

# Ayn Rand: A Writer's Life

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## 1. A motive to write: Hero worship

Early in Ayn Rand's last novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, there's a flashback to the youth of the novel's heroine, Dagny Taggart:

*"Dagny Taggart was nine years old when she decided that she would run the Taggart Transcontinental Railroad some day. She stated it to herself when she stood alone between the rails, looking at the two straight lines of steel that went off into the distance and met in a single point. . . . The two steel lines were brilliant in the sun, and the black ties were like the rungs of a ladder which she had to climb."*

Dagny did not view her career as a job guaranteed by family connections, or as a hassle imposed by a cruel world, but as "a ladder which she had to climb," a productive path that would require her best efforts far into the future. She embraced the prospect with solemn pleasure.

Rand doubtless drew upon her own experience when creating Dagny's character. In Rand's case, however, the career was that of a writer, not a railroad executive. *"I decided to be a writer at the age of nine,"* Rand recalled in later life, *"and everything I have done was integrated to that purpose."*

It was an immensely important choice for her—and for the world. It would lead her to flee her native Russia, to master the English language, to become a bestselling novelist with the publication of *The Fountainhead* and then *Atlas Shrugged*, to defy mainstream public opinion on the left and the right, to create a new philosophy, called Objectivism, and to forge a controversial legacy that's still hotly debated today, many years after her death.

Rand's ideas and writings are more popular than ever. Sales of *Atlas Shrugged* are at an all-time high, and her novels and books are discussed in high schools, coffee shops, university classrooms, the op-ed pages of the nation's newspapers, television news shows, academic meetings of professional philosophers, legal scholars and economists—and even the halls of Congress. In 1999, the United States Postal Service issued an Ayn Rand stamp.

How did Rand become such a famous writer? By a passionate dedication to her ideas and to her chosen career.

*"The simple truth is that I approach literature as a child does. I write—and read—for the sake of the story."*

The girl who would later assume the pen name of Ayn Rand was born in Tsarist Russia on February 2, 1905, as Alisa Rosenbaum. Her father owned a pharmacy shop, and her mother was a homemaker and socialite.

Young Alisa was an intense and bright child who taught herself to read at the age of six. Soon after, she was learning French and devouring detective stories in the children's magazines her mother bought for her. One day, in the pages of a French boy's magazine, the eight-year-old Alisa found, and fell in love with, her first hero.

*"1914 was a big turning point in my life anyway. Mother subscribed for me to a boy's magazine, because of the adventure stories. Now I remember one illustration that impressed me was the picture of that Englishman you see standing on the wall with a sword or something, waiting for someone. But this hero—"*

*and his name was Cyrus—was a perfect drawing of my present hero: tall, long-legged, with kind of, you know, trousers and leggings, the way soldiers wear, but no jacket, just an open-collared shirt torn in front kind of open very low, sleeves rolled at the elbows, and hair falling down over one eye. Elements of my—at least the appearance of what is my bromide about my type of man, were completely taken from that illustration. The first time they are presented in the story, they are all in a cage, and the cage is being wheeled through this valley to some kind of temple ceremony, and they're all scared except the hero. And I remember the image, the first illustration—he's standing, holding on to the bars of the cage, while everybody else is on the bottom, sitting down or cringing. Thereafter, up to the age of twelve—that's the next three years—that was my exclusive love. It was almost mystical in this sense: that I felt I'm totally out of the concerns or the reality of anybody. What they're interested in doesn't matter at all to me, because I know something much higher."*

During a family trip to England, walking down a London street, Alisa spied a colorful poster showing gaily dressed showgirls in a musical revue. Back in her hotel room, she made up stories about those dancers and told them to her younger sisters, who listened raptly.

Suddenly a thought struck her: this is what writers do, all the time. And she knew her course was set for life. She wanted to create stories about people and events she could admire and look up to.

*"I did not start by trying to describe the folks next door—but by inventing people who did things the folks next door would never do. I could summon no interest or enthusiasm for "people as they are"—I had in my mind a blinding picture of people as they could be."*

In later life, she wrote that the best of mankind's youth start out with this kind of attitude toward their lives, describing it as, for most, a ". . . sense of enormous expectation, the sense that one's life is important, that great achievements are within one's capacity, and that great things lie ahead."

With her choice to become a writer now made, fiction writing occupied more and more of Alisa's time and energy. At school, she wrote short novels during classes she thought boring. These early efforts lacked plot but featured interesting individuals doing unusual things; they were precursors of the fictional heroes she would create in later life.

Soon Alisa discovered the novels of Victor Hugo, and her world widened to encompass the vast dramatic tapestries he wove in such masterpieces as *Les Misérables* and *Ninety-Three*. Along with such Romantic geniuses as Edmond Rostand (author of *Cyrano de Bergerac*), Hugo extended a spiritual lifeline to the teenaged Alisa, expanding her vision of how much was possible to a novelist.

*"I discovered Victor Hugo when I was thirteen, in the stifling, sordid ugliness of Soviet Russia. One would have to have lived on some pestilent planet in order to fully understand what his novels—and his radiant universe—meant to me."*

Alisa's artistic awareness continued to expand. She was captivated by French and Viennese operettas, and she fell in love with cinema, still in its silent infancy.

All of these art forms spoke to her of the possibility that she could make a life's work out of putting down in writing her "*blinding picture of people as they could be.*"

*"I decided to become a writer—not in order to save the world, nor to serve my fellow men—but for the simple, personal, selfish, egotistical happiness of creating the kind of men and events I could like, respect and admire."*

But as she grew to adulthood, Alisa became increasingly aware that she had been born into a country whose culture and political system held in contempt the ideals of individualism she cherished.

