

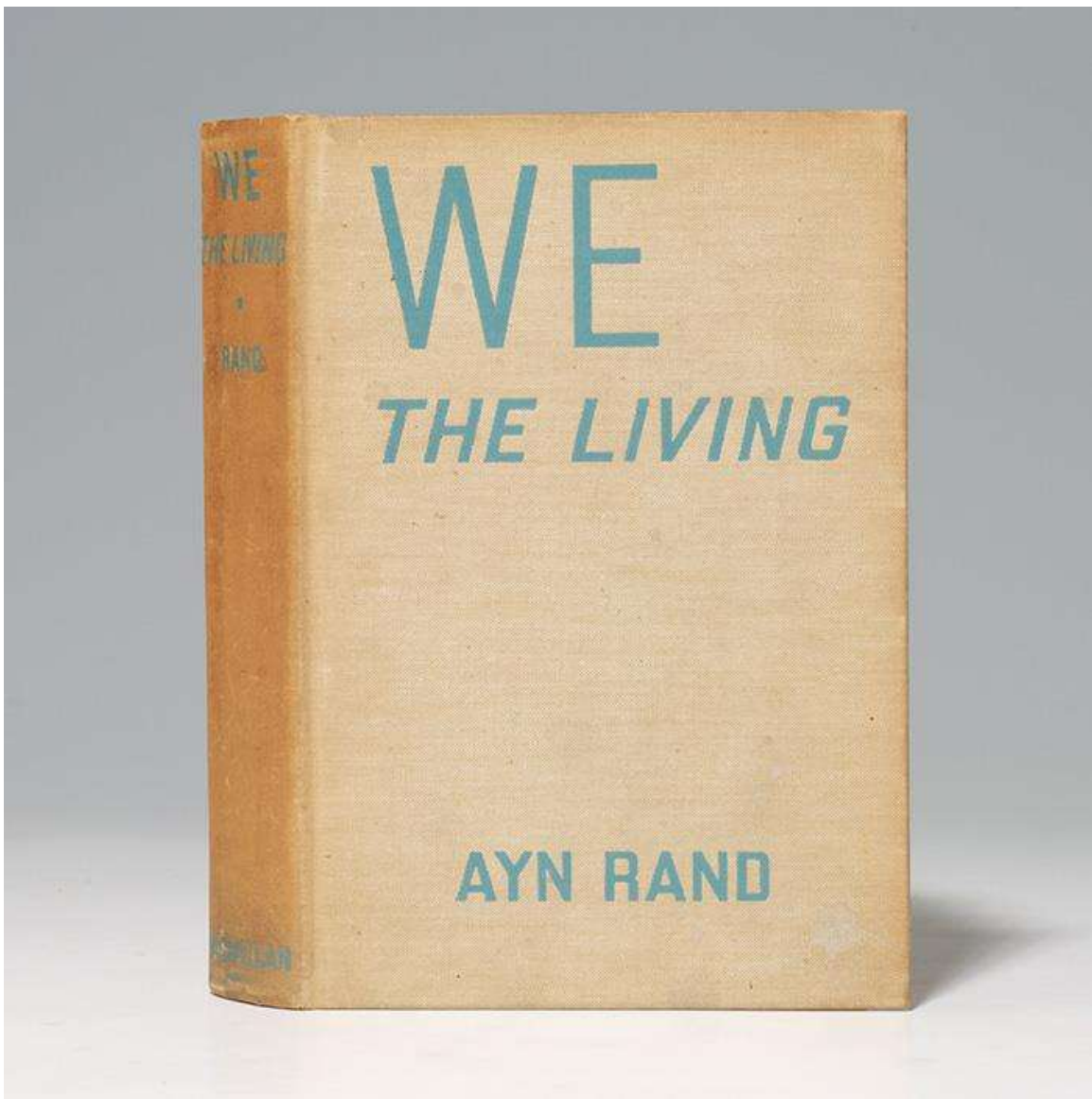
# "We the Living" (1936) by Ayn Rand: A Canonical Book

Curated by Stephen A Batman

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## Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

Ayn Rand, *We the Living*, 1936



*We • The • Living*

By  
AYN RAND



NEW YORK  
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY  
1936

To Ely Jacques Kahn—  
gratefully —

Ayn Rand

Scarce first edition of Rand's first novel, one of only 3000 copies printed, a wonderful presentation association copy, inscribed by the author to architect Ely Jacques Kahn, for whom Rand worked as an unpaid assistant in 1937, while researching the profession for the book that was to become *The Fountainhead*: "To Ely Jacques Kahn—gratefully—Ayn Rand." This would fill out your collection of Rand's novels. You presently have *Anthem* (1938), *The Fountainhead* (1943), and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957); *We the Living* would complete the series of compelling anti-collectivist fictional works which have shaped the lives of countless readers from the 1930's to the present. The thrust of *We the Living* is amply conveyed by the Ayn Rand Institute's concise summary: "*We the Living*" is Ayn Rand's first novel.

