

# Life Is Not a Novel

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Almost 21 years ago, Ayn Rand, author of "Atlas Shrugged" and "The Fountainhead" and high priestess of the objectivist movement, excommunicated Nathaniel Branden, her principal disciple and heir apparent. Rand's announcement sent a thunderbolt through the ranks of her followers, many of whom had come to see Mr. Branden as the embodiment of a Randian hero, proof in the flesh that such men as Howard Roark, Hank Rearden and John Galt really did walk the earth.

"Judgment Day: My Years With Ayn Rand" (Houghton Mifflin, 436 pages, \$21.95) is Mr. Branden's stirring account of the events leading up to this explosion. Fascinated with "The Fountainhead," young Nathan Blumenthal wrote Rand a fan letter. She summoned him and a spark was struck between them. He was then 20, she was 45. For the next 18 years their relationship blossomed to a complexity and intensity worthy of a Rand novel. Along the way, Nathan became Nathaniel Branden, found his name on the dedication page of "Atlas Shrugged," got married to and divorced from Barbara, his first wife, fell in love and had an affair with Rand, and established an impressive organization that disseminated objectivism—which teaches reason, logic and laissez-faire capitalism—to thousands here and abroad. Then he lost it all (including the "Atlas" dedication!) when his relationship with Rand turned sour.

Powerfully written, ruthless in its appraisal of Rand and those around her, Mr. Branden's book gives us many significant insights into this remarkable woman and her followers. Rand is portrayed as a woman whose great and obvious talents were marred by great and perhaps less obvious flaws: a powerful mind, dedicated to reason and logic, but demanding blind obedience from her disciples; a supremely secure ego, persevering in her work despite seemingly insuperable obstacles yet racked by doubts about her appearance and femininity; a loving wife, showering her husband, Frank O'Connor, with devotion, while coolly asking him to leave their flat twice a week so she could pursue her tryst with Nathaniel.

Men and women of unusual talent and intelligence, among them Alan Greenspan, now chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, were drawn like moths to Rand's ideas and luminous intellect, were held captive and occasionally singed by her dominating personality. Failure to agree with her on any subject—be it politics or art—precipitated an accusation that this revealed a deep-seated character flaw. The entire group—tongue-in-cheek calling itself "the collective"—would then sit in judgment of the apostate, with Nathaniel as prosecutor and Rand as accusing witness and executioner.

Mr. Branden does not spare himself from criticism. He recognizes that, with encouragement from Rand, he came to relish the role of Randian hero. As such, it was natural for him to seek a heroine

worthy of his mind, body and passion—no one less than Rand herself.

As a far wiser and more perceptive Mr. Branden now recognizes, life is not a Rand novel. Like many of her other disciples, young Nathaniel—and probably Ayn herself—mistook her fiction for reality, Randian heroes for ideals one should try to emulate. They are, of course, not. Rand's heroes display a number of admirable qualities: intelligence, individualism, perseverance, industry. But they are nevertheless abstractions, lacking in essential human qualities. Thus, Howard Roark's steely indifference toward almost everyone around him makes for great drama and provides a potent vehicle for elaborating Rand's philosophy, but it is not a trait we look for in the people we admire. While Randian heroes may happily mate on the basis of intellectual compatibility alone, human relationships also turn on such intangibles as similar tastes, physical attraction and a shared sense of humor.

Curiously oblivious to these realities, Ayn and Nathaniel forged a relationship that was inevitably headed for disaster. Rand's advancing age, her psychological letdown after the publication of "Atlas Shrugged," and Nathaniel's growing inter-

## Bookshelf

*"Judgment Day: My Years  
With Ayn Rand"*

By Nathaniel Branden

est in another woman eroded the romantic aspect of their relationship. Unable, or unwilling, to accept the rejection, Rand banished Nathaniel. Her logic was simple and, on its own terms, irrefutable: A Randian hero does not abandon a Randian heroine because of such trivialities as advancing age or the affections of a younger, prettier woman. Nathaniel must therefore be suffering from a serious character flaw, making him unworthy to carry on her legacy. The romance that started out as a Rand novel ended as a Greek tragedy.

The depth of the tragedy and Nathaniel's own suffering can still be felt in an undercurrent of bitterness that the passage of two decades has not eliminated. He is particularly hard on Barbara, who seems to have dealt well enough with a difficult situation, and upbraids other members of the collective for toadying to Rand. Given Nathaniel's own timidity in cutting the cord, one would expect more empathy for those who chose to stand by Rand in what was essentially a personal quarrel.

At the same time, the book provides valuable insights into the life of a great thinker and her followers, warns of the dangers of cultism, points out the positive aspects and hazards of Rand's philosophy and provides an introduction to Mr. Branden's own significant work on the psychology of self-esteem. Not bad for a story that is often as gripping as, well, an Ayn Rand novel.

Mr. Kozinski is a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.