



NATHANIEL
BRANDEN

MY
YEARS
WITH
AYN
RAND

The shocking story of the intimate relationship between a literary genius and a young man twenty-five years her junior—a relationship that over eighteen years went from student and teacher, to friends, to colleagues and partners, to lovers and ultimately to adversaries. A memoir that reveals the truth behind the myths. The story only one man can tell.

MY YEARS WITH AYN RAND

Nathaniel Branden

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

A MEMOIR IS THE RE-CREATION of certain events in one's life as seen through the lens of memory. In re-creating the events described here, I have had the help not only of a keenly vivid memory—made stronger by my having recounted the incidents many times—but also by a variety of materials, such as letters, diaries (Patrecia Branden's), tape recordings of Ayn Rand as she talked about her life, such publications as *The Objectivist Newsletter* and *The Objectivist* (which reported many of Ms. Rand's and my public activities), and Barbara Branden's biography, *The Passion of Ayn Rand*.

When I reproduce conversations that took place many years ago, I am not suggesting that all the words have been reported verbatim, but I am confident they are faithful to the essence of what was said and to the spirit and mood of the occasion. This conviction has been reinforced by those, acknowledged below, who knew one or more of the people about whom I write and who affirm that my characterizations match their own memories of the individual's attitudes, beliefs, behavior, and spoken style. I am especially gratified by the response of people who knew her and who praised the accuracy with which I captured Ayn Rand's "voice."

Prior to our break, Ms. Rand said publicly and on more than one occasion that I knew her thoughts more profoundly and specifically than any other human being and that I was qualified to speak for her on virtually any aspect of her ideas or convictions. Only the internal logic of my narrative can assure the reader that I am reliable in reporting on the more intimate aspects of our story.

Certain individuals read all or portions of this manuscript prior to its original publication, shared recollections with me, checked my memory, or offered editorial or other suggestions. Those people include Joseph Barber, Roger Callahan, Reva Fox, Florence and Hans Hirschfeld, Jonathan Hirschfeld, Leonard Hirschfeld, John Hospers, Elayne and Harry Kalberman, Ralph Roseman, Lawrence Scott, and Lee and Joyce Shulman. I thank them all. Thanks also to many former students who helped me recreate details about the atmosphere of the Nathaniel Branden Institute.

Obviously, there are events I write about that no one else is in a position to affirm or disaffirm. In any event, I alone am responsible for any errors that may have escaped notice.

Originally published in 1989 under the title *Judgment Day*, the present volume represents a newly edited and significantly revised edition. This new publication has offered me the opportunity, on the one hand, to eliminate some unnecessary material that impeded the flow of the action and, on the other, to include new material that adds, I believe, to the story's richness. Furthermore, revising this book has offered me the opportunity to correct a number of minor factual errors, to modify or eliminate passages that contained unintended and misleading implications, and, I hope, to present a more balanced portrait of certain people with whom my relationships were at times adversarial.

With regard to correcting factual errors and eliminating some unintended and misleading implications, I especially want to thank Barbara Branden for her input. She invested considerable time and energy in this effort, and it is much appreciated. This acknowledgment, however, carries no implication that she would agree with all the viewpoints expressed in this book; she would not.

The concept and approach of this memoir are difficult to convey. They are unconventional in a number of ways, and I shall always be grateful to Marc Jaffe of Houghton Mifflin, editor of the original edition, for the speed with which he grasped my basic intention and for his sensitivity and insightfulness in helping me to fulfill it.

I am equally appreciative of the book's new editor, Alan Rinzler, of Jossey-Bass Publishers, whose suggestions have been enormously valuable and often inspiring and whose enthusiasm for the project has done much to make the process of revision a joy for me.

Finally, my greatest debt is to my wife, Devers, whose contribution to this book—both editorial and psychological—is immeasurable. She provided inspired input from the first page to the last. Not only did she encourage me to write freely and openly about my intimate relationships with three other women but she lovingly and mercilessly challenged me to keep going deeper into self-disclosure. This book is dedicated to her in love and gratitude.

