



The Art of Fiction: A Guide for Writers and Readers

By Ayn Rand

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Editorial Review

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In 1958, a year after the publication of *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand gathered a group of student readers and writers in her living room for a series of 12 four-hour lectures about fiction. *The Art of Fiction* evolved from that course. Though Rand's *Romantic Manifesto* was also partly based on the same lecture series, this book omits (for the most part) Rand's discussions of other art forms. Its gist is a case for fiction that is "Romantic" (deriving from a belief in free will) rather than "Naturalistic" (allowing for fate).

It is hard to be ambivalent about Ayn Rand. Rand spoke in absolutes, and either you buy it or you don't. There is plenty of fiber and nutritious material in this book, but the Rand agnostic may find it hard to digest. Rand's ego is enormous and her dismissiveness petty most every step of the way. "In regard to precision of language," says Rand, who uses her work throughout the book to exemplify her points, "I think I myself am the best writer today." But woe to any other author, excluding Victor Hugo, Mickey Spillane, and, with reservations, Dostoyevsky. "To see how not to write," advises Rand, "read [Thomas Wolfe's] descriptive passages." Sinclair Lewis, she says, is a "perceptive but superficial observer." James Joyce? "He is worse than Gertrude Stein. ...He uses words from different languages, makes up some words of his own, and calls that literature."

Still, Rand does have some useful things to say to the fiction writer. Perhaps most important is her emphatic belief in the concrete. "In order to be completely free with words," she intones, "you must know countless concretes under your abstractions." It is only the concrete, she adds, that will lead the reader to your abstractions, your themes. Along related lines, Rand believes firmly that "If a writer feels that he was unable fully to express what he wanted to express, it means that he did not know clearly what he wanted to express"--no more blaming it on writer's block for you! And remember: "A good style is one that conveys the most with the greatest economy of words." This means that "when you draw a character, everything that you say about him acquires significance by the mere fact of being included in your story." The bottom line is that "Art is *selectivity*." --Jane Steinberg

About the Author

Born February 2, 1905, **Ayn Rand** published her first novel, *We the Living*, in 1936. *Anthem* followed in 1938. It was with the publication of *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) that she achieved her spectacular success. Rand's unique philosophy, Objectivism, has gained a worldwide audience. The fundamentals of her philosophy are put forth in three nonfiction books, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, *The Virtues of Selfishness*, and *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*. They are all available in Signet editions, as is the magnificent statement of her artistic credo, *The Romantic Manifesto*.

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