

Capitalism Shrugged

“Who Was Ayn Rand?” by Gene H. Bell-Villada, in *Salmagundi* (Winter–Spring 2004), Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, N.Y. 12866.

Alyssa Rosenbaum, an obscure Russian-Jewish immigrant coming of age during the early Stalinist years in Leningrad, would seem an unlikely figure to found a cult promoting unfettered capitalism in America. Yet in the period following the publication of her two massive novels, *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), the woman we know better as Ayn Rand held sway over millions of ardent followers. Next year marks the centennial of her birth.

Raised in a comfortable St. Petersburg household that was impoverished after the Russian Revolution, Rand emigrated to America in 1926 at the age of 21 to live with relatives in Chicago. She was bent on becoming a writer—taking her pen name from her treasured Remington-Rand typewriter. Aided by a chance meeting—in true Hollywood fashion—with movie director Cecil B. DeMille, Rand spent the 1930s and early '40s working in low-level studio jobs and penning obscure and mostly ignored plays, stories, and movie scripts. (A marriage to a movie extra, Frank O'Connor, resolved her uncertain immigrant status.) It was not until the publication of *The Fountainhead* that Rand's career took off, and with it her philosophy of objectivism.

As Bell-Villada, a professor of Romance languages at Williams College, explains, objectivism “is the idea that selfishness is good, greed is admirable, and altruism is evil. Unfettered capitalism is the only true moral system in history. The successful businessman is the ideal hero of our time.” Reason—really a kind of hyper-rationality—is the highest value; emotion, kindness, and compassion get nothing but scorn in the Randian scheme of things. She reviled the kind of social welfare

system embodied by the New Deal. Her protagonists—brilliant, principled Howard Roark, the unyielding architect in *The Fountainhead*, and John Galt, the *übermensch* inventor in *Atlas Shrugged*—are portrayed as godlike heroes dragged down by the unthinking masses.

The Fountainhead attracted hordes of admirers, and Rand organized the closest of these into a group she dubbed “The Collective” (which included a young Alan Greenspan). Today, her books sell in the hundreds of thousands, especially among

the young, and her ideas are influential in some conservative circles. Gore Vidal once quipped that she's the only writer everyone in Congress has actually read.

Yet the novels “failed to garner the intellectual prestige and respect Rand hungered for.” She longed to create novels of ideas in the mold of Dostoyevsky; indeed, Bell-Villada believes that *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* are essentially “Russian novels with U.S. settings.” But Rand was no Dostoyevsky. *Atlas Shrugged* in particular suffers from “relentless speechifying.” Its climax is a 70-page speech

by her hero Galt.

Rand's steely, self-reliant individualism and contempt for the “weak”—such as the “emotional parasites” who give up work for family life—seems hollow in light of her own experience. She was, after all, helped by many people, including her devoted followers, who cared for her as she was nearing her death from cancer in 1982.

Rand's books still sell strongly, but Bell-Villada doubts they will have the same kind of revolutionary appeal now that global capitalism has triumphed. Fifty years from now, he wagers, her name will have the antique resonance of Horatio Alger's.



Ayn Rand hated big government but was honored nonetheless with this commemorative stamp in 1999.