MY YEARS WITH AYN RAND

To Devers Branden

INTRODUCTION

I MET HER a month before I turned twenty. She was forty-five. I was studying psychology at UCLA. She was already famous as the author of *The Fountainhead* and was now engaged in writing a new novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, which would make her still more famous—and more controversial—not only as a novelist but also as a philosopher. Our relationship lasted eighteen years, coming to an explosive parting of the ways in the summer of 1968. During the course of those eighteen years, the relationship went through many transformations; we went from student and mentor to friends to colleagues and partners to lovers—and, ultimately, to adversaries.

At the time of the break, neither she nor I (for different reasons) chose to disclose to the world its actual cause. In her case, she chose to withhold the truth even from her closest friends. But everywhere I went I was assailed with questions: “What really happened between you and Ayn Rand? What could possibly have broken you two apart? How could two people who were so close find themselves in irreconcilable conflict?” I had been the foremost exponent of her philosophy. She had described me as its most consistent embodiment. What could have happened? The questions never stopped.

Because I thought the facts were of some importance as a matter of intellectual history, I decided that I would eventually write a book about our relationship. The problem was, the project did not overly excite me. My world was the present and the future, not the past. And then, one day, in a single shift of perspective, my attitude changed. I suddenly saw that our story had all the elements of a well-constructed novel. It had a range of characters whose lives, choices, and actions were all integrated in a central story line, events that propelled the “plot” forward to the logical explosion of its climax, and a resolution that satisfied all the requirements of high drama. Seeing the story through the eyes of a dramatist ignited my enthusiasm to write it.

Although I would not begin to work on it until some years later, I first announced my intention to write the book in a lecture I gave in 1982 at the University of San Diego. Called “The Benefits and Hazards of

the Philosophy of Ayn Rand,” the talk was published in 1994 in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (it is also available on my Web site: www.nathanielbranden.net). Many people conveyed that they found the talk helpful and even liberating, which gave me further encouragement to write this book.

I conceived the project as a memoir in the form of a novel in the form of a memoir. If you wish to understand the literary method of the book, that is the key.

There are many reasons one might choose to write a memoir, and one does not necessarily know all of them consciously. But this much I do know. I wanted to write as accurate a portrait of my relationship with Ayn Rand as I could, as a matter of historical record. I wanted to capture the essence of a brilliant, innovative thinker and artist, an exalted and tortured woman, neither allowing the positives to obscure the negatives nor the negatives to undercut the positives. I wanted to write about the dynamics of intellectual movements and about why and how even the best of movements can bring out the worst in people as well as the noblest. I wanted to examine anew the choices I made and the actions I took during those years; some of those decisions were disastrous. (I wanted to take a fresh look at old wounds and perhaps heal old traumas.) I wanted to explore the process of my own individuation—more specifically, my development through my relationships with three women, of which the relationship with Ayn Rand is the dramatic centerpiece that integrates all the events of the story. I wanted to write about the experience of being in love—with individuals, with ideas, and with causes. I wanted to celebrate the woman and the love that, in the end, precipitated the break from a life that had become destructive of my growth and well-being.)

I offer very little psychological analysis in this book. That is intentional. I wanted to relate the facts as accurately as I could—to let the story speak for itself—and let the reader draw his or her own conclusions.

Ayn named her philosophy Objectivism. I was the person chiefly responsible for launching Objectivism as a philosophical movement. How that happened and what it led to are part of this narrative.

Among establishment intellectuals, there has always been ferocious resistance to acknowledging Ayn’s achievements or the importance of what she spoke to in people. In 1991, however, the *New York Times* reported that the Library of Congress in cooperation with the Book-of-the-Month Club did a national survey to learn which books had had the biggest impact on readers—which books changed people’s lives. Number 1 on the list was the Bible; number 2 was *Atlas Shrugged*. Did anyone

conduct a study aimed at understanding the nature of or reasons for *Atlas's* impact? Not that I know of. But I believe this memoir will shed light on the question.