## 2. The freedom to write: Leaving Soviet Russia

*"I am an American by choice and conviction [because America] was the country based on my moral premises and the only country where one could be fully free to write."*

When Alisa was twelve years old, she heard the opening gunshots of the Russian Revolution from her apartment window in St. Petersburg. The idea shaping this revolution was that the individual must live for others—for the state—and sacrifice personal happiness for the good of the collective. Soon, Russia descended into a communist dictatorship.

This was the beginning of twentieth century totalitarianism, which eventually killed millions and millions of people in Russia, Germany, China and elsewhere. But long before the perpetration of these atrocities, Alisa was morally outraged by the very idea of collectivism, by collectivism's denunciation of the individual. She saw its essence as an attack on the most intelligent, able, and heroic among men—and to attack the heroic was to attack Alisa personally.

*"Then the Russian Revolution was February, 1917, and the Communist revolution was the so-called October Revolution, and that was in that same year, October '17. We left in the fall of 1918. By that time, there was a civil war going on in the south, in the Ukraine, and there were so-called White Russian armies. We wanted to get out, to escape Communism simply, and how they got the permit to travel: on the grounds that my sister, who had had pneumonia twice, needed to go to the Crimea. So that's how we managed to get out of Petrograd. Now that was in the fall of 1918, and we came back in 1921. By '21 the civil war was over, and the whole Russia was Communist. I began to—suddenly found myself, in effect, asking a lot of 'why's' in an abstract manner and beginning to define the reasons for what I believed. And then I realized that what I was now doing is thinking in principle. Today I would say it was the process of integration really, but that I wouldn't have known then. I think it may not be irrelevant that that was the year of the start of the revolution. But first, the springboard for it was the fact I was very much in sympathy with the February Revolution. Because, you know, it was the bloodless revolution, where everybody was for freedom, and the whole atmosphere, though it was in a kind of sentimental Russian way, nevertheless, it was all the glorification of freedom. In my terms, it was the individual, what today I would call the rights of the individual. Why the individual's right? Why is it right for him to be free? Why is the strong, independent man important? By what right can anybody tell a man, what he should do or what he should live for? And of course then when the October Revolution happened, that's when my first conviction began of a kind which I remember specifically concluding, the one that I mentioned in the preface to *We the Living*: That nobody has the right to tell men to exist for the sake of the state. The evil which before that I would have called collectivism, although I wouldn't know the word, it would be the group, the herd—that kind of entity—now began to be 'statism,' consciously."*

In contrast to the increasingly bleak prospect of life in Russia, Alisa's high school studies included an introduction to the United States of America, the world's foremost society of individualism.

*"From the earliest age I had the impression, even before the revolution, that culture, civilization, anything which is interesting, as I would have put to me, is abroad. Now I, in a general sort of sense, thought that I would probably be a writer in Russia. Therefore, I don't think I thought of settling abroad, but what it amounted to would be that I would probably live abroad, as many Russians in those days did—that in one way or another, what I would have considered my home would have been European culture."*

*"I didn't begin to even discover America until about the last years of high school. For the first time, incidentally, it was only the last year of high school that they gave us a small course on American history. Before that, in all history courses they gave you only Europe, Russian history of course, and European. And it's in this particular high school in the south, where I graduated, they had one course on America, and to me it was most incredible. Before that, America was mentioned in geography books, but not as history. I*

*didn't really know about the Declaration of Independence or what the American system is until the last year, and I'm not sure that I even would have grasped it all correctly. I would not have had a clear idea of capitalism or collectivism. All I knew is that that's the country of individualism."*

In college, Alisa majored in history (to gain knowledge for her future writing) and philosophy (to help shape her value system). But as communists took over the University of Petrograd, her outspoken hostility to their ideas left her in fear for herself and her family.

*"The situation of We the Living is practically biographical, autobiographical in the sense of background. I was taking chronologically the exact events as they were happening at that time. In the first year when I first went to college, students were quite outspoken, and I attended my first student meeting, just as I describe in We the Living, and almost fell in love with one of the young men who was a conservative and was making violent anti-Soviet speeches. And I felt very romantically impressed with him for a single value—he was enormously arrogantly outspoken against the Communists, and the first meeting that I attended they were making the speech—he was making the speech which I quoted in We the Living, that was an authentic one, that Russian students had always been (in the vanguard of any fight against tyranny no matter what color) and statements like that—there were quite a few Communists in, among the students. There was an official Communist cell in the university and the people who belonged to it wore a certain kind of red badges. And they were very much despised by a majority of the students—they were practically ostracized in a quietly hostile way. So that the atmosphere was quite free—just that first year. And I made quite a few very daring statements at those meetings. I wouldn't be allowed to make speeches yet to the freshmen, the first year—it was not allowed, we were allowed to vote, this was elections for student council, but you weren't allowed to make speeches or do anything until the second year. By allowed I don't mean by law, but simply by student conventions. And I started arguments with Communists, and I remember one day telling one of them that they would all be hung from street lanterns someday, from lamp posts—and I went home terrified. And that night I really was afraid, because I realized that I had put my whole family in danger. By the end of that first year, there was a purge of students—they began to tighten--and that same young man plus a lot of others, and girls who had gone out with them, but who weren't political in any sense—were all sent to Siberia. By the second year there were no more political speeches."*

Meanwhile, movies provided Alisa precious glimpses of life in the West. Films by favorite directors such as Cecil B. DeMille and Fritz Lang provided her with a very specific and inspiring view of life abroad:

