

ATLAS SHRUGGED AT FIFTY

BARBARA BRANDEN

I FIND IT HARD to grasp that it's been fifty years since the publication of *Atlas Shrugged*. I remember that period so vividly, as if it had been filmed and I were watching the scenes unroll on a screen before me. They are in black and white, with one exception: in the window of the Random House offices, facing Madison Avenue, I see the bright paint-box colors of the jacket of *Atlas*, designed by Ayn Rand's husband, Frank O'Connor. And I see the broad, excited smile on Ayn's face as she looked at it, with the look of youth and expectation that so rarely transformed the tense gravity of her expression.

It was October 1957, several days before the official publication date. That evening, I went with Ayn, Frank, and my husband, Nathaniel, to see if the book was displayed in the Random House window. It was the first time we had seen the book outside of our own small, private world of Ayn's apartment, the first time it had been out in the wider world where it belonged. I grinned from ear to ear, and quite involuntarily pointed at the book and blurted excitedly, "That's us!"

I realized later that my remark could have been interpreted as presumption, but Ayn understood my meaning. She laughed delightedly, and said, "Yes, it is us!" I—and in the years that followed—she often referred to that remark with pleasure.

It was a memorable evening that, and had been preceded by an even more memorable evening: the time a few months earlier that Ayn had emerged from her study carrying an enormous manuscript, beaming happily, and showed us the words on the final page: The End.

"One word leads to another," she said.

We could not have known then that those two evenings were among the last cloudlessly happy evenings we ever would spend

BARBARA BRANDEN is a writer and lecturer and is the author of *The Passion of Ayn Rand*.

with Ayn, although we remained with her for more than eleven years longer. We could not have known that the too-brief period from the completion of the manuscript to the book's publication was the last sunlit, untroubled period of Ayn's life.

Nathaniel and I felt that we had been a part of Ayn's struggle to complete the novel. Soon after we met her in Los Angeles in 1950, we had begun reading it in manuscript form as she wrote it—sometimes reading the latest pages in her angular, severe handwriting when the handwritten pages had not yet been typed by her secretary—and had continued when we all moved to New York. We had discussed its ideas with her night after night, month after month, year after year. We had been with Ayn during the miserable times of what she called “the squirms”—those periods of excruciatingly painful mental paralysis well known to every writer, when one stares at a blank sheet of paper with a mind as blank as the page. We had been emotionally supportive during the interruptions that plagued the writing, interruptions due to business matters, to necessary traveling, to personal issues. We had endured her extreme irritability during the two years of writing Galt's speech, which had been unrelieved agony for her—the agony arising from her effort to present abstract philosophical issues not in technical terms but in a manner suitable to a novel. We had worried about her as she grew increasingly tired and harassed, working often through the night, her shoulders and back aching from tension. We had happily witnessed the change in her mood when the speech was at last finished, and she was writing the final scenes of the novel, the predominantly action sequences that gave her so much pleasure.

Now they were over, the years of watching the growth of the work that had changed our lives—and was to change them still more—the years of feeling that we, along with Ayn, were living in the universe of *Atlas*, were over.

As the publication date drew near, Nathaniel and I and the “Collective”—the small group of friends who had gathered around Ayn during the past few years and had also read the book in manuscript—felt that this miracle of a novel would surely hit the public like a thunderclap. As Ayn had said, the wildly successful *The Fountainhead* had been only a prelude to *Atlas Shrugged*. And Ayn seemed to blossom during these last few months of waiting. Once more, she was the person Nathaniel and I had met as college students; benevolent, helpful, kind, no longer the tense and angry moralist of the past few years. (Much later, I was to say to friends, “No one really understands Ayn Rand who did not know her in the early 50s. No one understands how much was lost after that, and

how little gained.”) For the first time in many years—perhaps for the first time in her life—she dared to live in the present, to embrace and enjoy the shining moment. Always, it had been the future that beckoned her, the completion of the book she was writing, the books she would write. While she was working on *Atlas*, that was reality to her, that was the shining moment, that was where she lived, and the world of movies and parties and concerts and pleasant conversations and travel held not the least attraction for her. John Galt was reality, and Dagny Taggart, and Francisco d’Anconia, and Hank Rearden.

In *The Writing of One Novel*, Irving Wallace wrote,

At the start I had pushed my people, my story, but at some cross-road they suddenly started pulling me with them, and it would surprise and confound me when I went to dinner after my day’s work, that only my son David, my daughter, Amy, my wife, Sylvia were seated there, and that Andrew Craig and Denise Marceau and Max Stratman and John Garrett were not also at the table.

And so it had been with Ayn. But now, the major work of her life was done, and she could relax, enjoy her accomplishment, and wait eagerly for its reception. She spent happy hours at her desk, reading sections of her manuscript—not to edit them, but simply to enjoy them. “Just gloating,” she explained. As we, too, waited eagerly for the effect *Atlas* would have on the world, we said to each other, very solemnly and very wisely, that it takes many years for new ideas to penetrate a culture, and therefore we could not expect immediate consequences in the form of cultural and political change. But I suspect a part of each one of us—I know it was true of me—secretly thought that it might change the world much faster than we dared predict. And to this day, that part of me—although over the years I have come to disagree with some of the ideas that then had seemed luminous in their clarity and persuasiveness—that still young part of me has never understood how one can read *Atlas* and deny the sanctity of individualism, of political freedom, of the exalted view of the human potential that the book embodies.

Atlas Shrugged was published on October 10, 1957. I wrote in *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, “And then it was over—over forever in Ayn’s life—that happy period of excitement, and hope, and expectation. And with it seemed to go almost the last of her fragile capacity to live in reality.”