I hope this memoir will deepen the reader's understanding not only of Ayn Rand's work but also of Ayn Rand as a person. Ideally, it will help the reader get past the misconceptions circulated by both her blind worshipers and her blind detractors. I also hope that the reader will find value in one man's willingness to write rather intimately about the experience of being in love—with three very different kinds of women in three very different kinds of ways—because although this book is a work of intellectual history, it is also a love story.

PART ONE

1

“I WANT TO SLEEP with you. Now, tonight, and at any time you may care to call me. I want your naked body, your skin, your mouth, your hands. I want you—like this—not hysterical with desire—but coldly and consciously—without dignity and without regrets—I want you—I have no self-respect to bargain with and divide me—I want you—I want you like an animal, or a cat on a fence, or a whore.”

The girl who was reading these words aloud to her friends was trying, it seemed to me, to contain and deny her excitement. I was puzzled by her unconvincing attempt, just as I was puzzled by the slightly nervous laughter of the other two girls. The book to which they were reacting was clearly an object of their intense fascination.

One of the girls was my oldest sister, Florence, age twenty-one, seven years older than I.

That summer afternoon in 1944, far from Toronto, Canada, where we lived, wars were being fought; human beings were killing and dying. In Paris, German troops were surrendering to French and American forces. In the Pacific, General MacArthur was unleashing devastating bomb attacks against Japanese shipping. To me, it was all rather remote.

That afternoon, the radio and newspaper reports did not capture my interest. Nothing seemed able to capture it.

I sat in a large armchair in our living room, my legs stretched over the side. As usual, I was gazing off into space. I did not expect my sister Florence or her two friends to pay any attention to me, and they didn't. I had wandered into the room a few minutes before, in response to the mysteriously hushed and excited sounds of their voices. With nowhere to go and nothing to do, I listened, thinking that there was something silly about such behavior from twenty-one-year-olds. At fourteen, I felt detached and faintly superior.

A few minutes later, without saying a word to me, they walked out of the room.

They had left the book behind on a coffee table.

I walked over a little disdainfully, picked it up, and glanced at the title. *The Fountainhead*, a novel by Ayn Rand. I read the dust jacket and gathered that the book's central idea was that the ego, meaning the independent mind, "is the fountainhead of all human progress." I was intrigued. I studied the author's photograph on the back of the jacket. Nothing about the face reminded me of anyone I had ever seen. Perhaps it was the dark, perceptive, intense eyes, conscious in some heightened way, that imparted a glamorous, even exotic cast to the face.

I vaguely recalled the boy up the street mentioning the book to me months earlier. I tried to recall what he had said—something about an architect with a very unusual philosophy of life. I turned to the first page.

"Howard Roark laughed." That was how it began.

There are extraordinary experiences in life that remain permanently engraved in memory. Experiences that represent turning points. Moments, hours, or days after which nothing is ever the same again. Reading this book was such an experience.

The writing had the most marvelous purposefulness and clarity. I had the sense that every word was chosen with excruciating care; the book seemed absolutely devoid of the accidental. This was stylization of a kind I had never seen before, and it was maintained down to the smallest detail. The author's ability to provide an experience of visual reality was instantly evident, and it was visual reality of the highest level of luminosity and precision.

The author's constructions, images, and rhythms all took hold of me in some profound way. The style reflected a manner of interpreting experience, a way of being conscious, that I had never encountered and yet seemed intimately familiar.

Six years later, at one of my early meetings with Ayn, I told her, "My excitement wasn't just at the stylization of the writing—your particular way of seeing and recreating reality, which runs through everything—it was like being in a stylized universe." She clapped her hands in appreciation of this image and later referred to it many times.

The first chapter of the novel establishes the basic character and context of Howard Roark. A young man passionately committed to becoming an architect, he has just been expelled from school for designing buildings that represent a total break with tradition. Unmoved by the expulsion, he knows he will not be stopped. His direction comes not from the opinions or values of others but from his own inner vision and convictions.

The novel covers nearly two decades in Howard Roark's life. The plot-theme of *The Fountainhead* is the battle of a great innovator, an architect of genius, against a society geared toward and committed to tradition and mediocrity. In terms of its abstract theme, the novel is a dramatization of the morality of individualism.