*"My last year in university, more theaters were opening, smaller ones, and I began to be able to go and see a few on the third- and fourth-run houses, in effect, and that fascinated me—particularly because that was a much more specific, not merely symbolic, view of life abroad. That was the reason why, for my last year in Russia and getting ready, or hoping, to come to America, I decided to go to the movie school to learn the technique of movies and production generally. And the great advantage of going to that school was that they gave you free passes to all movie theatres, since they were all state, and then I began to see movies every night practically. And that was the most wonderful period, so that those movie stars and movie magazines from abroad became, well, the world from Mars. And I remember there were some American movies where you could see New York—just shots, really long shots, and I would sit through two shows just to catch it because it would be very briefly. They never had one that showed much, but you could get that glimpse once in a while. I can't tell you how glamorous it was at that distance. Well, it still is."*

On graduation, she enrolled in film school and thought about becoming a Soviet screenwriter, incorporating her individualistic ideas into her scripts. She even went so far as to present a fellow film student—a loyal communist—with a writing sample along those lines.

But the student could tell there was something odd about the story and its theme, and Alisa soon concluded that she had no future in Soviet cinema:

*“So after I graduated from school is when I got the job as a guide through a museum and the museum was the Peter Paul Fortress in Petrograd, where I had to lecture on the history of the place for excursions, and I held that job until I left for America. At about that period, after graduation, we received letters from some relatives of Mother’s, her first cousins, who had left before the revolution, long before I was born, actually. Mother had met them as a child but I wouldn’t have known them at all and they were writing to inquire how we were and what was happening to us and Mother began a correspondence, and that is when I and Mother both had the idea that perhaps they could help me to go abroad. Because I was speaking of going abroad through one way or another. I was desperately anxious to go, so we wrote to these relatives that I would like to come as a visitor and they sent me the affidavit, the papers necessary and my main interest was getting ready for this trip and studying English, which I didn’t know at all, and I left for America then in January 1926.”*

On January 17, 1926, with the help of her family, twenty-year-old Alisa Rosenbaum embarked alone on her journey to America. She would never return to Russia. Many years later, when she became politically active and started giving speeches to American audiences, hecklers sometimes greeted her thick Russian accent with jeers, asking what right did a foreigner have to talk about America. *“I chose to be an American,”* she would respond defiantly. *“What did you do, besides having been born?”*

### **3. Early years in America**

*“Writers are made, not born.”*

Fearful that her family, still trapped in Russia, would be punished for her intransigent anti-communism, Alisa adopted the pseudonym Ayn Rand for her new, writer’s life in America. She traveled by boat to New York City, then by train to Chicago for a six-month stay with relatives, and finally by train to Hollywood, California.

At the studio of famed director Cecil B. DeMille, one of Rand’s idols, she applied for a job but was told there were no openings. Then, on her way out the front gate, it was as if she had suddenly stepped into the pages of an exciting Ayn Rand story:

*“I arrived in New York. I stayed in New York only a couple of days, with some friends of my relatives who they had asked to meet me, and then proceeded to Chicago. I stayed there for six months with my relatives and then went on to Hollywood on my own. I borrowed money from the relatives, a hundred dollars. I felt that I had to sell something or make a name for myself as fast as possible. I was here on a six months permit. Because I couldn’t yet hope to write in a literary English, I had figured out that since this was the day of the silent movies, I could write even if it’s slightly broken English, enough to write an outline, the scenario, just the original of a story and then they could, somebody else could, write the titles.*

*“And one of my relatives, one of Mother’s cousins, owned a movie theater in Chicago, a small neighborhood theatre. So she gave me, through a distributor, a letter of introduction from the distributor in Chicago to the DeMille studios. DeMille at that time had an independent studio of his own in Culver City. What he was famous for is society glamour, sex and adventure, and I liked almost all of the ones I had seen in Russia. So he was my particular idol of the American screen. When I arrived at the studio and I went to the publicity department and presented that letter and I told them what I was interested in was a junior screenwriter’s job, if it was possible. Now I walk out of that studio and, you know, it’s that colonial kind of mansion in Culver City which was Pathé later, and it has a driveway in front of the main building that goes to a gate. And as I start [to] walk down the driveway I see an open roadster parked, and a man at the wheel talking to somebody outside the car, and it was DeMille, and it wasn’t too long before he started driving. He drives up to the gate, stops, looks at me and says, and asks, ‘Why are you looking at me?’ So I told him I had just come from Russia, and I am very happy to see him. So he opens the door of the car and says, ‘Get in.’ I didn’t know where we were going—I got in, and he started driving. Now isn’t that a fantastic*



story?”

As a junior screenwriter for DeMille, Rand was able to compose scenarios for the silent screen using her limited English skills. On her own time, she wrote short stories that she knew were not publishable. “I did not attempt to write professionally,” she later recalled, “*until I knew what I was doing and felt that I was ready.*”

Her early stories told of unrequited love and desperate love, of witty crooks and perky news reporters, of famous actresses and Russian convicts. They were stories with sad endings, happy endings, and surprise endings, stories that prepared Rand for the next phase of her career as a novelist.

*“I have never studied writing nor taken any formal course in literature. I did have a college education, but whatever I learned I had to learn by myself and in my own way.”*

During these early years, Rand met and dated the man who was to become her husband. “*I knew what values of character I wanted to find in a man,*” she said later. “*I met such a man . . . His name is Frank O’Connor.*”

Their first encounter was on the set of DeMille’s movie *King of Kings*, but then they lost touch.

