



# Book Goddess of the Market

## Ayn Rand and the American Right

Jennifer Burns  
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### Recommendation

To understand the US far right’s intellectual underpinnings and resolve, you must know Ayn Rand, the influential Russian Jewish immigrant and author. This enigmatic woman’s ideas about reason, individualism, personal freedom and the importance of a free market shaped and continue to shape modern conservatism. Rand articulated a hero-role for the individual in her two best-known novels, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. Her contempt for the altruistic and collectivist and her praise of individuality inspired business leaders. Rand – who died in 1982 – was as idiosyncratic as her novels’ protagonists and was seldom an ally to Republicans or libertarians. Author Jennifer Burns describes Rand’s bizarre private life, in which she tried to reconcile a new philosophy, an unconventional romantic vision and the emotional storms she created. *BooksInShort* recommends this compelling biography as a great story and essential reading for those seeking to understand where the far right finds its convictions. As the Republican Party seeks an identity that’s paradoxically inclusive and traditionally conservative, Rand’s life serves as liner notes.

### Take-Aways

- From early childhood, Ayn Rand held the world at a distance, imagining herself as a “child of destiny.”
- Nietzsche inspired her notion that the “egoist is a man who lives for himself.”
- Her praise of financial success provided a philosophic and economic framework for many in US business.
- Rand’s effort to build a philosophy and a movement based on reason was undermined by her inability to control her emotions and the emotions of those around her.
- Alan Greenspan was among those most influenced by Rand’s concept of Objectivism.
- Rand disliked Ronald Reagan because he mixed religion and libertarianism.
- Though deeply suspicious of government, Rand experienced transcendence watching NASA’s Apollo 11 lift off toward the moon.
- Conservatives and libertarians claim Rand’s ideas; she had little use for either group.
- Rand found refuge in her idiosyncratic, romantic vision of personal and political power.
- Rand’s beliefs manifest in pundits like Rush Limbaugh and in libertarian entrepreneurs who must reconcile the business roles of “I” and “We.”

### Summary

#### Formative Events

Alisa Rosenbaum turned 12 as the Russian Revolution unfurled in 1917. She was the daughter of a chemist and his emotionally charged wife. Alisa’s family of five lived

in St. Petersburg and had servants and a summerhouse in Crimea, until the revolution shattered their lives. Her father lost his business and in the mid-1920s, after selling their last heirlooms, the family faced starvation.

“Like a Hollywood star, she wanted a new, streamlined name that would be memorable on the marquee. The one she ultimately chose, Ayn Rand, freed her from her gender, her religion, her past. It was the perfect name for a child of destiny.”

Alisa was unusual, unforgiving, unrelenting, always uneasy with small talk and convinced she was a “child of destiny.” In high school, she found the first rudiments of a belief system: the heroic notion of the individual and the beguiling power of reason. At tuition-free Petrograd State University, she experienced diversity and Marxism. The writings of Nietzsche captured her imagination. When Russia exiled anti-Marxist students and professors, she was forced to withdraw for a time but “the policy was later reversed and she returned.”

“Atlas Shrugged... made Rand a hero to...business owners, executives and self-identified capitalists, who were overjoyed to discover a novel that acknowledged, understood and appreciated their work.”

Hollywood movies instilled in Rand an overwhelming desire to go to America. In 1926, after months of family intrigues, she left Russia. She arrived at the home of cousins in Chicago with a new name made from an abbreviation of her last name and a partly invented first name. Years later, someone described her: “There was a lot of sex in her face, beautiful eyes, black hair and very beautiful lips, very prominent lips, a lovely face, not especially big, but a beautiful smile.”

## Hollywood

Chicago was only a stepping-stone. Rand soon went to Hollywood. In a dream come true, film director Cecil B. DeMille spotted her, gave her the nickname “Caviar” and hired her as an extra. She parlayed that into script work, which led to connections that fueled her success as a writer. Her job ended in 1927, when the advent of talking pictures forced DeMille to close his studio. Rand recovered thanks to another extra, Frank O’Connor. Drawn to Rand’s strength, he was the one person who stood by Rand throughout her life. O’Connor provided the security she needed to unleash her ambition and intensity.

“Rand was a powerful polemicist because she set... arguments in terms both abstract and moral.”

