

Chapter Eight

Reviews of *We the Living*

By Michael S. Berliner

A study of the reviews of a book provides a variety of insights. It is a cultural barometer of the times in which the book is published. It tells us something about the ease or difficulty a book has reaching its audience (e.g., some books such as Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* become best sellers despite being ignored by reviewers). Such a study also provides important biographical information about the author. In the case of *We the Living*, this first novel, widely and positively reviewed, did *not* presage similar treatment of her later novels or nonfiction works. As she became more radical in her writings, the reviewers turned either silent or antagonistic.

It is of particular interest that Ayn Rand paid close attention to reviews of her works. Philosophically, she was a staunch advocate of individualism, whose essence is the reliance on one's own independent judgment. One might, therefore, expect her to have had little interest in the opinions of reviewers. Such, however, was not the case. She kept extensive collections of reviews, clipping many herself or filing those sent to her by clipping services. And she discussed reviews at some length in her unpublished biographical interviews of 1960–1961.¹

The explanation for her interest in reviews is not difficult to discover. She held that reviews—even negative ones—helped book sales and helped her reach her audience. She also knew that they provided a bargaining point for future publishing and performance contracts. Ayn Rand was not ethereal, either in her writing or in her life. She carefully monitored and directed every aspect of her career. She kept careful track of print runs of her books and of book sales, and she vetted and even wrote advertising copy.

Her attitude toward reviews reveals an analytic approach to opinions about her works. She expected little from reviews because, she said,

I had read too many book reviews of books that I had read and I had seen the terrible contradictions and no standards nor reasons given. For instance, I thought [Clifton] Fadiman's reviews [in *The New Yorker*] were intelligent, and I tried once or twice to read books that he recommended. Well, that ended Fadiman for me. Then, Alexander Woolcott was very prominent. He had a radio program where he reviewed books and did it so interestingly, really intelligently, that for a while he had an enormous following—anything he recommended people would read, and it became a best seller. His reviews impressed me, so I tried to read some of his selections. The result was I stopped listening to him. And, incidentally, the same happened with all of his following. He had recommended too many bad books and he lost his influence. I knew that the field of reviewing was not fully rational; however, I would not have expected it to be totally irrational.²

Nor did she blame herself for bad reviews:

If they had given me justice for what was good, and said something like “the style was rough or uneven,” then I would have taken the blame; not otherwise. If anybody praises me I want to know why. And, particularly, if anybody criticizes me I want to know why. If I see arbitrary statements I discount them immediately, particularly if they’re distorting statements. Because there I would be totally objective. I often thought that’s [the same point as] in [my] story “The Simplest Thing in the World”³: that I wished I could find some serious flaw in the book, because that would make the situation more benevolent, in effect more just. And I knew damn well there wasn’t.

But reviews could and did have a positive effect on Ayn Rand. As she wrote to Lorine Pruette, after Pruette’s *New York Times* review of *The Fountainhead* in 1943:

If one reviewer had missed the theme, it could be ascribed to stupidity. Four of them can be explained only by dishonesty and cowardice. And it terrified me to think our country had reached such a state of depravity that one was no longer permitted to speak in defense of the individual, that the mere mention of such an issue was to be evaded and hushed up as too dangerous. That is why I am grateful to you in a way much beyond literary matters and for much more than the beautiful things you said about me and the book, although they did make me very happy. I am grateful for your integrity as a person, which saved me from the horror of believing that this country is lost, that people are much more rotten than I presented them in the book, and that there is no intellectual decency left anywhere.⁴

That review was especially important to her because it was in a New York newspaper. As she later said, “professionally nothing counts except the New York reviews.”

The source of what follows is primarily the material in the Ayn Rand Archives, though I’ve supplemented these slightly. It should be noted that this is a history of reviews only—for example, formal reviews that came out when the book and movie were released; it is not a history of all commentary on *We the Living*.

THE REVIEWS

We the Living, published in 1936, was Ayn Rand’s first novel. The Ayn Rand Archives contains a very large collection of reviews of this book, because the reviews were supplied by a clipping service. There are approximately 125 different reviews (“approximate” because it is sometimes difficult to tell if a review is original or cribbed from another review—a surprisingly common practice at that time). Since some reviews were syndicated, the number of publications carrying reviews was more than 200. In addition, there were hundreds of short feature stories and mentions in columns, some of which were quasi reviews.