*“Now what was happening on my career, was that when The Kings of Kings was over, DeMille offered me the job as a junior writer. Now, he really was wonderful. The first story he gave me was a story entitled ‘My Dog,’ and then another story was called ‘The Skyscraper.’ It was an original he had bought, and it involved the rivalry of two rough and tough construction workers who were in love with the same girl. And he told me that he didn’t like the story very much but he liked the idea of a story about the construction of a skyscraper, but it’s because of that story that I found Frank again.*

*“There was a construction job going on right in Hollywood on—you know what is now the Broadway Department store there on the corner of Hollywood boulevard? And I made an appointment with the superintendent through somebody at the studio to come to interview him and watch the construction. I got there, he had left a message that he had been detained somewhere and could I please come an hour later. I didn’t want to go back home, so I decided I would wait in the public library. It was just a block from there, and I entered the public library, and the first thing I see is Frank sitting there reading.*

*“And the thrilling thing was that I stopped there and he looked up. I was some distance away, and the way he smiled I knew he recognized me immediately. And almost implicit in it, I kind of sensed he hadn’t forgotten me. So he got up, and since you couldn’t talk there he said, let’s go out. And we walked around blocks, and we talked, and this time I remember we talked about movie originals and what he wanted to do. He had some ideas for originals. They were all outrageous comedies—I mean outrageous, almost blasphemous, some on religious subjects or something like that, so right then he invited me to dinner, and from then on we were going steady.”*

Ayn Rand and Frank O’Connor married in 1929. “He is the first person to hear everything I write,” Rand once said, “and his criticism has always been correct and valuable. His viewpoint is the same as mine, but he has always been objective about my work. When I start to write a book, the characters become members of our family.”

#### **4. The struggle to write for a living**

The young couple struggled economically. In 1927, Rand left the DeMille studio and scrambled to find work:

*“Now after, I had to do something, and this was a depression approaching. So that there was very very*

*difficult to find anything, and the only things that were available were waitresses' jobs. And so I tried that, and I didn't even know the names of the foods, so the first restaurant I was fired the same day, the last one I lasted the whole week. And then I did envelope stuffing and tried to sell subscriptions to the Hollywood Citizen. I hated those jobs. I hated that whole period. I regarded it like Roark in the quarry only much worse, because Roark would at least be much more conscious of what he was doing and doing it intentionally. I felt this was despair and horror. It was that time that a friend of ours who was a Russian actor, he got me a job in the RKO wardrobe. A friend of his had just got the job of art director in charge of all of those departments, and that was the only job where they could use someone who couldn't type or take shorthand, and I got this job at \$20 a week. Within six months I got \$25—I got a raise without having asked for it, and a year later I was the head of that department. And I really did very well, loathing and hating it.”*

*“Yes, I've had a hard struggle. I had to earn my own living before I could start writing. After I started, I had to earn my living whenever the money I made by writing was exhausted. I did all sorts of odd jobs: I have been a waitress, an office clerk, a reader for film companies. I could not concentrate on a business career, but had to take such jobs as could be held temporarily and would leave me free to write in my spare time.”*

*“I also wrote two screen originals, both of them laid in Russia, and I sold one of them, which was Red Pawn, to Universal Pictures. And along with the sale went a six-weeks job to write the first adaptation of it to screen form, because the original was just an eight-page synopsis. Now on the proceeds of Red Pawn, I wrote Night of January 16th. MGM took an option on Night of January 16th—it was called Penthouse Legend. I wrote it as a stage play, and I had an agent in Hollywood who had a representative in New York. In the meantime, MGM became interested—one of the producers, and they took an option on it. And I went to MGM to write a screen adaptation, which I had a miserable time with. And I wrote the screenplay but they didn't like it, apparently, and they didn't pick up the option. But that gave us some more money. Then I finished We the Living and sent it off to New York. And I had a terrible time with that because I began waiting for letters from the agent. I had asked her to report to me what happens, and only one rejection after another. Our main income by that time was Frank's, for his work in pictures. I think by the time we landed in New York we had fifty dollars between us. Frank's brother was here, and so we had someone, at least to borrow from a little, but not much because he didn't have much himself. That's when we lived in the furnished room, and that was as near as we came to real starvation, it was much worse than Hollywood. It was already after 1929, and the depression you see. So, the only thing I got was being a reader, not for Paramount which came later, but for RKO first, and then MGM; and I was doing outside reading. We lived, I remember, our budget was approximately 11 dollars a week, which was all I could count on. My one advantage was I could read several languages: French, German, and Russian. I could read German enough to make a synopsis; and so they were giving me most of the foreign stuff, they even had some Soviet Russian plays I synopsisized for them.*

Rand's play, *Night of January 16th*, dramatized a murder trial whose jury is selected from the audience at each performance. She tried to evenly balance the evidence for guilt or innocence, so that the jury's verdict would depend on the jurors' basic attitudes: those who valued independence would be inclined to vote for acquittal, while those who valued conformity would be inclined to convict. Rand wrote a different ending for either possible verdict. The play opened in California during the spring of 1935 as *Woman on Trial*, and eventually it moved on to Broadway.

Although Rand never wrote an autobiography, her first published novel, *We the Living*, was what she termed an “intellectual autobiography,” capturing the feeling of being trapped in Soviet Russia. The novel tells the story of a young woman named Kira, who yearns to become an engineer, and her love for Leo, whose contempt for the communist state matches her own.

Of her heroine Rand said: “*The specific events of Kira's life were not mine; her ideas, her convictions, her*

values were and are.” The theme of *We the Living*, in Rand’s words, is “the supreme value of a human life and the evil of a totalitarian state that claims the right to sacrifice it.”

