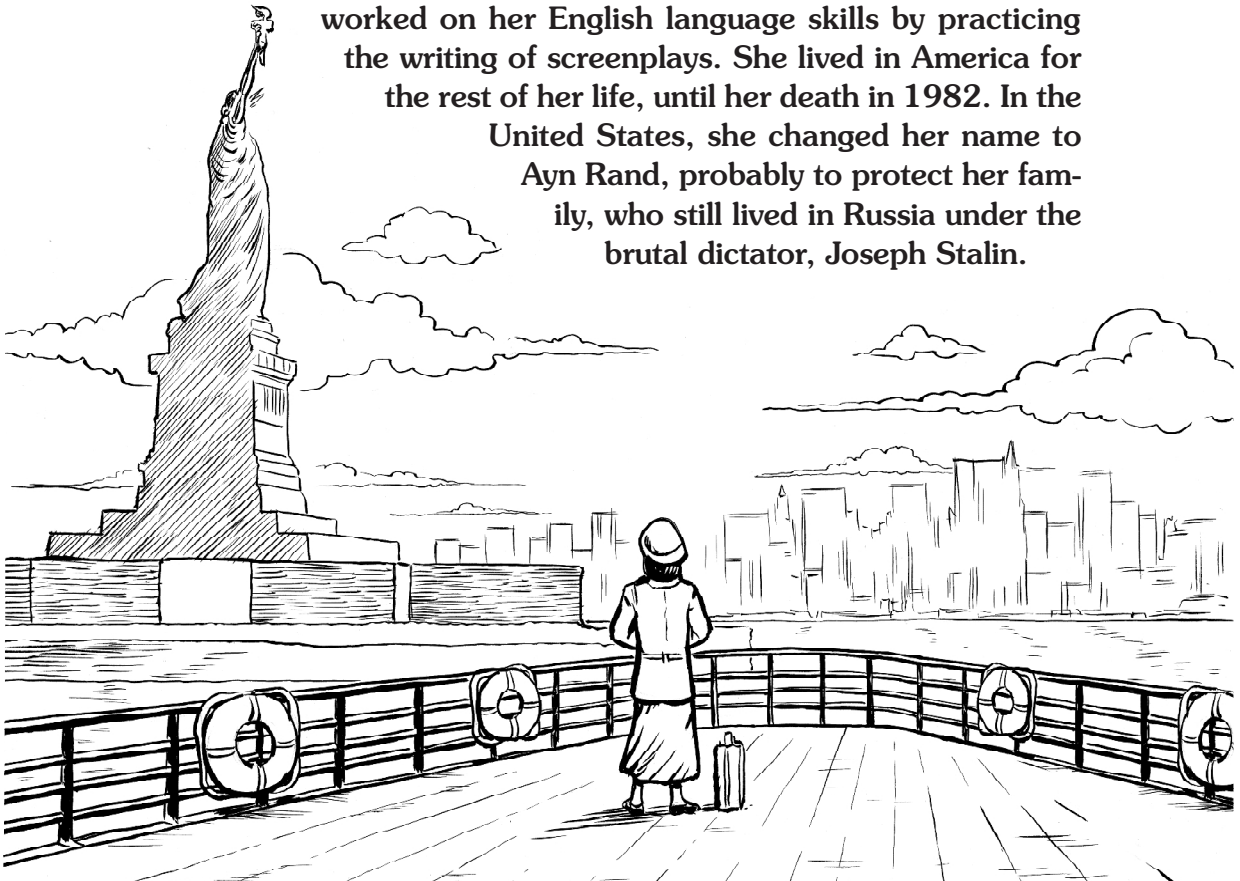


Chapter 1

Who Was Ayn Rand?

Ayn Rand was born in Russia in 1905. Her real name was Alyssa Rosenbaum. At the age of six, she taught herself to read. At age nine, she decided that fiction writing would be her career. She was twelve years old in 1917 when the Bolshevik Revolution began, which resulted in the Communists taking over Russia a few years later. The victory of the Communists led to the confiscation of her father's pharmacy and years of severe poverty for the Rosenbaum family.

