Film review – Carol : stunning 1950s tale of two women in love

An insistent clamour of bells and horns recurs throughout Carol, evoking the stifling, heavy atmosphere of conformity that overlay early 1950s America. An older woman, the wealthy, strikingly beautiful Carol (Cate Blanchett), starts an affair with young salesgirl and aspiring photographer, Therese (Rooney Mara). Carol is going through a divorce from her heavy-set, WASP-y husband, Harge (Kyle Chandler) – and at first it's far from clear what either woman wants from the relationship.

The two meet in the toy department of a large store, where Carol is looking for a particular doll for her daughter, Rindy's, Christmas present. In the event, the doll has sold out and Therese persuades Carol to buy her daughter a train set instead. But Carol leaves her gloves on the counter and, when Therese mails them back to her, Carol – for reasons that are delicately opaque – phones the department store to ask Therese if she can take her to lunch as a thank you. For Carol, though, the affair will turn out to be dangerous: her husband sets out to use evidence of her "moral failing" to claim sole custody of Rindy.

Carol is based on Patricia Highsmith's 1952 novel The Price of Salt, which incorporated semi-autobiographical elements. The novel was originally published under the pseudonym Claire Morgan: 1950s America was not a time for an aspiring author to publish such a novel under her own name. Though it is not explicitly mentioned in the film, the 1950s saw the frenzy of McCarthyism sweep America – and homosexuality was almost as

bad as communism in the eyes of McCarthy's witch-hunters.

This was a period when different understandings of homosexuality could come into conflict. It could be seen as a "moral" (or immoral) choice. It could also be seen as a mental deficiency or illness – and by that definition, it could perhaps be "cured". In one of the most moving scenes of the film, Carol's lawyer seeks to suggest that through psychotherapy, she has in fact been "cured", and is once more fit to have custody of Rindy. Much hinges in the emotional economy of the film on whether Carol will tell this lie about herself.


Cate Blanchett is superb.
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Lurid novels

Though Highsmith published in 1952 under a pseudonym, novels about lesbianism were not as uncommon as we might expect in 1950s America. In fact, there were many lurid "pulp" fiction examples, the (ostensible) purpose of which was to warn women that lesbianism was perverted, degenerate, or evil; that lesbians ended up lost, lonely, and suicidal; that they were wracked by self-loathing. Typical were lines such as this from Edwin West's Young and Innocent, published in 1960:

> *A sword of self-revulsion, carefully shielded, slipped its scabbard now for one second to stab deeply to the exposed core of her lesbianism.*

The idea of lesbian love as a doomed affair appears earlier, too. The Well of Loneliness, a 1928 novel by British author Radclyffe Hall, presented lesbianism (or "inversion" as Hall thought of it) as natural, and not deserving of persecution. Yet Hall seemed to call on her audience to pity the

unfortunate invert, who has only loneliness to look forward to.

The Price of Salt – and, in the same way, Carol – avoids the faded trope of doomed lesbian love. This was what made The Price of Salt different from the "pulp" lesbian fiction of the 1950s. Exquisitely paced, the film does not attempt to offer a complete resolution; we dwell with the characters as their love affair unfolds, and witness in its full horror the consequences which follow for both. And without revealing too much, we're left with a glimmer of the potential for future happiness.

Rooney Mara.
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Spurning stereotypes

But Carol isn't just a film about lesbian love in the 1950s – it powerfully evokes the restrictions placed on all women in the America of that time. Gender shapes every aspect of Carol and Therese's lives.

When the two women meet in the toy department, Carol is looking for a particular doll for Rindy, and Therese informs her of the doll's attractive features: among them, the fact that it wees itself. Thus are little girls prepared for their role in life.

Later, Therese visits Carol at her home in New Jersey. There are lingering shots of the imposing house in the snow, the elegant drawing room with its tasteful Christmas tree, Carol wrapping Rindy's train set by the fire, all serving to show us how little sense these scenes make when peopled by two women. These are the idealised images of an American family Christmas. They only work with a man in the picture, or about to arrive home, jovial and commanding, from a long day at work

in the city.

Familiar scene.
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It would have been easy to portray this missing man, Carol's husband Harge, as nothing more than the stereotypically domineering, brutish husband. But this doesn't happen. Even as he bullies and commands and demands and coerces, we get glimpses of his suffering, too. He appears to us as a man cut off from his emotions, and now suddenly, painfully deprived of one of the most important coordinates of his masculinity: his beautiful wife.

The film also does well not to present Carol and Therese as existing in a world with no lesbian subcultures. 1950s America was, despite (or perhaps because of) its frenzies of homophobia, the backdrop for the development of more clearly defined and self-conscious subcultures than had ever existed before. When Therese is checked out by two fashionably dressed young women, we get a glimpse into a hidden world where lesbians met each other relatively openly – playing on softball teams or frequenting gay bars.

In the end, though, this is really a film about Carol and Therese and the slow, cautious, confused, confusing unfolding of their love for each other. It is also about how they constitute themselves as individuals in a culture which attempts to profoundly restrict their ability as women to do that.

In not falling into any of the stereotypes or traps to be expected from it, Carol is highly, highly commended.

by Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Lecturer in History, *UCL*

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