. It was a bit difficult to, you know, do all these travels, but I finally, I could manage to go to the Hamptons <laugh> and we had wonderful chats, but she didn't, you know, she didn't want to participate in the first, in the first stages of the project. She didn't wanna make a film because she said, you know, I've

already written a book. Why should I now make a film again? I've said it all in the book. So I said, okay, but I can't, you know, make a film without <laugh> people.

Debbi ([11:55](#)): I need some talking heads. Yeah.

Eva ([11:58](#)): I need some, some people who can share their memories of Patricia Highsmith, firsthand. So, and I absolutely wanted to have a film, which is not, which doesn't only have experts, literary experts. I wanted some, I wanted to, I wanted to add something to the image of Patricia Highsmith, which is really her private life. So I, for me, this was crucial that I could find the ex-lovers or ex-girlfriends of her to, you know, to add really the thing that was missing in her story in the public image somehow.

Debbi ([12:38](#)): It's the kind of depth you couldn't get from an expert. Only from somebody who knew her.

Eva ([12:44](#)): Yes.

Debbi ([12:45](#)): So that's fantastic. I was fascinated by the fact that she had written this novel I never heard of called *Carol*, once called *The Price of Salt* and written under a pseudonym about a woman in the 1950s who falls in love and doesn't die. And this is like remarkable? <Laugh>

Eva ([13:07](#)): She's not going crazy. She's not ending up in a crazy <laugh> how's it called in, in English, a crazy home or something?

Debbi ([13:19](#)): A lunatic asylum? Yeah.

Eva ([13:22](#)): Asylum something <laugh>

Debbi ([13:23](#)): Institution. Yeah. Whatever you wanna call it. Yeah. I mean, I just thought it was remarkable. Just remarkable that she did it.

Eva ([13:33](#)): Mm-hmm <affirmative>

Debbi ([13:35](#)): It seems like a lot of great themes are touched on in this film. What would you like to see viewers take away from this movie? How, what's the message here? What's the thought, the theme, I guess?

Eva ([13:50](#)): I really think they will discover a Patricia Highsmith that is really a bit different. She's very, she's also very emotional, something that you couldn't, you know, quite imagine if you read her books. You probably have the feeling that the writer must be very, has this, a bit cold and amoral quality, which she's always exploring, but it's absolutely not the case because she's exploring those dark topics of society somehow that probably also have roots in herself. But she was a very sensitive person who could, you know, from her biography. She always had to hide her sexual identity. She was a lesbian and being born in the 1921. And of course she had to hide all of this in public and also to her family which was a normal thing at that time. And because otherwise you probably wouldn't have access to publishers anymore.

(15:01): The family would have a huge problem with it. So you just didn't talk about. It was a complete taboo, of course. And I think from having this biography of having to lead somehow a double life, you can, you know, see in society double sides as well, and all the effaces that are behind the surface. So I think she was really destined to write about those difficult topics, about violence in society, about murderers who lead a double life and all that, all those things. I think, you know, how society works, if you have to lead a double life yourself.

Debbi (15:49): Yeah. And I was struck by her mother who was quite a piece of work. <laugh>

Eva (15:56): Yeah, she was not, this was also probably one of her first feelings that she was really not accepted in this world also by her mother. Her mother wanted to board her first, and then she divorced just nine days before she was born. I even found in Texas, you know, this, the divorce certificate, which said it was nine days before she was born. So it was very particular. It must have been a very difficult situation for that woman to get that child. And she was leaving little Patricia with her grandmother in Texas, you know, just to try to make a living as a graphic designer in New York. She then met a new, a new husband and married. And they took Patricia to New York when she was seven, but she was really growing up the first years in Texas with her grandmother, which was for her very important and positive person actually.

Debbi (17:05): That had to be quite a culture shock for her, too, going from Texas to New York.

Eva (17:10): Yeah, I suppose so. Yeah. Yeah. It was quite a different life. It was a city life compared to, you know, Fort Worth was a city as well, but it probably was a very small and slow city at that time.

Debbi (17:24): By comparison. Yeah.

Eva (17:25): By comparison of New York. <laugh>

Debbi (17:30): Were there any particular surprises in your research that you discovered things that really surprised you?