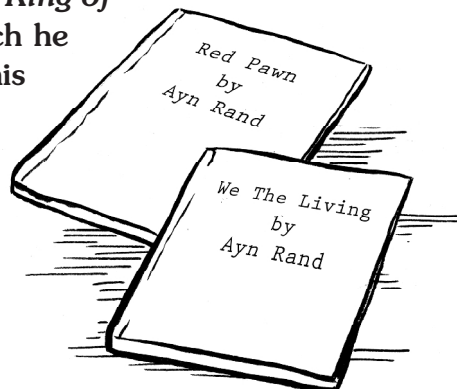
In 1926, at the age of twenty-one, Ayn Rand escaped to the United States, the country that she loved. For approximately the first six months of her stay in America, she lived with relatives in Chicago. One of her relatives owned a movie theater there, which she visited almost daily. At this time, she worked on her English language skills by practicing the writing of screenplays. She lived in America for the rest of her life, until her death in 1982. In the United States, she changed her name to Ayn Rand, probably to protect her family, who still lived in Russia under the brutal dictator, Joseph Stalin.



Ayn Rand knew from her childhood that she wanted to write fiction, because she wanted to write stories about heroes—about strong men and women who overcame any and all obstacles to accomplish difficult goals very dear to them. Such stories would echo the trajectory of her own life—in which she came alone to a foreign country, with little knowledge of English and even less money, and overcame every challenge to become one of the great novelists in the English language.



Shortly after she arrived in America, she moved to Hollywood to pursue a screenwriting career. She rented a room at the Studio Club, which provided living quarters for young women seeking careers in the film business. (Later, Marilyn Monroe, among many other future stars, lived there.) On her second day in Hollywood, Cecil B. DeMille, one of the great film directors in movie history, spotted her at the gate of his studio and offered her a ride to the set of *King of Kings*, the biblical movie on which he was then working. Struck by this young woman with the intense, dark eyes, he gave the young Ayn Rand her first jobs in America, first as an extra and later as a script reader.



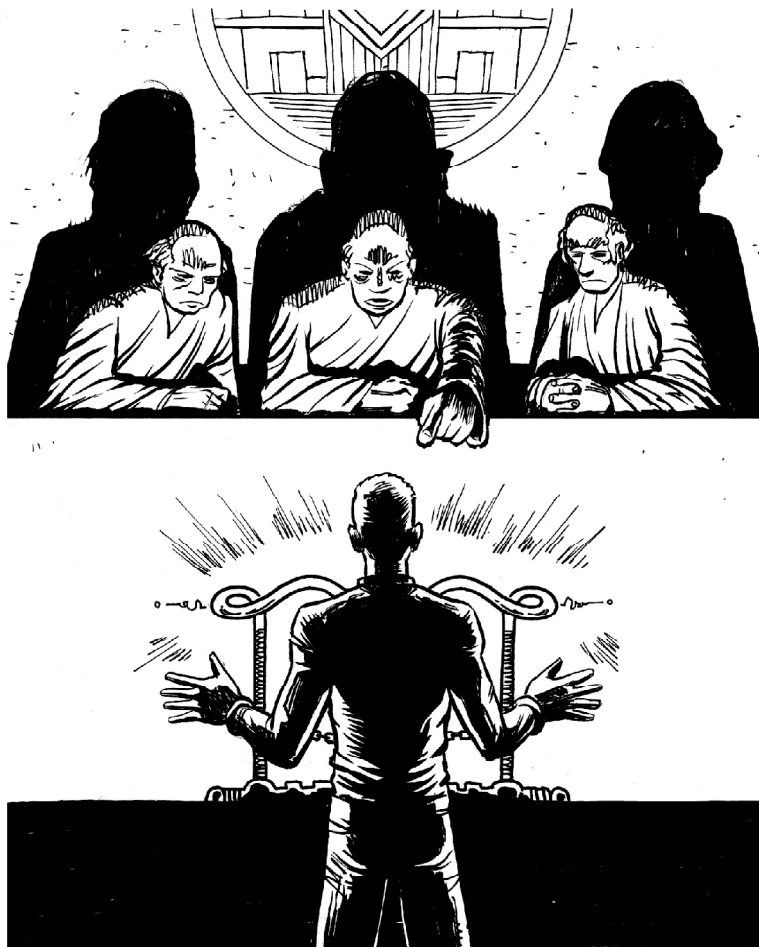
A week later, while working as an extra on the DeMille set, she met her future husband, Frank O'Connor. The shy but determined Ayn Rand felt attracted to the handsome young actor, whom she later described as having an "ideal" face. During one scene, she made sure to place herself directly in his path so that he stumbled on her foot. He apologized, the ice was broken, and, as she put it years later, "the rest is history." They were married in 1929 and remained so for fifty years, until Mr. O'Connor's death in 1979. Their marriage took place shortly before the final extension of her visa expired, and led to one of the proudest days of her life—when she became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1931.

