

*Popoff, Alexandra. Ayn Rand: Writing a Gospel of Success. Jewish Lives. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT and London, 2024. xii + 239 pp. Illustration. Notes. Index. £18.99.*

The subject of Alexandra Popoff's latest biography is Ayn Rand, a divisive American writer and publicist whose inflexible ideas could perhaps be traced to her early experiences in Stalinist Russia. Born in a Jewish family in St Petersburg, Alisa Zinovievna Rozenbaum (1905–82), witnessed the 1917 Bolshevik revolution and the ensuing Civil War. She was twelve when her father's pharmacy was expropriated, an experience that made her strongly anti-Communist. In 1926, determined to make a career as a scriptwriter in Hollywood, she left for the United States, never to return. Rand's life was far from typically Jewish, as she professed herself an atheist and would only occasionally reveal her own ethnicity when faced with antisemitism. Unlike the majority of Jewish immigrants in America who supported social causes, her views were hawkishly right-wing. Her first novel, *We the Living* (1936), set in Soviet Russia, was swiftly recognized for its defence of the individual. The theme of individualism versus collectivism became central in her dystopian novel, *Anthem* (1938). Her mature novels, *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) became bestsellers and her forceful dramatic style as a lecturer brought invitations to speak at universities and public venues. Rand's first ambition in America was to conquer Hollywood (starting at the top with Cecil De Mille and Walt Disney), but her insistence on keeping her ideas intact became an obstacle to succeeding as a scriptwriter. In her fiction and non-fiction alike, Rand defended laissez-faire capitalism, individual achievements, profit and wealth, and attacked all sorts of collectivism, including social projects, such as Medicare (although she would have to rely on it in her old age). Her early experience of Soviet collectivization may explain her extreme drive to the opposite. Popoff, well-known as a talented biographer of Vasilii Grossman and Sofiia Tolstoi, rises to the challenge of portraying a figure like Rand, and gives a fair picture of this celebrity, only rarely offering her own opinions about Rand's frequent acts of cruelty and ruthlessness towards her family, friends and followers. Rand, who advocated the 'virtue of selfishness' (p. 11) was, Popoff observes, 'perfectly selfish' in her private life (p. 166). This account of a writer who was both revered and reviled in her lifetime is absorbing. It reveals a person with a strong fixation on the importance of individualism and great scorn for those who held other views. In politics, Rand inevitably supported the most conservative presidential candidates, one egregious example being her endorsement of Barry Goldwater, the Republican candidate from Arizona, against John F. Kennedy. Rand's social views are evident from the books she admired and was influenced by, including Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil* and Herbert Spencer's *The Man versus the State*. The nineteenth-century polymath, best remembered for his doctrine of social Darwinism, rejected government interference with the natural processes of society, thus justifying laissez-faire

economics. Rand rarely acknowledged the influence of other writers on her work and also failed to admit her indebtedness to Evgenii Zamiatin, whose dystopian novel, *We*, became a blueprint for *Anthem*. (Unlike Rand, George Orwell stated that Zamiatin's novel served as an inspiration for his *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.) Rand aspired to revamp conventional beliefs and values, arguing that religion has turned 'morality against man'. In *Anthem*, in answer to the book of Genesis, she stated that 'man is not his brother's keeper', whilst establishing her individualist credo: 'I ask none to live for me, nor do I live for any others.' In *Atlas Shrugged* she presented her strongest defence of capitalism, slamming its socialist opponents as 'moochers and looters'. When her publisher Bennet Cerf asked her to abridge the sixty-page track summarizing her philosophy at the end of this colossal novel, she riposted, 'Would you cut the Bible?' (p. 153). This well-researched biography will be of great interest to those studying, or who would like to familiarize themselves with, the distorted notion of collectivism in the Soviet Union, and also to those who are exploring or believe the opposite — the omnipotence of the individual, as advocated by Ayn Rand. Popoff's book may be firmly recommended to libraries and readers.

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