The intellectual climate of America in the 1930s, the so-called Red Decade, made an anti-Soviet story a tough sell. However, Macmillan and Company finally published the book in 1936. Word of mouth gradually boosted sales, but once the initial run of 3,000 copies was exhausted, Macmillan breached its contractual obligation for a second printing. Anticipating only modest sales, Macmillan had destroyed the metal type after the first run, which in that pre-digital era would require the expense of typesetting from scratch. *We the Living* remained out of print until 1959, when the success of *Atlas Shrugged* awakened publishers’ interest in her previous writing.

Although *We the Living* was not a bestseller, Rand was now a published novelist, and she used that status to make contact with individualists she admired at the time. To H.L. Mencken she wrote: “I fully realize that I am a green, very helpless beginner who has the arrogance of embarking, single-handed, against what many call the irrevocable trend of our century.”

Her repudiation of collectivism was to take a radically different form in a novelette called *Anthem*:

“In 1937, Ayn and Frank were spending a summer in Connecticut while Frank appeared in a stock version of *Night of January 16th* at the Stony Creek Theater. In an intense struggle to work on her next novel, *The Fountainhead*, Ayn used the solitude of the country to write. Literally tearing her hair out over the plot, she took a break to complete a novelette called *Anthem*. Originally a play she conceived in Russia, *Anthem* was a futuristic account of a world where individualism had been obliterated and the word ‘I’ had been replaced with the word ‘we.’ It was her hymn to man’s ego, to man’s absolute self, and an account of what she believed were the true implications of all forms of collectivism.

“Written in the form of a diary, the story culminates with the protagonist rediscovering the concept of individualism: ‘At first, man was enslaved by the gods. But he broke their chains. Then he was enslaved by the kings. But he broke their chains. He was enslaved by his birth, by his kin, by his race. But he broke their chains. He declared to all his brothers that a man has rights which neither god nor king nor other men can take away from him, no matter what their number, for his is the right of man, and there is no right on earth above this right.’”

As the 1930s came to a close, Rand had earned significant sums as a writer, but it would be several years later, when she sold the movie rights to her first bestseller, *The Fountainhead*, that she finally achieved financial independence.

## **5. *The Fountainhead***

*“The motive of my writing has always been the presentation of an ideal man.”*

From the time she fell in love with Cyrus Paltons, the dashing adventurer in *The Mysterious Valley*, Rand had been a hero worshiper. She had sought to create in her fiction a vision of the world as it could be, if people chose to live up to the best within themselves.

For many years, however, “I was not ready to attempt the portrait of an ideal man; his first appearance in my writing is Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead*.” What did she mean by an ideal man?

*“Above all else, he is a man guided exclusively by reason, a man of independence and a man of great self-esteem. These three are the distinguishing characteristics of what I regard as an ideal man.”*

At the end of 1935, Rand began working on *The Fountainhead*, originally titled “Second Hand Lives.” In her early notes on the story, she wrote: “The first purpose of the book is a defense of egoism in its real



meaning . . . .”

*“The first idea for The Fountainhead came when I was still on—I don’t remember the exact date specifically, as the birth of The Fountainhead as such, and this was the question in my mind about the difference between me and one girl I knew in Hollywood, in pictures. It was a girl whom we met, she happened to live in the same apartment building, and she worked at RKO. She seemed to be enormously ambitious; she was definitely a Hollywood climber. And the question I asked her is, Can she tell me what is her goal in life? She said, ‘If nobody had an automobile, I would not want one. If some people have two automobiles, I want two automobiles.’ It was literally like one of those light bulbs going off in my mind, like a dramatic revelation. Then I saw immediately the principle, the difference between me and this girl, and that was Roark and Keating. It was in the fall of 1935, after January 16th had opened, that I made my first notes for the novel, and I remember the date because my first notes I still have and the date is marked on them. And then of course one of the first things I did was read Frank Lloyd Wright’s biography. There were very few books except Frank Lloyd Wright’s biography on the careers of architects, practically none. Then while I was studying architecture generally, which was one line of work, the plot line consisted of now working out the theme in action, and it was really worked out theoretically. For instance, the characters of Wynand and Toohey were the next step. The procedure of my thought was that if we take the ideal man as the center—that is really the theme of the story, that is Roark—then in relation to him I shall say other types in this way. Roark is the man who could be the ideal man and was. Wynand is the man who wasn’t but could have been. Keating was the man who wasn’t and didn’t know it. Toohey is the man who was not the ideal man and knew it. That was the definition for myself as to why I take these four as the key figures.”*

She chose architecture as the backdrop for her story because *“it is a field of work that covers both art and a basic need of men’s survival. And because one cannot find a more eloquent symbol of man as creator than a man who is a builder.”*

The hero was Howard Roark, an innovative architect who defied convention to build structures whose form followed their function, and whose designs were uniquely his creation. As Rand once put it, *“The theme of The Fountainhead is: individualism and collectivism, not in politics, but in man’s soul.”*

She wrote the first third of the novel before submitting chapters to publishers. Twelve publishers turned her down before The Bobbs-Merrill Company said yes, in December 1941, on condition that she deliver the completed manuscript by December 31, 1942. It was a year of intense creative effort during which Rand once wrote longhand for thirty hours without sleep. She typed the manuscript herself, and it was ready on time.