Rand wrote furiously while reassessing her intellectual outlook, particularly the ideas and assumptions she’d taken from Nietzsche. Other influences included H.L. Mencken, Oswald Spengler and José Ortega y Gasset. She pursued the idea of a hero who existed beyond society, with no capacity for guilt or sentimental attachments – a hero who lived completely for himself and was justifiably selfish. The result of her new drive included “Night of January 16th” (1933), a play, and *We the Living* (1934), her first novel and the most autobiographical. She also wrote the novel *Anthem* (1938) during this time.

## The Fountainhead

In 1940, Rand’s life as a political leader and intellectual provocateur began in earnest. Her novel *The Fountainhead* was an artistic expression and a formal defense of egoism. In its climactic scene, the hero, architect Howard Roark, blows up a housing project he designed for free, after city officials exploit his genius to make money from the project. At his trial, Roark articulates Rand’s belief that civilization’s salvation lies in individuality and creativity, not in the mediocrity and corruption of collectivism and altruism. “Good” is the product of strong, uncompromising creators defined by their ability to reason and their will to accomplish.

“Under Rand’s tutelage [Alan Greenspan] began to look beyond a strictly empirical, numbers-based approach to economics, now thinking about ‘human beings, their values, how they work, what they do and why they do it, and how they think and why they think’.”

Finding a publisher for *The Fountainhead* proved difficult. Frank Lloyd Wright, the architect who was Rand’s model for Howard Roark, was unimpressed. She persevered in the spirit of her hero and the book finally came out in 1943. It became a massive bestseller and led to a film. Rand wrote the script.

## From Salon to Movement

After the film version of *The Fountainhead* came out in 1949, Rand wrote nonfiction and made contact with intellectuals of the day. She refined her philosophy and built on the idea that morality and rationality were interdependent. As she became confident of her positions, she grew scornful and mistrusting of compromise.

“Objectivism...was decidedly not...devoted to freewheeling inquiry, but rather a community in which a certain catechism had to be learned for advancement.”

She was interested in the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), a popular libertarian group, but came to doubt its philosophical consistency. This was a harbinger of disagreements to come. She felt the same about conservatives, especially contemporary, moderate Republicans. She opposed Dwight Eisenhower because he didn’t offer an uncompromising alternative to the welfare state and because she saw him as a relativist.

“The Fountainhead made a familiar argument that humanitarianism is simply a guise for those who seek power.”

In the 1940s and ’50s, Rand surrounded herself with like-minded people, including economists Ludwig Von Mises and F.A. Hayek, as well as “a collective” of students from New York University, including Alan Greenspan and Nathaniel Branden. These relationships followed a similar arc: from curiosity to affection to alliance to disagreement to dissolution. No one, save her husband Frank, could contend with Rand’s relentless demands, her mercurial nature and her need for unquestioning loyalty.

“Anyone who sought power for power’s sake was not truly selfish.”

Branden, a psychotherapist, emerged within the Collective as an eloquent, charismatic promoter of Objectivist principles, and as Rand’s personal protégé, her “intellectual heir” and her lover. Rand gathered her husband, Branden and his wife together to explain that she and Branden were about to start an affair, and that while

it was awkward, their spouses should understand and accept it as a real-life extension of their philosophy. The affair was proof that reason and transparency trump all arguments, false moral teachings and “feelings,” and that an attraction, of whatever kind, needs no justification. The spouses readily agreed.

## *Atlas Shrugged*

Rand’s three-year affair with Branden began as she wrote her novel *Atlas Shrugged* – a 1,084-page vision of America on the eve of ruin, a country run by a bloated socialist government reminiscent of Petrograd in the 1920s. Society is upside down: industries nationalized; property expropriated; wealth confiscated. All the Randian villains ascend: “second handers” (people who accept credit others deserve), takers and corrupt officials. Business leaders, inventors, freethinkers and creatives – the “strikers” – come together to rebel. One ragtag group establishes a refuge at “Galt’s Gulch,” a free-market Randian utopia.

“The American way of life... ‘has always been based on the Rights of Man, upon individual freedom and upon respect for each individual human personality’.”

Observers said either Nathan or Frank inspired the book’s hero, John Galt. The “striker’s” oath, a Randian anthem, begins, “I swear by my life and my love of it that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man for mine.” The book ends with an America so destitute that only the Galt-led strikers can save their country.

“Rand assumed...totalitarian dictatorship was only a matter of time in America, and she blamed apathetic and ignorant citizens, the so-called ‘fifth column’.”

This book also proved a tough sell to publishers. It was not received well in academic or literary circles. But CEOs, executives and the would-be Roarks and Galts found for the first time a champion who incarnated their struggles and ennobled their pursuit of wealth. The book captured the zeitgeist of American conservatism: a love of capitalism mixed with nostalgia for an America of the past more closely linked to “traditional values.”