After DeMille closed his studio, Rand worked as a filing clerk in RKO's wardrobe department, becoming the department head within a year. At about this time, she bought her first portable typewriter and began her writing career. During her free time, she wrote screenplays and short stories, and began her first novel, *We the Living*, a semi-autobiographical tale of a young woman struggling to reach her personal goals under the Communists in the Soviet Union, which was eventually published in 1936. Before the novel's publication, she sold a screenplay, *Red Pawn*, to Universal Studios for a modest sum that was sufficient for her to quit the wardrobe department and concentrate on full-time writing.

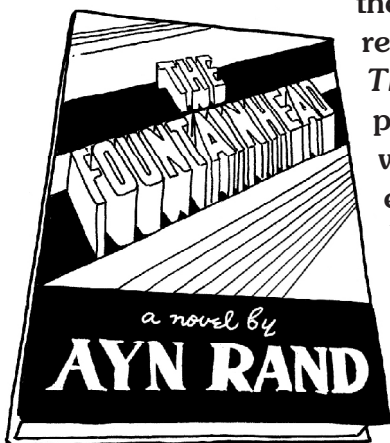
During the 1930s, she authored a courtroom drama, which ran on Broadway for more than six months, entitled *Night of January 16th*. The play's most striking feature was that the jury was composed of volunteers from the audience—so that the story had two different endings depending on the jury's verdict.

During this period, she also wrote her novella, *Anthem*, which is generally considered her first work of great fiction. It has sold several million copies, and is widely read today in American high schools. *Anthem* tells the story of an independent young mind in a Communist-style totalitarian state of the future, where all freedom of thought and expression has been abolished. Even the language has been thoroughly collectivized: all first-person singular pronouns have been expunged; men are executed for discovering and speaking the "Unmentionable Word"—"I"; and individuals think and speak of themselves exclusively as "we."

The suppression of individual thought has plunged the society into a second dark age. The story's hero, Equality 7-2521, a Thomas Edison of his generation, reinvents the electric light. His gravest sin, however, is that he dares to think, act, and stand alone against the all-powerful state—crimes for which he is condemned to death. The story presents a powerful case for the freedom and rights of the individual against the oppressive power of the totalitarian state.



Anthem was published in England in 1938, but was not published in the United States until after World War II, in 1946. Ayn Rand subsequently claimed that intellectual opposition among American publishers to its pro-individualist, anti-collectivist theme was the main reason it was not published in the United States until after World War II.



In the late 1930s, Ayn Rand began writing the book that would establish her literary reputation and bring her popular fame: *The Fountainhead*. It tells the story of a principled and brilliant young architect who struggles against virtually all of society—including the woman he loves—to build structures in accordance with his own vision and ideals. The hero, Howard Roark, who refuses to sell his soul in any form, has become an inspiration to countless readers over the nearly seven decades since its first publication.