In her biographical interviews, she said that *We the Living* was not widely reviewed in important publications. That is an intriguing remark, because it was the most reviewed of any of her works, certainly the most positively reviewed, and in such major publications as the *New York Times*, *The Nation*, *Saturday Review of Literature*, *Time Magazine*, the *Sunday Times* of

London, and the *Manchester Guardian*. Both the number and quality of publications reviewing the book would seem to indicate significant response to a first novel.

Let us look first at the major US reviews—beginning with those she believed really counted: the New York City reviews. The *New York Times*'s Harold Strauss praised it for “remarkably fluent English” and narrative skill. But, he warned, “the dice are slavishly warped to the dictates of propaganda,” and thus the novel blunders into artistic improbabilities. The book, he warned, might seem impartial to the unwary, but it's loaded in favor of Leo Kovalensky. However, he did allow as how the “improbabilities” pertained only to the plot: “We cannot here hold in question the facts upon which Miss Rand's political attitude is based.”

The second major New York paper was the *Herald Tribune*. Its reviewer, Ida Zeitlin (April 19), called the book “passionate and powerful” and—most impressively—“primarily a wild cry for the right of an individual to live for what he wants to live for.” Only secondarily, she thought, was it an indictment of the Soviets. And she quotes the novel's heroine: “I want to live for myself—for the something sacred and untouchable within me that makes me myself. Who gave you the right to forbid it?” However, she concluded with the hope that the USSR of 1936, more firmly established than that of 1925, has found it possible and desirable to make life bearable for the everyday people like Uncle Vasili.⁵

The lesser New York papers were more positive: for example, in the *Sun* (April 17), James C. Grey called it a “masterpiece” and used many anticommunist quotes from the novel; the *Evening Journal*'s Elsie Robinson (July 8) said that, because it's not a fantasy, it is more convincing than Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*, and that it is not the usual exaggerated, shrill propaganda. Robinson wanted to “put it in the hands of every young person in America, knowing that they would never be as happy or carefree again.”

Positive reviews came from the *Book of the Month Club News* (April) and *Variety* (May 6), both of which recognized the philosophic content to some degree. Other magazines were less positive: *Time* (April 20) in its two-sentence review, rode the fence, describing *We the Living* as the story of the younger generation in Russia during the early years of Soviet rule. “Communist sympathizers,” it said, “would find it annoying, Whites heartening.” *The Nation*'s Ben Belitt (April 22) snidely retold the story and carped that it was “out to puncture a bubble with a bludgeon” and that Ayn Rand's “excessive theatricality invites suspicion about her politics.” The prestigious *Saturday Review of Literature* chose as its reviewer a Russian émigré, Irina Skariatina, author of *First to Go Back (to Soviet Russia)*.⁶ Her review (April 18), which treated *We the Living* as just a graphic story of what could and did happen in 1922, thoroughly disgusted Miss Rand—especially its ending: “Thank God that period for my people has passed.” (This was written in 1936, three years after the murder of six million kulaks, when Russia was at the height of Stalinist terror.)

In other major papers, J. C. Rogers, in the *Washington Post* (April 26) found it “entertaining” and “beautifully written,” but suffering “from deliberate exaggeration and aristocratic bias.” One comment by Rogers indicates the more conservative moral climate of the 1930s: he opined that Ayn Rand's love scenes would cause Boccaccio to “writhe with jealousy” and make Erskine Caldwell (author of the rather trashy *Tobacco Road*) “seem like a producer of Gospel mission tracts.” The *Los Angeles Times* (April 12, by H. C.) thought it “the best novel to come out of Russia since the World War,” praising it for creating real people with mixed motives, rather than cardboard saints and sinners. Then, showing the contradictions pervading the history of book reviews, the *Toronto Globe*'s J. P. C. (May 9) wrote the opposite: that it was bad literature *because* there were no “real people.” Incidentally, Ayn Rand said in her

biographical interviews that reading wildly contradictory reviews of other books had armed her against this phenomenon.

Reviews in major papers were not the only ones to come to Ayn Rand's attention. In an April 11 review in the *Deseret News* (the main paper in Salt Lake City), Ayn Rand circled the following: "It tears the front covering from the puppet show and shows the inner workings of Soviet rule. . . . A great book, one that should go down as an epic of one of the greatest struggles the world has ever seen, the struggle between individualism and collectivism." Thus, some reviewers got the point of the book, writing that it shows what communist theories mean in practice (e.g., Carleton Cady's May 10 review in the *Grand Rapids Herald*), calling it anti-collectivist (e.g., Adrian Rose's May 3 review in the *Dallas Times-Herald* and John Cummings's June 21 review in the *Detroit Free Press*) and "a plea for the individual against the collective, for the right to the pursuit of happiness" (the *Topeka State Journal* on May 2).