*“. . . Howard Roark represents my conception of man as god, of the absolute human ideal.”*

The reviews were generally superficial, and so Rand was extremely grateful that the *New York Times* reviewer, Lorinne Pruette, seemed to understand the book. Pruette wrote that Rand *“has written a hymn in praise of the individual”* and *“you will not be able to read this masterful book without thinking through some of the basic concepts of our times.”* Years later, Rand said that this review *“saved”* her outlook on the world at the time.

After a slow start, the book reached the bestseller list, selling 100,000 copies in 1945. There would be no repeat of the Macmillan debacle from ten years earlier—enough books were printed to meet the demand.

*“The success of The Fountainhead has demonstrated its own thesis. It was rejected by twelve publishers who declared that it had no commercial possibilities, it would not sell, it was ‘too intellectual,’ it was ‘too unconventional,’ it went against every alleged popular trend. Yet the success of The Fountainhead was made by the public. Not by the public as an organized collective—but by single, individual readers who*

*discovered it of their own choice, who read it on their own initiative and recommended it on their own judgment. I did not know that I was predicting my own future when I described the process of Roark's success: 'It was as if an underground stream flowed through the country and broke out in sudden springs that shot to the surface at random, in unpredictable places.'*

*"It is the unity of the book—the unity of theme, style, conception and execution—the unity and the complete, ruthless consistency that made the book successful. People are starved for something strong and definite. They're so sick of half-hearted evasions, generalities, compromises, standard patterns and feeble attempts to please everybody . . ."*

With publishing success came bidding from Hollywood studios for the movie rights. Here is Rand's description of the negotiation with Warner Brothers.:

*"And so this telephone call came and said that they were interested in the movie rights to The Fountainhead, and they want to know what price we would take. I said fifty thousand, and he said, 'I would warn you that you are running the risk of losing the film,' and I said that I'll take that chance. And then there was a delay of, I think, a week or ten days. In the meantime I had an appointment with some businessman to meet him for lunch to discuss my idea of the conservative campaign for the book. I come back home, and the moment I open the door, Frank is standing somewhere in the middle of the living room. And I knew something had happened, there was an abnormal look on his face, a benevolent one. He said, 'Well darling, you've earned \$50,000 while you were out to lunch.' Meaning that Warner Brothers had accepted it, and they made only one condition: that I come to Hollywood to adapt it—they'll pay the transportation—and that I give them four weeks free included in the price. What I remember, immediately after this telephone call, Frank and I go out to dinner, and usually, you see, if I was busy in the afternoon I had no time to cook; we ate in a little cafeteria. It was pretty bad place to eat, but very convenient when we couldn't cook. So we go there to dinner, and we both had the same experience. We always, you know, selected food by the right hand side of the menu – by the price. And I think there were two types of dinner: 65 cents, and 45 cents. We always ate the 45 dinner. And when we both get there, we both start looking at the 45 cent dinner – and suddenly remember we can get the 65. This made the most, the issue of wealth, that made it realer than anything else; that fact that we suddenly could order a 65 cent dinner if we wanted to."*

Along with her new-found financial independence, Rand had attained the public prominence of a best-selling author. Among other things, this meant she received a large volume of fan mail. She especially enjoyed letters from those in the military:

*"What I liked most was that, of any predominant group of the population, the majority of the letters, and all of them good, were from men in the armed services. This was during the war, and I remember letters, from fliers for instance, saying that after every mission they would gather around a candle and read passages from The Fountainhead, and other—an awful lot from young aviators. Another letter said he would have felt much better if he thought that what this war was fought for is for the ideals of The Fountainhead. And all of that is coming from from overseas. I answered as many as I could of those—they were the best."*

Amid the post-war debate over communism's threat to American ideals, Rand made her first forays into political non-fiction writing. She became involved with the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, a conservative group formed by Louis B. Mayer and including such Hollywood heavyweights as Walt Disney, Hedda Hopper, Gary Cooper, and John Wayne.

This led to her pamphlet, "Screen Guide for Americans," which offered techniques for filmmakers to voluntarily monitor communist propaganda in their movies.

Rand also wrote "The Individualist Credo" (published in *Reader's Digest* as "The Only Path to Tomorrow")

and began making notes on a longer work, “The Moral Basis of Individualism.”

In 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee invited the “Screen Guide” author to testify on communist propaganda in the movies. She agreed on the condition that her testimony not be censored. Rand analyzed a movie called *Song of Russia*, an absurdly inaccurate glamorization of Russia which she felt did not even deserve scrutiny. However, she wanted to set the record straight about life in the Soviet Union:

“[Question to Ayn Rand:] *Don’t they do things at all like Americans? Don’t they walk across town to visit their mother-in-law or somebody?*”

“[Ayn Rand:] *Look, it’s very hard to explain. It’s almost impossible to convey to a free people what it’s like to live in a totalitarian dictatorship. I can tell you a lot of details, I can never completely convince you because you are free—and it’s, in a way, good that you don’t, can’t even conceive of what it’s like. Certainly they have friends and mothers-in-law. They try to live a human life, but you understand that it is totally inhuman. Now try to imagine what it’s like if you are in constant terror from morning to night, and at night you are waiting for a doorbell to ring. If you are afraid of everything and everybody, if you live in a country where human life is nothing, less than nothing, and you know it. You don’t know who, when, is going to do what to you, because he may have friends somewhere—where there is no law and no rights of any kind.*”

In late 1943, she and her husband had settled into a bold, modern house designed by Richard Neutra and located on thirteen acres in Chatsworth, California.

Through the end of the decade, Rand worked as a Hollywood screenwriter, not only on *The Fountainhead* but on such films as *Love Letters*, starring Jennifer Jones and Joseph Cotton, and *You Came Along*, starring Lizabeth Scott and Bob Cummings.