This 700-page novel of ideas took Ayn Rand seven years to complete. But when it was done, Rand was convinced that she had a novel that was both serious and entertaining—one with both a profound theme and an exciting story. Unfortunately for her, many publishers did not agree. One leading publisher, for example, rejected the book on the ground that it was a bad novel. Another deemed it high-grade literature, but turned it down because it was too intellectual and controversial. By 1941, twelve publishers had rejected *The Fountainhead*. Finally, the editors at Bobbs-Merrill recognized what Rand had long believed about the book: it was a serious and entertaining novel that would sell. They published it in 1943.



The book that was supposedly too intellectual for commercial success has since sold, by conservative estimate, more than 6.5 million copies. Currently, *The Fountainhead* continues to sell well over 100,000 copies per year. It has achieved the status of an American classic, and is studied widely in secondary schools across the country.

Ayn Rand began full-time work on her greatest novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, in April 1946. She worked on it for many years (she stated that she wrote every page of the 1,000-page book a minimum of five times) and was finally ready to publish it in 1957. Its main idea was to raise and answer the question: *What would happen to the world if its greatest thinkers—the scientists, philosophers, writers, artists, inventors, entrepreneurs, and industrialists—went on strike?*



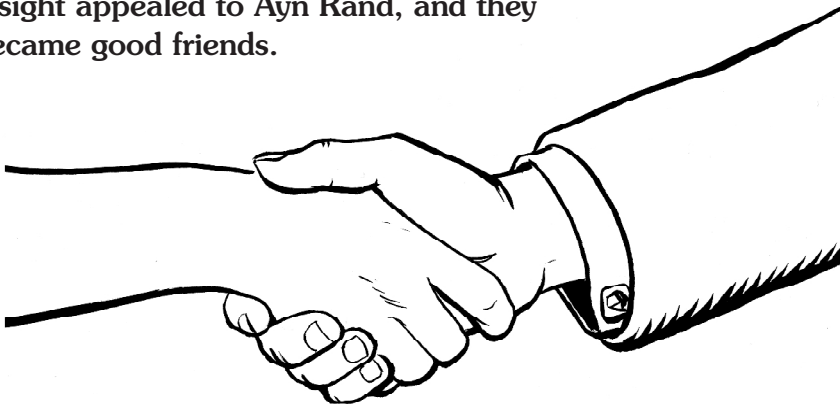
For years, her working title for the book was “The Strike.” Her answer to the question was that advanced civilization would collapse. In *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand composed a moral defense of capitalism, expressing a battery of related points: that an individual has the right to his own life; that he furthers his life by the use of his rational mind; and that a man’s right to think and live for himself requires a system of political-economic freedom, i.e., laissez-faire capitalism.



RATIONAL THOUGHT
IS MAN'S SOLE MEANS OF
GAINING KNOWLEDGE.

Rand discussed the possible publication of *Atlas Shrugged* with Bennett Cerf, one of the founders of Random House. He admired her novels but told her forthrightly that he found her political philosophy abhorrent.

He also proposed to her a kind of philosophical contest for her manuscript—that she should offer it to multiple publishers, see what their respective attitudes toward her philosophy were, as well as how those attitudes would affect their promotional efforts for the book, and then judge for herself who she considered the best publisher for it. Cerf’s blunt honesty and literary insight appealed to Ayn Rand, and they became good friends.



Additionally, one of Cerf's associates, Donald Klopfer, understood that her book's proposed moral defense of capitalism would necessarily place her in opposition to thousands of years of the Judeo-Christian tradition in ethics—and said so. She was extremely pleased by his philosophical understanding, and answered, yes, it absolutely would. This did not frighten Klopfer or Cerf, but only made them more interested in the book. To Ayn Rand, it quickly became clear that Random House was the right publisher for *Atlas Shrugged*. And so, in 1957, the publishing giant released her greatest book.