The world did not rush to embrace the novel. Reviews in most of the major newspapers and magazines were savage. “Not in any literary sense a serious novel . . . the book is written out of hate,” (Hicks 1957) opined the *New York Times*, and Buckley’s *National Review* declared, “From almost any page of *Atlas Shrugged* a voice

can be heard, from painful necessity, commanding, "To a gas chamber—go!" (Chambers 1957). Sales were so painfully slow that no one could be certain the book would be commercially successful. And Bennett Cerf tried to conceal from Ayn his belief that it would certainly fail.

It was a soul-shriveling reward for the writing of *Atlas Shrugged*. It was a disaster from which Ayn never recovered. When word of mouth finally caused sales to pick up, then to soar, then to skyrocket—as her fame spread to all corners of the world and—as the admiration she had longed for came to her abundantly—it was too late for her. She had pronounced her final verdict upon the culture. "I feel paralyzed by disgust and contempt," she said. "And if I feel contempt for the whole culture, then what sense does it make to continue writing?"

She often said that her despair was not the result of the reviews of *Atlas* and not the result of the slowness of the sales. It was because there was not a single voice among her peers, among men or women of like achievement and fame, to speak up for her and publicly defend her. I believed at the time that this was so—and I have no doubt that she believed it—but, looking back, I realize that her disgust with the world had long preceded the publication of *Atlas*. It had been accelerating over the years I had known her, despite the success she had had, despite the fame and financial comfort she had achieved with *The Fountainhead*. The reception of *Atlas* had been only the final straw.

Although ultimately, with much prodding from her friends, she turned to the writing of nonfiction, she never wrote another novel. "I'm not happy enough," she explained. For Ayn, to write a novel required that she have a conviction of the intelligence and integrity of her audience that she was never able to regain. At the age of 52, the career she had ferociously pursued since her childhood in Russia, was at an end. And when the door closed on fiction writing, that rapt, ecstatic vision that had been the motor of her life was gone forever.

In the years that followed, I saw her sink deeper and deeper into depression and rage, striking out vainly at a world that had betrayed her, turning even on the people who loved her most. I saw only rare glimpses of the woman I once had known. Her words had been "twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools," and she could not bear it.

She would find moments of contentment, even moments of a short-lived happiness. There were events—such as the launch to the moon of Apollo 11, which she attended at the invitation of NASA

and about which she wrote one of her most beautiful and moving articles for *The Objectivist*, and a state dinner at Gerald Ford's White House in honor of Malcolm Fraser, Prime Minister of Australia, who admired her work and had asked that she be invited—that gave her great satisfaction. But the passionate aspiration that had moved her through all her days, that had hurled all the threads and events of her life into a single blazing purpose and had driven her to greatness, was gone, never to return. Life became predominantly a succession of gray duties, of dead ends, of joyless days. She was living in the present at last, but it was not a present she ever had wanted. She was living in the present because there was no future to strive for.

It seems there is a terrible price to be paid for genius. Perhaps if one searches history, one will find geniuses whose lives are not blighted by suffering. But I do not know of any. The great innovator in any field, in the words of Nietzsche, "knows not how to live today." Such men and women are pulled forward by a consuming vision that is always just out of reach—and when it's reached, they believe, *then* they will live in the present today—but not yet, not quite yet, now they must look neither to the left nor to the right, but only at that beckoning vision.

In *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, I wrote,

One must wonder if Ayn's suffering was not in part the price she paid, granted other elements in her psyche, for her astonishing intellectual powers. Historically, it is a price that men and women of vast intelligence have often paid. Such men and women stand alone, cut off from the world by a sense of distance from other people that is not an illness and cannot be cured. With the firsthand, blinding vision of the creator, they endure the loneliness of seeing farther and more clearly than others see, of understanding what others do not understand, of achieving what others cannot achieve, of moving forward with a dedication and certainty that others cannot grasp. They feel invisible to the world—and in many respects they are invisible, as is every creative genius. For Ayn, the use of her mind, the solving of the most complex of problems, was an effortless, joyous activity; it was the sole unchanging and permanent source of happiness in her life. To think, to see, to understand, to know, seemed to her as simple and uncomplicated as drawing breath, and the conclusions she reached seemed as clear and evident as the need to draw those breaths. Why, then, did others not grasp what was so easy to grasp? Why did they not perceive what was so patently apparent? Why did they not understand what was so simple to understand? Why did they not know what she knew with such blazing clarity?

Over the years of my friendship with Ayn Rand and over the years since, I have felt so many emotions about her. I have felt intense love, and an unforgiving anger; I have felt indignation, and a melting tenderness; I have felt fear of her rages and delight in her presence and the greatest admiration of my life. And now, on the 50th anniversary of her *magnum opus*, I think of those days between the completion of *Atlas Shrugged* and its publication, I think of Ayn's happiness and expectation, I think of the pain and bitter disillusion that scarred the rest of her life—and something inside me twists in pain for her, and tears stand in my eyes. It was not the way the story should have ended. It was not the way it *would* have ended in an Ayn Rand novel.

REFERENCES

- Branden, Barbara. 1986. *The Passion of Ayn Rand*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.
- Chambers, Whittaker. 1957. "Big Sister is Watching You." Review of *Atlas Shrugged*, by Ayn Rand. *National Review* (December 28). Online at www.nationalreview.com/flashback/flashback200501050715.asp.
- Hicks, Granville. 1957. *Atlas Shrugged* Book Review: "A Parable of Buried Talents." *New York Times* (October 13).
- Wallace, Irving. 1971. *The Writing of One Novel*. Richmond Hill, Ontario: Simon & Schuster.