If she had stopped with *The Fountainhead*, Rand would have earned recognition as a major literary figure. But she was about to embark on a much more ambitious project, one that would involve broader themes than individualism versus collectivism.

This new project would lead her to develop a new philosophy that she would later call Objectivism. “. . . The Fountainhead,” she said, “*was only an overture to Atlas Shrugged.*”

## **6. *Atlas Shrugged***

“. . . *Atlas was really the climax and the completion of the goal I had set for myself from the age of seven or nine. It expressed and stated everything that I wanted of fiction writing. Above everything else, it presented my idea of the ideal man fully.*”

In *Atlas Shrugged*, the adventurous hero-worship, intellectual drive, and emotional heat that characterized Rand’s previous novels rose to new levels of intensity. It is difficult to summarize the story without giving away its plot, but the book’s original advertising copy deftly hints at what awaits the reader.

“*Who is John Galt? When he says that he will stop the motor of the world, is he a destroyer or a liberator?*”

“*Why does he have to fight his battles not against his enemies but against those who need him most?*”

“*Why does he fight his hardest battle against the woman he loves?*”

“*You will know the answer to these questions when you discover the reason behind the baffling events that play havoc with the lives of the amazing men and women in this book.*”

*“You will discover why a productive genius becomes a worthless playboy*

*“Why a great steel industrialist is working for his own destruction*

*“Why a composer gives up his career on the night of his triumph*

*“Why a beautiful woman who runs a transcontinental railroad falls in love with the man she has sworn to kill.”*

*“Atlas Shrugged is ‘a mystery story, not about the murder of a man’s body, but about the murder—and rebirth—of man’s spirit.’”*

This novel, Rand’s *magnum opus*, required thirteen years to write.

*“Atlas was the one central integrating purpose of everything I did. The first step was to project in a generalized way the philosophical progression of what would be needed, what kind of men, or characters, would be needed to carry a story of that kind. Galt and Dagny were the two set almost immediately, Dagny was always the type that I intended to present someday as my ideal woman or as the feminine Roark, in effect. To do in my metaphysics what Roark did, and for this type of story a woman engineer would be just ideal.”*

*“The hardest and most important task of a novelist,” she once wrote, “is to integrate his plot structure to the theme of his novel . . . .”*

In the case of *Atlas*, the theme was quite broad (the role of the mind in man’s existence) and the plot quite complex (involving the mysterious decline of Western civilization), and the writing took longer than Rand predicted.

In particular, she underestimated the time it would take to complete the speech in which the hero reveals what is destroying the world, and what’s needed to save it. She thought three months would be enough, but it ended up taking her two years.

During these years of hard mental labor, Rand took pleasure in the company of a small group of individuals who gathered socially to discuss current issues and read the novel in progress:

*“Well, there was a group of us, around ten or twelve, who were related—either one was a friend of another, or a relative of another—and as a joke, Ayn started to call us ‘The Collective.’ As a joke, because we were supposed to be all arch-individualists. We came to her place on a regular basis starting originally on Saturday nights to read the manuscript of *Atlas Shrugged*, and then we would read whatever was available or some given chapter, and then there would be an all-around discussion monitored by her, and then she would serve something around midnight or one in the morning. Sometimes we would stay until three or four in the morning. And at first we got to know her best through these weekly, Saturday-night sessions.”*

In order to fully define an ideal man in fiction, Rand found that she had to originate a philosophy worthy of him:

*“[Question to Ayn Rand:] Do you consider yourself primarily a novelist or primarily a philosopher?”*

*“[Ayn Rand:] I would say I am primarily both, equally, and for the same reasons. You see, my main interest and purpose, both in literature and in philosophy, is to define and present the image of an ideal man, the specific concrete image of what man can be and ought to be. And when I started writing, when I approached the task of literature and began to study philosophy, I discovered that I was in profound disagreement with all the existing philosophies, particularly their codes of morality. Therefore, I had to do my own thinking. I had to define my own full philosophical system in order to discover and present the kind*

*of ideas and premises that make an ideal man possible—in order to define what kind of convictions would result in the character of an ideal man.”*

Here, she explains the point in more detail.

*“Since my purpose is the presentation of an ideal man, I had to define and present the conditions which make him possible and which his existence requires. Since man’s character is the product of his premises, I had to define and present the kinds of premises and values that create the character of an ideal man and motivate his actions; which means that I had to define and present a rational code of ethics. Since man acts among and deals with other men, I had to present the kind of social system that makes it possible for ideal men to exist and to function—a free, productive, rational system which demands and rewards the best in every man, and which is, obviously, laissez-faire capitalism.”*

As Rand wrote the final chapters, publishers eagerly sought to bid on the first novel in more than a decade by the author of *The Fountainhead*. One publisher, Random House, won Rand’s favor with an unusual proposal:

*“And I explained to the Random House boys just what my problem was—I stated it openly. And it was then that Bennett Cerf came up with a brilliant idea: a philosophical contest. He said, why don’t we select four or five publishers whom we are most interested in and submit the book simultaneously? And it wouldn’t be an issue of bidding for conditions—I would ask the publishers to read it and to tell me what their attitude would be, philosophically and ideologically. I was very startled by Donald Klopfer’s philosophical acuteness when he asked me the following question. He said, ‘But if this is an uncompromising defense of capitalism, wouldn’t you have to clash with the Judeo-Christian tradition of ethics?’ And that was the second that just got them the book.”*

*Atlas Shrugged* was published on October 10, 1957. At first, sales were slowed by negative reviews. But word of mouth ensured that within two months, *Atlas Shrugged* would rank among the top ten on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

## **7. A public figure: Rand’s turn to nonfiction**

*“America is a country without voice or defense—a country sold out and abandoned by her intellectual bodyguards.”*

Rand was gravely disappointed in the culture’s response to *Atlas Shrugged*. She had no illusions that her radical philosophy would sweep the world in her lifetime, but she did hope to find defenders among mature, established intellectuals. Such individuals, however, did not step forward.