The reviews were generally scathing. One prominent critic dismissed it as “a remarkably silly book,” said it could be called a novel only by “devaluing the term,” complained that its shrillness is without reprieve, and concluded that Rand was akin to the Nazis—that every page of the book commands: “To a concentration camp go!” One religious reviewer stated it was the “most immoral and destructive book he’d ever read,” but took comfort in the belief that its 500,000 words could not long endure in print. A famous writer described its philosophy as “nearly perfect in its immorality.” *The New York Times* proclaimed that the book was “written out of hate.” *The Los Angeles Times*—not to be outdone—argued that it would be hard to find such a display of “grotesque eccentricity outside an asylum.” *The New Yorker* at least maintained a sense of humor about it: commenting on a scene in which the American economy is so depressed by socialist policies that a man is witnessed pulling a plow by hand, it stated, “Even the horse, it appears, cannot survive when liberals flourish.” Another witty reviewer called the 1,000-page book “longer than life and twice as preposterous.” Still another, not so witty, likened *Atlas Shrugged* to Adolf Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf*.

And yet, *Atlas Shrugged* founded a movement. Rand's growing number of intellectual supporters, both inside and outside the universities, fire back that *Atlas Shrugged* is the greatest novel ever written, that its brilliant plot alone ranks it as superlative literature, and that the reviews are nonobjective smears from writers who could not distinguish an extraordinary work of art from a book that espoused ideas with which they strongly disagreed.

Ayn Rand's philosophy, which she named Objectivism, is dramatized throughout the action of *Atlas Shrugged* and is presented, as well, in numerous later works of nonfiction. She argues that rational thought, not faith or feelings, is man's sole means of gaining knowledge and advancing his life on earth; that the mind is mankind's survival instrument, and that any form of abrogating reason—religious faith, for example—is harmful to human life. She claims that reality is exclusively the world of nature—that no supernatural dimension exists—and that a rational mind is capable of understanding this world, but not altering it, by a sheer process of thought. She argues that the world is lawful, and that no amount of wishing, praying, or believing can make burning bushes speak, men live inside of whales, or virgins give birth—that such miraculous claims are worse than false: they are impossible.

Further, according to Rand, human beings are not the pitiful antiheroes depicted in serious modern literature and film—helplessly buffeted by social forces, repressed psychological conflicts, or dysfunctional families. In her novels, she presents and proclaims man as the potential hero. She shows that by means of a life devoted to reason and unflagging action based on it, human beings can reach great accomplishments, and can do so, if necessary, in opposition to powerful social forces. Individuals who remain dedicated to life-promoting advances even in the teeth of powerful antagonists can reach moral greatness or heroism.

Rand argues that something is good if it factually, or objectively, promotes human life (e.g., nutritious food, an education, political-economic freedom), whereas evil is that which harms or destroys human life (e.g., poison, ignorance, political dictatorship). So the good is based on objective fact—hence the name of Objectivism for her philosophy—not on the will of God, the wishes and beliefs of society, or the whims of individuals. The only beings who are alive, who must attain the values that further their lives, and who will perish if they do not are: *individuals*. There is no collective organism, only many individuals.

Therefore, each individual must by rational thought, hard work, and honest effort seek those values which advance his own life and happiness—for example, the education, career, and personal relationships that sustain his life and fill it with meaning.

This is the moral code of *egoism*. Human beings can flourish on earth only by achieving values—not by sacrificing or surrendering them. The code of self-sacrifice, religious or secular, is immoral. Practicing goodwill and kindness toward other human beings is morally good, and rationally egoistic individuals benefit both themselves and others many times each day by helping those they care about—their children, spouses, friends, customers, clients, students, and numerous other people with whom they have relationships. It is not difficult to benefit both the self and others—but it is impossible both to fulfill and to sacrifice the self. That is a logical impossibility akin to a round square.

The only moral political-economic system is one that recognizes an individual's right to his own life, his own mind, and the pursuit of his own happiness. A proper government exists solely to protect an individual's rights, not to violate them. The proper system of government is, therefore, *laissez-faire* capitalism, which protects each man's right to achieve the values his life requires by the employment of his survival instrument—his rational mind.

This is a brief summary of Ayn Rand's philosophy. But what are its details? How does Ayn Rand support and validate her theories? What kinds of examples does she present to illustrate them? Let's go deeper into her books and ideas and explore the answers to such questions.