But many didn't understand, considering *We the Living* to be a story about the Russian middle class (e.g., the *Indianapolis Times* on May 1). Some reviews (e.g., the *Cincinnati Times-Star* on July 25) saw it as biased against the Soviet "experiment" (a headline in the *Oklahoman* on April 26: "Reactionary Russian"), but many (e.g., the *Dallas News* on May 10 and Ivar Spector in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* on May 5) repeated the idea (bizarrely included in a Macmillan press release) that the book is "impartial" and leaves the reader to decide for himself. In this vein was a review by Bruce Catton (who later gained fame as a Civil War historian) syndicated to seventy papers. Wrote Catton:

Most novels about post-war Russia describe either the heroism and triumph of the proletariat or the heroism and escape of the aristocrats. Ayn Rand takes a middle course and tells about the middle-class folk who stayed in Russia and tried to make a go of things. It makes a tragic story, packed with significant overtones for those vague dreamers who think that a revolution would be an interesting experience.

Here is another circled passage, an insightful one from the *Albany News* (April 13): "The end is very tragic and helps to drive Miss Rand's point to her logical conclusion. But one loses the sense of frustration that tragedy sometimes engenders, by the magnificence of the presentation." Circled from the *Syracuse Post-Standard* (April 12): "*We the Living* probably provides a more true and devastating picture of the Communist government in Russia than all of the intellectual analyses that have been written about it. . . . It has all the earmarks of great literature." Finally, here are two insightful philosophic points: Georgiana G. Stevens in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (June 28) wrote that the theme is "that men have a sacred right to life and to a personal ego." And the *Washington Star*'s Margaret Germond (May 6) deemed Soviet Russia (as described by Rand) to be "the most amazing experiment in the regimentation of human souls that the world has ever witnessed," and she recommended the novel to those who refuse to relinquish their view that communism is ideal.

In the British Isles, where it was widely reviewed in 1937, *We the Living* was received quite positively. The *Sunday Times*'s Ralph Straus (January 17), though generally ignoring the ideas, called it "remarkable" writing, a vivid picture of life, a thrilling but believable story. The *Times Literary Supplement* (January 17) said that Ayn Rand wrote in "irreproachable English" but thought that the material at the author's disposal afforded the opportunity for a more interesting and revealing story. Harold Brighouse in the *Manchester Guardian* (January 12) wrote that Ayn Rand had an "extraordinary" command of English and had written an immensely

readable description of life in the 1920s. Reviewer Young Marlow in the *Reynolds News* thought the story “first-rate” and doubted that the author was really a foreigner: “The style of the writing is that of an old hand.” Not recognizing Rand’s anti-altruist moral position, Howard Spring, who succeeded J. B. Priestly as reviewer at the *Evening Standard*, thought the message to be that the best way for the individual to serve the masses is for the masses to let the individual alone (January 14).

The *New Statesman* and *Nation* (January 6) called it “bitter” and “aggressive,” but good to see after all the left-wing adulation of pro-Soviet novels. The reviewer for *Irish Press* (January 19) wrote that *We the Living* presented a picture of misery “as convincing as a Rembrandt drawing.” *Time and Tide*’s John Brophy (January 23) was encouraged by the USSR “transforming itself” from a dictatorship and wished that Ayn Rand had waited for this development and “excised some of the criticisms of Communism,” for “she might have seen this novel a best seller in Russia.” William Plomer in *The Spectator* (January 15) opined that the book was so counterrevolutionary that it will “annoy people of Reddish sympathies.” *Current Literature*’s Dennis Wheatley (January) called it “one of the most terrible indictments of utter failure that world communism has ever been called upon to answer.” *Books of the Month* (January) branded it a consistently virulent piece of anti-Soviet propaganda. And Arthur Porritt, in the *Baptist Times* (August 19), after quoting the “air-tight” passage near the end of the novel (see 404–405, cf. 407), wrote that *We the Living* gives a “vivid picture of the slavery of the individual to die collective.”