Every work of art is an act of psychological self-disclosure. An artist declares to the world, "This is what I think is important—important for me to project and for others to perceive." By the same token, an intense response to a work of art is also psychological self-disclosure. More often than not, the roots of our responses lie deep in our subconscious, but our values, philosophy, and sense of life are necessarily engaged when we encounter a work of art and fall in love.

As I read *The Fountainhead*, I was aware that Ayn Rand had reached me in some unique way and that in the cardinal values of the novel—independence, integrity, love of one's work, and a sacred sense of mission about one's life—I had found a world more interesting, more energizing, more challenging, and in a way more real than the world around me.

I was what psychologists call an "alienated adolescent." Certainly, I felt radically different from everyone I knew, to the point of sometimes feeling that I had almost nothing in common with anyone. At times I felt almost unbearably lonely. However, the concept of alienation is somewhat troublesome. To some extent, any thinking person experiences alienation as a by-product of independence, although I do not believe that independence was the only reason for my alienation.

By my teenage years, my sense of distance from other people had grown stronger. My recollection of those years is not so much that I was unhappy as that I was questioning, searching. What I wanted, without the words to name it, was a world that would somehow match what I had felt as a child running down the street. I longed for a place of laughter and challenge and high-energy excitement. I wanted to find heroes. What I saw instead was a world in which life was perceived not as an adventure but as a burden and in which growing up was equated with giving up.

My feelings of progressive isolation and estrangement provided the psychological backdrop for the events that were to follow—even events twenty or more years in the future.

Living in the predominantly Anglo-Saxon city of Toronto, my parents were Russian Jewish immigrants who had never really assimilated into Canadian culture. A sense of rootlessness and disorientation was present in our home from the beginning. I had no sense of belonging, in Toronto or anywhere else, and I was not even aware of what a sense of belonging would mean. To me, the void seemed normal.)

I was aware that neither of my parents felt effective in practical matters. My mother was by far the more this-worldly of the two. An action-oriented woman with no outlets for her energy, she had a sense that life is to be "taken," but she had no sense of how to seize it, and she felt enraged at my father because he did not know either. My father, more passive, was a dreamer. His favorite recreation and escape from my mother was his garden, where he loved to work, especially when my mother was yelling that he come and deal with some matter of family business.

My mother's greatest preoccupation was, "What will people think?" Reality for her was only what others believed it to be. In retrospect, I can see that she existed in a condition of chronic anxiety.

However, she provided the minimal grounding that existed in our home. Father's contribution, apart from supporting us, was of a different order; he brought music and literature into our lives—the voice of Caruso and the plays of Shakespeare, for instance.

My father owned a men's clothing store in a blue-collar suburb of Toronto. I was obliged to work there most Saturdays, which I disliked, wanting more free time for myself. He evidently believed that leisure time, music and literature aside, was only for small children and perhaps for girls; a man *worked*.

I can remember times when he attempted to be physically affectionate with my mother; I cannot remember a single occasion on which he was not rebuffed. They fought a good deal, chiefly over my father's tendency to disappear mentally, to start talking about birds or flowers, when Mother wanted to discuss some matter of money or family.

If Mother suffered from an anxiety disorder, then Father was passive-aggressive. I did not feel close to either of them, although at times I felt sorry for what I perceived to be the joylessness of their lives.

Once, when I was sixteen years old and had failed to do a chore, my father, frustrated and angry to the point of fury, struck me with his open hand. We stood looking at each other. He appeared bitterly forlorn; he could not control his family, he could not win respect from his wife or children, and he could not even get his son to perform a simple task satisfactorily. I felt neither pain nor anger. For him to resort to a physical blow seemed like a confession of impotence, and in that moment I felt older than my father. It was not a happy feeling.

As the only son, I received many messages to the effect that all important family expectations centered on me; I was the one who was supposed to achieve something noteworthy in life. On the other hand, I also received messages to the effect that I might be a failure, because I did not