

Ayn Rand as Literary Mentor

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Ayn Rand: My Fiction-Writing Teacher
A Novelist's Mentor-Protégé Relationship with the Author of Atlas Shrugged
Erika Holzer
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301 pp.

In *Ayn Rand: My Fiction-Writing Teacher* (2005), Erika Holzer gives us a lively and candid account of her “mentor-protégé relationship” with Ayn Rand. This relationship lasted for four years in the late 1960s when Holzer, inspired by Rand’s writings and under Rand’s personal encouragement and tutelage, decided to turn from law to fiction-writing. The major outcome of this, so far, are her two novels, *Double Crossing* (1980) and *Eye for an Eye* (1993), both of which show clear traces of Rand’s influence. In part a memoir and in part a how-to-book on fiction-writing, Holzer’s book is primarily addressed to aspiring writers, especially those who have been inspired by Rand’s fiction. But the book should also be of interest to the many admirers of Rand who, though having no writing ambitions, have fallen under the spell of Rand’s powerful vision of life and have experienced the problem of applying this vision to their own lives without, as seems to be the case with many Objectivists, surrendering their independence and individuality.

This problem is highlighted in Holzer’s concern with a writer’s need to develop his own voice and vision. In her introductory chapter, Holzer acknowledges her deep debt to Rand, writing that “Ayn Rand influenced—profoundly—*what* I have chosen to write and *how* I have written it” (2005, 17). This might suggest an overly submissive attitude, providing little room for creative independence or originality. But Holzer is well aware of what she calls the “pitfalls

and traps” that face the neophyte novelist strongly influenced by another novelist, revealing a sound resistance to becoming excessively influenced by Rand. This resistance is clearly marked in her discussion of the difficult question of how a writer develops a personal style. As Holzer frankly admits, she had allowed herself to become “too immersed in Ayn Rand’s novels,” letting Rand’s “inimitable style slip into my work” (110). In part, her solution was to reduce her exposure to Rand by reading her less often—a lesson well worth heeding for anyone overimmersed in one writer. In addition, Holzer offers the valuable advice, prompted by Rand, that style is something that grows naturally from the practice of writing, arguing that if you let your style “flow from the way you *genuinely* feel about expressing your deepest values,” it will in time become a “natural fit” (114).

Holzer also reveals her resistance to Rand’s influence in her avoidance of “the preachy novel trap” (39). Interestingly, this was a trap Rand herself cautioned against, having no patience for what, according to Holzer, she denounced as “amateurish pontificating exercises in propaganda—poor excuses for art” (40). In view of the widespread tendency among Objectivists to evaluate works of art on the basis of their philosophical “truth” (i.e., their consistency with Objectivism), it is with some relief that one learns that Rand “counseled aspiring novelists to tap into their *own* values and emotions and points of view in choosing their story lines—even if they clashed with Objectivism” (40). Nonetheless, though recognizing the need to write stories from her own value perspective, Holzer seems to feel little need to assert any deeper philosophical independence from Rand. At no point do we get the impression that she ever wrestled with the problem of defining and expressing her own philosophy of life—parallel to what Rand did in her very complex but creatively fruitful relationship with Victor Hugo and Nietzsche. Philosophically, Holzer places herself squarely within a Randian paradigm, preferring to write fiction that, if not exactly propaganda for Objectivism, remains consistent with Objectivism.

A central feature in Holzer’s relationship with Rand is their shared interest in larger-than-life heroes. Surprisingly, however, Holzer devotes little space to her own efforts to create heroes. Assuming the perspective of a consumer of fiction rather than a writer of fiction, she focuses on what she sees as the “objective” need for

romantic heroes, making a claim—well-rehearsed in Objectivist literature—for the power of heroic fiction to satisfy the fundamental need many readers harbor for “the larger-than-life in *their* life” (128). Surprising too is her rather superficial interest in Rand’s heroes. Here she has disappointingly little to say beyond declaring her preference for Francisco d’Anconia over John Galt as her favorite. The important fact that Rand renewed the tradition of heroic fiction by creating heroes informed by an entirely new moral code is a topic Holzer hardly touches upon. Instead, she expresses her fondness for swashbuckling heroes, as portrayed by film actors like the late Stewart Granger, popular in the 1950s, and today’s Adrian Paul in the *Highlander* series. I do not wish to dispute the pleasure that may be had from watching swashbuckling heroes, but one naturally expects that a novelist drawn to Rand’s heroic vision of man would have something to say about the much more sophisticated type of hero projected in Rand’s novels. Also, one expects that she would show some concern with the rather daunting task of creating a morally convincing hero without making him a bad copy of the Randian hero. But on this Holzer is silent.