Eva (17:40): Well, we, for example, found out that Patricia Highsmith had probably been growing up with a black nanny, because the grandmother and the grandfather came from Alabama and they were coming from a cotton plantation. They had, the family had a cotton plantation. So obviously they had a lot of slaves at some some point. And of course slavery was already abolished, but when they traveled to Texas, they migrated to Texas in 1907, they probably took some of the servants with them. And Patricia Highsmith must have, you know, grown up the first years with a, with this black person called House, which was a woman and working for that family. So this was a, quite a surprise. And I think there was a lot of women, you know, I didn't know about before I was looking for a lot of ex-lovers. Patricia Highsmith was quite notorious. She <laugh>, she had a lot of lovers and it was not easy to find all of them. First of all, a lot had already died, but some were also in anonymized?

Debbi (19:13): Anony, yeah, anonym, anonymous,

Eva (19:17): Anonymous, somehow in biographies. And I couldn't even, you know, know the names of them. So I had to find out all the names and and for some, it really took a long time until I could track them down. One was, I had two years to find out her name. At some point,

somebody just, you know, said the name, slipped, it slipped her. And because everybody didn't want to say the name because she was not outed. She was a lesbian, but, or also a lesbian, probably B, but she was married. And so nobody would tell me her name. And when I found the name out, I could of course immediately spot where she was, where she lived, and what she did and all those things. But when I came there to this house, it was in London, they were just moving the furniture out of the place. And she had just died recently. So it was, I just missed her for some weeks or months.

Debbi ([20:27](#)): Wow. You did a lot of traveling in making this, didn't you?

Eva ([20:30](#)): Yeah. And was quite some research, actually, it was sometimes a bit of detective work to do all this. <Laugh> It was actually nice because I found it, I found it a bit, you know, like Patricia Highsmith's own writing sometimes, although she doesn't write the classical detective novels or, but still it has something in common <laugh>.

Debbi ([20:57](#)): Made you feel like a sleuth. <Laugh>

Eva ([20:59](#)): Yes.

Debbi ([21:01](#)): I'm interested in the fact that both *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *Strangers on a Train* have characters, important characters who feel they're incapable of guilt, basically.

Eva ([21:14](#)): Mm-hmm. <Affirmative>

Debbi ([21:15](#)): They just are incapable of feeling guilt.

Eva ([21:17](#)): Mm-hmm. <Affirmative>.

Debbi ([21:19](#)): Do you think the documentary sheds any light on why she would write about characters to that sort?

Eva ([21:25](#)): I think guilt was a very important topic for Patricia Highsmith, because in her own life, as you can imagine being a lesbian in that time, she had some sense of always being there, guilt <laugh> I think. And that she was also growing up in a, not in a religious family, but it was, you know, quite ... for example, the grandmother was very Methodist, quite religious. She was also herself still going to church even singing in a church choir at some point. And I think this guilt problem for herself somehow it was something that she always thought about. And with Ripley, she did invent a character who was absolutely guilt-free. So this was like some kind of utopia for Patricia Highsmith to write about somebody who doesn't have the feeling of guilt and who is really unscrupulous? Is it the word?

Debbi ([22:33](#)): Yes. Unscrupulous. Exactly.

Eva ([22:36](#)): And and I think it, that's also what, what all readers, like so much about him. Can you imagine somebody who doesn't have a feeling of guilt? I mean, it's like huge freedom. <Laugh>

Debbi (22:50): It is, it is a huge freedom. Exactly. Yeah.

Eva (22:53): Even if it leads to murder. <Laugh>

Debbi (22:56): Yeah. No matter what, just do whatever you want. Just carry on.

Eva (23:01): Yeah, exactly. I think it was, you know, it was huge success, this character, somehow I think it was for the first time also that somebody wrote a character like this and really like going into his mind. Although he's such an amoral person somehow.

Debbi (23:20): That's, that's a great point. That's really interesting. What else do you like to read other than Patricia Highsmith?

Eva (23:30): Oh, that's a difficult question. <Laugh> I like to read so many things. Right now I've started to read it's, it's rather, Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, which is, I think childhood memories of <laugh> of somebody. I love that. And then I read a lot of poems, actually.

