

Objectively Speaking: Ayn Rand Interviewed

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More than sixty years after she first came to prominence, the philosopher and writer Ayn Rand continues to provoke controversy. Her ideas, posited on ruthless self-interest, have many admirers, among them such figures as Alan Greenspan, Rush Limbaugh, and Ronald Reagan.

Her philosophy, Objectivism, has been largely ignored by the academic community, but her work, especially her fiction, remains remarkably popular. In 2007, her novel *Atlas Shrugged*, generally considered her magnum opus, sold 185,000 copies fifty years after it was first published, and four of her novels and one nonfiction title appeared in a Modern Library 100 Best list; another poll by the Library of Congress and the Book-of-the-Month Club rated *Atlas Shrugged* second in influence only to the Bible.

Objectively Speaking is copyrighted by the Ayn Rand Institute and edited by Marlene Podritske and Peter Schwartz. It collects half a century's worth of print and broadcast interviews with Rand, among them a number by leading media figures like Mike Wallace, Edwin Newman, Louis Rukeyser, and even Johnny Carson. In addition, there are print interviews from as early as 1932, and a four-year series of radio interviews produced by Columbia University's radio station in the early 1960s, along with other occasional pieces. Finally, the book presents a transcript of a radio program in which Rand's literary executor Leonard Peikoff discusses her work.

Rand was famously opinionated, high-handedly dismissive of those who disagreed with her, and, according to her critics, frequently self-contradictory and not always well informed. For example, she took violent exception to Kant's thought, but more than one observer suspected that she had never actually read Kant. Russian by birth, she was violently anti-communist, and was an enthusiastic witness during the McCarthy-era HUAC hearings.

Given her reputation as an obdurate, sometimes contemptuous character, it is interesting to see that in sympathetic company she comes across as rather endearing, albeit literal-minded and not possessed of much sense of humor. She can be inadvertently humorous, though, as when she brushes aside the mystery novels of Agatha Christie and others as worthless but praises the Objectivist virtues of Mike Hammer and Matt Helm as models of action-oriented, self-actuating heroes.

On the whole, *Objectively Speaking* is a friendly forum, edited by a pair of Rand partisans. As presented, her interviewers are respectful and unchallenging, serving up softball questions rather than provocations; Rand's responses essentially amount to generalized restatements, annotations, and clarifications of her thinking. This tendency makes the book more a resource for Rand completists than a place for newcomers to start, although a careful reader could glean the essence of Objectivism from what appears here.

PEYTON MOSS (April 13, 2009)

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