Of greater interest is Holzer’s discussion of an artist’s sense of life. Here she wisely cautions against the mistake made by many Objectivists of reducing Rand’s opposition between a benevolent and a malevolent sense of life to an “either/or dichotomy,” especially when passing judgment on other people’s artistic preferences. In most cases, she observes, what we have is “an immense continuum” between these extremes, “with plenty of room for mixed premises of varying degrees”(170). Yet, notwithstanding this cautionary note, Holzer seems to fully endorse Rand’s view that an artist should hold up a benevolent view of reality, untainted by any suggestion of a malevolent universe. The implications of this for her own writing are tellingly brought out in Holzer’s account of how, at the time she wrote *Eye for an Eye*, she had lost her love of New York City and, with it, her ability to present the city in a benevolent light. Gradually overwhelmed by its darker aspects, she had repressed the sense of exhilaration she formerly had felt in response to the city. As she explains, “Instead of opening myself up to the giddy energy of the city, I had adjusted my gaze downward—the better to confirm its miserable potholes and dark, danger-filled streets” (183). The result

was not only that she lost access to some of her most fundamental value premises when writing *Eye for an Eye*, but also that she shelved a completed manuscript for another New York-based novel, a courtroom drama in which she had been able to project her true feelings for the city. I find this story absolutely fascinating, since it illustrates the author's struggle to maintain a benevolent view of existence against the ugliness of a crime- and corruption-infested social reality. One does not, however, have to be a Rand-influenced fiction-writer to experience this kind of sense-of-life conflict. Any person attracted to Rand's Romantic vision of life will be vulnerable to the corrosive pressures exerted on this vision by the harsh realities of the modern world. But the conflict is probably experienced with greater urgency by a novelist faced with the task of translating her sense of life into fictional form.

It is, ultimately, in her discussion of practical issues of writing that Holzer has most to offer. Much of her material here is covered in Rand's taped courses on fiction-writing and nonfiction writing. Holzer's book, however, supplements these courses with interesting perspectives on what it means to apply the advice given by Rand to one's own writing. Of special interest is her chapter on "stoking your subconscious," which deals with Rand's technique of feeding the subconscious with material for stories by "paying attention to what goes on in the world around you" and taking stock of your "reactions, good *or* bad to whatever you observe in life" (53). Since this really constitutes a method of training one's mind, of developing a special habit of observing and evaluating, its usefulness is not restricted to writers but extends to non-writers as well. As Holzer points out, what it involves is a "process of self-discovery" through which one learns what one's values are (55). Also interesting, though on a more specialized level, are Holzer's chapters on various principles of writing counseled by Rand: how to avoid overdoing one's research by learning to think in essentials; how to avoid false starts resulting from trying to exceed one's present ability; how to practice "editing in layers" in accordance with Rand's crow epistemology; how to practice flexibility in regard to where and how to begin a story; how to practice selectivity in plot-writing. In all cases, what we get is not just a rehash of Rand's counsels but a personal account of Holzer's efforts to put these counsels into practice.

Running through Holzer's book is a strong belief in the all-importance of craft. As she writes, "I have always believed that writers are made, not born. That fiction writing, in particular, starts out as a craft. That if you work hard enough and long enough, you can turn it into an art" (51). For someone setting out on a writing career, it is probably necessary to believe this, or else he may never get started, getting bogged down by doubts about having the requisite talent. Yet it is a belief I wish to question. Surely, talent must be taken into consideration too. By clinging too tenaciously to the belief that a writer (or any other artist) is made rather than born, an aspiring novelist may very well risk devoting himself to a career for which he is ill or insufficiently suited. Furthermore, I think it rather doubtful that acquiring technical skills is sufficient for *great* writing, for what we hail as high art. Rand's own example attests to that. However craft-oriented Rand was as a writer, what ultimately lends her greatness and distinguishes her from those who try to follow in her footsteps is her genius. Even if genius was a term Rand avoided, probably because of its mystical connotations, it is a concept that clearly informs her conception of the creator hero. Notwithstanding her insistence on the importance of individual effort in human achievement, her portrayal of her heroes indicates that she thought of creative genius as something at least in part inborn. A major difference between Howard Roark and Peter Keating in *The Fountainhead*, for example, is precisely that Keating is a mediocrity who does not have the same potential as Roark to become a great architect, however hard he might have tried to become one.

Probably to give her readers some idea of the practical results of Rand's teaching, Holzer has included two short stories. Although quite readable, both of them are, I think, inferior to her two novels, *Double Crossing* and *Eye for an Eye*, and illustrate rather poorly the many points Holzer has tried to cover concerning Rand's literary mentorship. One reason for this may be the fact that Rand's approach to fiction-writing lends itself much better to the art of the novel than to that of the short story.

This, however, does not detract from the overall value of Holzer's book, first of all for its many interesting observations on what the author has learnt from Rand, but also for its sympathetic portrayal of

Rand as a teacher. For anyone interested in Rand, both as a person and as a novelist, it is a book well worth reading.