Australian reviews (in early 1937) went from the sublime to the ridiculous: The *Adelaide Advertiser* (February 27) saw *We the Living* as a book against “all forms of state tyranny,” Communist or Nazi, an indictment of the state that claims all, an appeal for “the right of the individual to live his own life.” In contrast to the British praise of her writing ability, the *Melbourne Argus* reviewer (February 13) thought it read like “translated Scandinavian.” However, the *Sydney Morning Herald* (January 22) thought it brilliantly written, with a remarkable flair for portraiture. But the prize for absurdity goes to Leslie Haylen, in the *Sydney Women’s Weekly* (one of Australia’s most prominent magazines). Haylen called it a magnificently told story of Kira’s courage, but thought that Ayn Rand’s message was: “Revolution and change may be ancient things, but woman and her emotions are as old as the world. . . . Body and soul may belong to the new social order, but a woman’s heart is her own.”

There were a number of foreign-language editions of *We the Living* during Ayn Rand’s lifetime, and she collected some reviews (though there is no evidence that she read English translations of them). For example, there were a number of reviews in Denmark, though none from major papers, and they echoed the contradictions in other countries: some said the book doesn’t apply to today’s Russia, while others warned that the executions continue and hoped that the novel would shut the mouths of Danish parlor Communists. The most interesting historically were the reviews in Italy, when the book came out in 1938. This was, of course, Fascist Italy, and the reviews are predictable: High praise for *We the Living*’s attack on Communism and Soviet Russia. Echoing Mussolini’s party line, two reviews (*Nero Su Bianco* of Rome on May 8, 1938, and *Corriere Mercantile* of Genoa on June 15) praised the book for revealing the weakness of Communism: its annihilation of the Fascist values of country, family, and religion. Two reviewers (in *Nuovo Giornale* on May 7 and *Corriere del Tirreno* on July 9) were sufficiently attuned to Fascism that they deplored Kira’s “excessive” individualism, but none identified Kira’s philosophy, the philosophic conflict, or even why Ayn Rand condemned communism.

We the Living was reissued in both hardback and paperback volumes in 1959. That it did not attract major reviews is somewhat curious, even though reissues and paperbacks are often ignored by reviewers. However, in 1959, *We the Living* was virtually new to American readers, having been out of print for two decades. In the interim, Ayn Rand had gained considerable fame with *The Fountainhead* book and movie and with *Atlas Shrugged*, which had been on the best seller lists for more than five months, ending in March 1958. Furthermore, the Cold War with Soviet Russia was in full swing, with revelations by Khrushchev of the Stalin purges. The reissued novel wasn't totally ignored, however. Paul Clark (*Miami Herald*, January 25, 1959) quoted extensively from Ayn Rand's new foreword about the belief that communism is a noble ideal and opined that the book "will make a greater impact than twenty years ago." The *Detroit Jewish News* (February 6) said that it "exposes the horrors of dictatorial rule, its dangers to human freedom" and quoted from the foreword about unchanged living conditions in 1959 compared to the book's setting in 1925.

THE MOVIE REVIEWS

Upon its release in Fascist Italy in 1942, the four-hour Italian-made film was popular with both audiences (probably for its implied anti-Fascism) and critics (who awarded it a Biennale Prize at the 1942 Venice Film Festival). The film starred Alida Valli, Rossano Brazzi, and Fosco Giachetti, and was directed by Goffredo Alessandrini. Critic Guido Gualassini wrote in *Primi Piani* (September 1942) that the film "can truly be defined as a giant." And Umberto De Franciscis, also in *Primi Piani* (August 1942), said:

[This film] continues the theme of Italian faith. . . . [It] is an attack on Bolshevik civilization. An attack that does not stop at the visible manifestations of the New World but also exposes the torment that the free spirits of the Russian people are subjected to. The Russian machinery works with tragic results, like a grinder that crushes and pulverizes everything that comes close to its grind-stone.⁷

The 1988 release of the two-hour fifty-minute subtitled version attracted dozens of reviews in the English-speaking world. Reviews varied considerably regarding both the content and production values. The *Dallas Morning News* (Bill Cosford, April 28, 1989) found it to be "a grand old Hollywoodstyle weeper" that succeeds because "the over-wrought Randisms are submerged in the melodramatics." In the *Milwaukee Journal* (February 2, 1989), Douglas Armstrong thought the movie inspiring and, with a revisionism found in other reviews, admired Rand's "feminist" heroine. *Weekly Variety* (February 4, 1988) stressed the oft-published history of the movie: "Fascist authorities quickly got wise that the film's anti-authoritarian message directed at the communists could just as easily be meant for them." *Newsday's* Mike McGrady (November 25, 1988) wrote: "Individual rights—that's the subject of the film. Though the setting is vital, the film is neither about Russia or communism; it is about any human being whose freedoms have been curtailed by the state."