*“America’s intellectual leadership has collapsed,”* she wrote in 1960, decrying *“the grayness, the stale cynicism, the noncommittal cautiousness, the guilty evasiveness of our public voices.”* *Everywhere she looked, she saw a society “approaching [intellectual] bankruptcy.”*

In 1958 Rand’s student, psychologist Nathaniel Branden, began giving public lectures in New York City on her philosophy, which she now called Objectivism.

And Rand herself emerged as a public figure, speaking to college and university audiences, appearing on radio and television, and giving print interviews in *Playboy* and many other publications. She was intent upon explaining her ideas and getting *Atlas Shrugged* a wider readership.

*“She did not like public speaking. She did not regard herself as a teacher by profession or by interest. She thought her accent was wrong, as far as public speaking, and she had never been able to do much with her accent. But she would be damned if she was going to let *Atlas Shrugged* be commented on exclusively*



*by the critics who hated it. She got invitations, so she made up her mind that despite all of her reservations, she was going to speak at least enough to give it some publicity. So she went reluctantly. She faced at first very antagonistic audiences. They booed her, they tried to out-yell her, but of course she was immutable—she was herself on the lecture platform and I have seen audiences start booing and end up cheering.”*

Rand’s first major essay, “For the New Intellectual,” argued that the course of Western civilization was and is determined by its dominant philosophical ideas. Rand called for a new kind of intellectual, one who championed reason, rational self-interest, individualism and laissez-faire capitalism. Much of her subsequent writing was aimed at formulating, explaining and showcasing the philosophical principles that these new intellectuals would need to understand and advocate.

Based on the success of Branden’s initial lectures, Rand authorized the Nathaniel Branden Institute to offer a variety of courses applying her philosophy, taught by lecturers Rand approved. NBI remained in business until 1968, offering both live lectures and audio recordings that were replayed in local venues around the world.

During the years 1962 to 1976, Rand edited three successive periodicals: *The Objectivist Newsletter*, *The Objectivist*, and the *Ayn Rand Letter*. Ultimately, Rand the essayist generated dozens of original articles, enough to launch a series of books on philosophy and its major branches, plus collections of cultural commentary:

*Philosophy: Who Needs It*

*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*

*The Virtue of Selfishness*

*Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*

*The Romantic Manifesto*

*The New Left: The Anti-Industrial Revolution* (later re-titled *Return of the Primitive*)

*The Voice of Reason*

Through her non-fiction, Rand articulated and explained basic principles and applications of the philosophy she formally called Objectivism but informally called a “philosophy for living on earth.”

*“My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute.”*

The death of Frank O’Connor in November, 1979, not long after the couple celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary, was a terrible blow to Rand.

But by 1981, inspired by an actor she admired, she was writing her own teleplay for an *Atlas Shrugged* miniseries. It was her first fiction writing in more than twenty years, but she was unable to complete it.

Having written only one-third of the script, Rand became ill after a speaking engagement in New Orleans. She died of heart failure at her New York apartment on March 6, 1982, at the age of 77.

## **8. "And I mean it"**

*“My personal life is a postscript to my novels: It consists of the sentence: ‘And I mean it.’ I have always lived by the philosophy I present in my books—and it has worked for me, as it works for my characters.*

*The concretes differ, the abstractions are the same.”*

Rand utterly rejected the widespread view that philosophy is a parlor game for ivory-tower academics, and that fiction is an escape from reality. Philosophy, she held, is a practical guide to living, and fiction a way of imaginatively projecting the real possibilities life holds for every individual.

Like her fictional heroes, Rand regarded the pursuit of a central productive purpose as essential to a happy life:

*“A central purpose serves to integrate all the other concerns of a man’s life. It establishes the hierarchy, the relative importance, of his values, it saves him from pointless inner conflicts, it permits him to enjoy life on a wide scale and to carry that enjoyment into any area open to his mind . . . .”*

For Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead*, that central purpose was creating new buildings. For Dagny Taggart in *Atlas Shrugged*, it was running a transcontinental railroad. And for Ayn Rand, that central purpose was writing—about fictional heroes, about philosophical ideas, about real life and how to live it.

*“My life has been ‘single-tracked’ . . . a life consciously devoted to a conscious purpose.”*

*“Since it is the conclusion, I would say it is a very benevolent universe and I love it, and any struggle was worth it—and how. And I don’t regret it a minute of it. What I mean is that the struggle or the unhappiness is enormously unimportant. But the positive is wonderful, and if it’s the last interview on my life, I hope and know I will be saying it at 80: It’s a benevolent universe.”*

Ayn Rand was many things—philosopher, novelist, essayist, cultural commentator, public intellectual—but she was essentially one thing: a writer.

In the end, Rand died in the happy certainty that she had achieved her basic goal in life, that the fictional heroes she created—Howard Roark, Hank Rearden and the rest—fully embodied the burning passion to live that she felt as a little girl, and that she was able to paint in words her “blinding picture of people as they could be.”

*“To hold an unchanging youth is to reach, at the end, the vision with which one started.”*

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