Debbi (23:59): Cool.

Eva (24:00): This is probably why I also liked all the poems that Patricia Highsmith has written. She, this was totally surprising as well. I mean, if you read her novels, there's probably some very few poetic sentences, but in general, you could, she's not that typical poetry writer. And there has been some poems published, but really, really rarely, but in her notebooks, she writes poems all the times. It's a daily thing that she does. And I really love that side to show that side as well, that she really writes a different kind of text as well. So I picked a lot of poems for that film.

Debbi (24:47): That's great. It's wonderful. Let's see, what advice would you give to anyone who's interested in writing for film or doing what you're doing?

Eva (24:59): You mean making ...

Debbi (25:00): Documentaries.

Eva (25:00): Making documentaries,

Debbi (25:02): Yes. Or just even writing for film in general,

Eva (25:06): Writing for film. I think it's very different in the US and in Europe, because in Europe you have all these funders and you know, you, first of all, you just have an idea and you write a story down. It's all in written. I think in the US, it's more like pitching.

Debbi (25:26): Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>

Eva (25:28): You know, it's, it's a bit different, but I think if you want to do something like that, just go ahead and try it and try to get, to get somebody enthusiastic about your ideas and try to get some funding in Europe, I would say. And in the US, it's probably some production company

that's interested in the film. And then just try to go ahead. I mean, I found it very, the greatest job <laugh> I could imagine. <laugh>

Debbi ([26:04](#)): That's awesome.

Eva ([26:06](#)): But probably you shouldn't expect too much money from it. <Laugh>

Debbi ([26:12](#)): That is very, very true.

Eva ([26:18](#)): Yes, exactly. But it's not, you know, the normal ...

Debbi ([26:24](#)): It's not your normal job. It's just, it's a passion really.

Eva ([26:28](#)): Yes.

Debbi ([26:29](#)): When you come down to it. Alrighty. is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

Eva ([26:36](#)): Yeah, probably I should add something about the music of the film because it's--

Debbi ([26:41](#)): Oh, please do.

Eva ([26:42](#)): It has been done by two by a French musician, Noël Akchoté, he's a guitar player. And he invited two American guitar players who are very well known in the US, Bill Frisell and Mary Halvorson. They are two great, great jazz guitar players. There's still, we also made an album from the whole soundtrack and above that. So if somebody's interested in music, just go ahead and look at the album, which is also called *Loving Highsmith*.

Debbi ([27:15](#)): That is fantastic. <Laugh> Such, this is such a cool project. You guys, this is such a cool film. I really encourage everybody to see it. It's great. And you can count on my putting up a review somewhere online. <Laugh> Five stars.

Eva ([27:32](#)): Yeah. It's actually starting in the beginning of September, in most cities. It's now. I think it's starting the second in New York, the 2nd of September, and in other cities sometimes around the beginning of September.

Debbi ([27:51](#)): Is it gonna be mainly in theaters? Is it also available online streaming?

Eva ([27:57](#)): First it's gonna be in theaters and I think it doesn't take too much time until it's also available in streaming and there will be a DVD as well with, with a lot of bonus material.

Debbi ([28:08](#)): Cool.

Eva ([28:09](#)): Which will be nice.

Debbi ([28:10](#)): <Laugh> Excellent. Well done. Well, thank you. I wanna thank you so much for being here because this has been a great talk and I just love listening to filmmakers, too. So thanks so much. It was my pleasure.

Eva ([28:26](#)): Thank you very much for having me. Yeah, it was a great pleasure to me as well.

Debbi ([28:32](#)): Thank you. And with that, I will just say, please leave a review if you enjoyed the show and consider becoming a patron on Patreon where I provide bonus episodes, ad-free content, and early access to my new releases. I have a book coming out soon, so hopefully I'll start posting some stuff from that there, and there are also Crime Cafe ebooks which you can either buy through a retailer or get by becoming a patron. And with that, I'll just say, thank you so much for listening. Our next guest on the show will be Indy Perro. And until next time, take care, happy reading, go see this movie. And just happy reading. Till next time, be seeing you.