Major US publications were less kind and indicated that the leftist attitudes of the 1930s Red Decade were alive and well in the late 1980s. The *Los Angeles Times's* left-leaning Michael Wilmington (November 12, 1988) sneered at the ideas and called the movie an adventure in "triple-think," taking it to task for rewriting the dialogue and redubbing the hero's climactic speech (ignoring the fact that it was Ayn Rand who rewrote the dialogue to conform to the book,

which had been changed by the Italian filmmakers). The *New York Times*'s Caryn James (November 25, 1988) found it to be "a simplistic paean to the lost wealth and freedom of upper-class individuals," and thought that it made "Doctor Zhivago look like the Communist Manifesto." In the *New York Post* (November 25, 1988), David Edelstein branded Ayn Rand a "fanatic" and "loony" and wrote that her "vision seems crazed." The *Village Voice*'s J. Hoberman thought the movie "not quite nutty enough to qualify as camp" and snickered that it was "worthy of its source," "a unique combination of Adam Smith, Friedrich Nietzsche and Jacqueline Susann." He wrote that "Rand is a triumph of political kitsch" and even doubted the story's anti-Fascism.

The rest of the English-speaking world was kinder. Reviews in the major Australian papers ranged from mildly positive to glowing, with the *Weekend Australian*'s Evan Williams (November 26–27, 1988) calling it "among the greatest love stories the cinema has given us." The British reviews were much more positive and generally more intellectual than the US reviews. None considered the story to be outdated, and most stressed the implicit anti-Fascism of the story, although Sheila Johnston in the *Independent* (July 20, 1989) liked the movie despite its "standard Red-bashing propaganda." In the *Monthly Film Bulletin* (July 1989), Geoffrey Nowell-Smith thought that the story was not really a political one, and he discussed at length his thesis that "the most obvious message opposes the individual to the collective. But this front line of opposition covers for one between personal integrity and those demands on the individual which threaten it."

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

What are we to make of these reviews? Given that *We the Living* was published in the middle of the Red Decade, the reviews are both predictable and surprising. On the one hand, they reflect a widespread sympathy with Communism that would be unheard of among mainstream reviewers by the 1950s. That sympathy was manifested in pro-Soviet reviews in mainstream publications, but also in the wonderment that any writer could be as anti-Soviet as was Ayn Rand in *We the Living*. Numerous reviews also accepted the Marxist notion that any anti-Soviet writer must be an apologist for the aristocracy. That said, a more dominant—and surprising—thread in the reviews is that they aren't more pro-Soviet. In fact, most reviews are generally positive regarding Ayn Rand's ideas and her warnings about the destruction of the individual. None contested her facts, though some thought they no longer applied. Particularly surprising was the lack of objections to her characterization of Marxist ideology, which she portrayed as favoring the sacrifice of the individual to the collective. Yet nowhere do the reviewers cry out that Ayn Rand misrepresented a glorious ideal as anti-life. Perhaps her characterizations were just too obviously true to be dismissed.

In retrospect, the *We the Living* reviews do not seem very negative. Most were positive, certainly about the story and Ayn Rand's writing; but also the majority was positive about the ideas, which is surprising in the Red Decade. But Ayn Rand was just coming to realize that the individualistic ideas she brought from Russia were not only not welcome but were considered anathema by the intellectuals of the freest country on earth. Unfortunately, this attitude would only grow through the years.

NOTES

1. Clippings are held at the Ayn Rand Archives. All quotes of Ayn Rand, unless otherwise indicated, come from the biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).

2. For more on her views regarding book reviews, see Ayn Rand, *The Art of Nonfiction: A Guide for Writers and Readers*, Robert Mayhew, ed. (New York: Plume, 2001), chapter 9.

3. See Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*, revised edition (New York: Signet, 1975), 173–85.

4. Michael S. Berliner, ed., *Letters of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 74.

5. Ironically, on the page facing this review was a review of a biography of John Reed (the American who moved to Russia and was so pro-Soviet he was eventually buried in Red Square): *John Reed: The Making of a Revolutionary* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), by Granville Hicks, reviewed by Floyd Dell, a Reed colleague. The previous year, Macmillan had published Hicks's *The Great Tradition*, an explicitly Communist work, and published it jointly with International Publishers, the official Communist publishing firm. The New York literary world was indeed Moscow West. On Hicks's involvement with the publishing of *We the Living*, see Richard Ralston, "Publishing *We the Living*," in the present volume, p. 165.

6. Irina Skariatina, *First to Go Back: An Aristocrat in Soviet Russia* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1933).

7. Translated by Alberta Miculan.