“The most significant obstacle to Rand’s joining the ranks of the intelligentsia was her antagonistic attitude.”

Rand’s traditional values did not include religion, which she saw as a refuge for the weak and a dangerous fount of altruistic thought. One religious conservative, William F. Buckley Jr., got his mentor, Whittaker Chambers, a communist turned conservative, to review *Atlas Shrugged*. His scathing piece was entitled, “Big Sister Is Watching You.”

## Objectivism

These were difficult days for Rand, at her wits’ end after finishing *Atlas*. “She sank into a deep depression, crying nearly every day...[her] continued use of Benzedrine may have further contributed to her emotional fragility.” She was distraught that academia – repulsed by her dismissal of so-called intellectuals – rejected her. Branden suggested that she start her own university. Skeptical, Rand left the task to him. The result was the Nathaniel Branden Institute (NBI), featuring lectures about Objectivism. The business model involved sending a lecture series around the country to members who invited others to pay to hear the lectures. Its success did not assuage differences within the Collective, where a mix of politics and psychiatrics led to constant instability.

“It is technology and progress that the nature-lovers are out to destroy.” (Ayn Rand)

Members debated whether Rand should make her philosophical arguments in academic journals, to respond in her critics’ language and format, and to gain respectability. Rand was reluctant because she wanted acceptance, but would not achieve it by compromise. She was becoming increasingly inflexible. She tightened the rules of her associations: You agreed with her or not. And if not, you had little or no place in the Collective.

“In Rand, business...found...a voice that could articulate its claim to prominence in American life.”

In 1962, she broke through her stagnation and began writing a column for the *Los Angeles Times*. It lasted a year before sputtering in the face of deadline pressure. She also published *The Objectivist Newsletter*, which drew a relatively large, influential audience. Over the next few years, she found her place as a political philosopher and, for many thoughtful conservatives, a compelling alternative to the likes of Buckley.

## A Woman Scorned

Rand drew emotional strength from Branden. But, unbeknownst to her, he had become infatuated with another woman. He pulled away from Rand, promising her that his distance was temporary and that they could renew their affair. In 1968 he tried to break off for good, and the truth came out. Rand was devastated. She renounced him and cut all ties, business and otherwise. She never saw him again. She went into retreat and found solace once more with Frank, who for years had lived on the outskirts of her ambitions.

“Rand was sanguine about the prospect of her own end. She did not believe in life after death, she told [TV host Phil] Donahue, otherwise she would have committed suicide by now...to join Frank.”

Rand’s personal turmoil reflected the times. Both left and right were in an identity crisis. Conservatives were divided between freewheeling libertarians and traditionalists. Rand had no affinity for either. She was in the odd position of trying to reclaim her conservative intellectual property from those who would cherry-pick it for gems they believed and then reconcile it with a new philosophy. Critics accused her of being inconsistent or muddled. Libertarians were not constitutionalists and had only contempt for government. Rand, a patriot, felt inspired by Apollo 11 lifting off to the moon. For her, NASA’s success had little to do with government and everything to do with man’s hero-instinct to accomplish great things. Libertarians were not fellow travelers and neither was Ronald Reagan, whom she described as conservative in “the worst sense of the word” because he did not separate government and religion.

## A Solitary Death

In 1979, Frank died, after 50 years of marriage. Rand withdrew, facing death with no expectation of an afterlife. She attempted to reconcile with Branden, but still distrusted him. In March 1982, she died after a bout of pneumonia.

The Objectivist movement split in two, each with its own think tank: the Irvine, California, nonprofit Ayn Rand Institute – the orthodox repository of her life and works – and the Atlas Society, in Washington, DC. *Atlas Shrugged* still sells tens of thousands of copies a year. The economic crisis of 2008 proved to be a fulcrum of Randian ideas: the Left arguing that the free market had been too free – pointing to Greenspan’s admission of a possible “flaw” in his approach to deregulation – and the right claiming that a free-market economy never existed, just a mangled interpretation, a forerunner of the socialist nightmare in *Atlas Shrugged*.

Rand influenced Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales and, to a lesser degree, Craigslist founder Craig Newmark. Both tried to balance libertarian concepts of the individual and the need to build new communities. Though an atheist, Rand thought her books conveyed a sense of the sacred by encouraging a morality based not on religion, but on the free, exalted spirit of the individual.

## About the Author

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