Published in 1936, the story is set in Soviet Russia, from which Rand had fled to America ten years earlier. The immigrant Rand was startled by the failure of American intellectuals and politicians to uphold the American ideals of individualism and freedom, and she was horrified by the widespread acceptance, even sympathy, that greeted the spread of communism, socialism, and fascism in Europe. Rand resolved to expose the "noble ideal" of collectivism, through the story of three young people whose lives are sacrificed by an all-powerful state. Originally titled "*Airtight*," this unvarnished account details the methods by which the spirits of its best citizens are suffocated by the collectivist state.

The first printing (3,000 copies) sold out, but the book went out of print due to a publisher's error. An edition revised by Rand was published in 1959, following the success of *Atlas Shrugged* (1957).

"With regard to this particular copy, the binding is in pretty rough condition and the scarce original dust jacket is absent, but I think it's still a very collectable copy, for a couple of reasons: 1) The condition issues are more than offset by several factors: intact copies of the first edition are very scarce in any condition; signed or inscribed first edition copies are even scarcer and more collectable; and copies that are inscribed to someone notable - in this case, an esteemed architect who influenced one of Rand's subsequent novels - are rarer yet, and especially appealing to collectors. 2) Condition issues carry far less weight than usual when a copy has an exceedingly desirable inscription. The reason is simple: the inscription can't be disjoined from the book it's in, so to procure the former (which is frequently unique, and specific to a single copy, as in this case) you have to acquire the latter, even if it's in less-than-ideal condition.

(As you may recall, similar considerations came into play when you were thinking about a copy of *The Federalist Papers* that Heritage was auctioning. It was a first edition copy in the virtually unobtainable original publisher's binding. The binding was pretty ragged, but this was more than offset by its scarcity. In other words, to acquire something especially desirable - in this case, a first edition copy in the original publisher's binding - you would have had to accept the very poor condition of the copy.)

I would hasten to add that the inscribed association copy of *We the Living* that we're offering is hardly in such degraded condition; the spine is sunned and the rear cover is smudged and soiled,

but the book is in the original publisher's binding, the text block is complete and in nice condition, and the book as a whole is structurally sound. I've provided some photos below, so you can judge for yourself. As I see it, this is a very desirable and collectable first edition copy of one of Rand's major novels (and the first one she wrote, starting her on the path that culminated in *Atlas Shrugged*), inscribed by Rand to an architect of note, who played a tangible role in her literary life. As such, it's exceedingly scarce and would make a splendid addition to any top-flight Rand collection.

RAND, Ayn. *We the Living*. New York: Macmillan, 1936. Octavo, original cloth; housed in a custom half navy Morocco slipcase and chemise.

The condition of the book's binding is hardly ideal, but neither is it prohibitive or determinative, especially in light of all of the plusses I just outlined.

## Introduction

"*We the Living*," published in 1936, was Ayn Rand's first novel and represents her most personal work. Set in post-revolutionary Soviet Russia, the novel draws heavily from Rand's own experiences before she fled to America in 1926. Rand described it as "not an autobiography in the literal, but only in the intellectual, sense," noting that while "the plot is invented; the background is not."<sup>3</sup> The novel was written during a time when many American intellectuals and politicians were showing sympathy toward communism, socialism, and fascism spreading across Europe. Alarmed by this trend and the failure of Americans to uphold ideals of individualism and freedom, Rand resolved to expose what she saw as the destructive nature of collectivism through the story of three young people whose lives are sacrificed by an all-powerful state.<sup>1</sup>

Originally titled "*Airtight: A Novel of Red Russia*," Rand completed the manuscript in 1934, but it faced rejection from several publishers despite support from H.L. Mencken, who called it "a really excellent piece of work."<sup>9</sup> It was finally accepted by George Platt Brett of Macmillan Publishing in September 1935, though not without controversy—associate editor Granville Hicks, a member of the Communist Party USA, strongly opposed its publication.<sup>9</sup> The novel was eventually released on April 7, 1936, during what some called the "Red Decade," a period of American intellectual infatuation with Soviet Russia.<sup>39</sup>

The initial American publication was not a commercial success. Macmillan did little marketing, and although sales eventually picked up, the publisher destroyed the printing plates before the first 3,000 copies sold out. Rand's royalties from the first American edition amounted to only \$100.<sup>9</sup> However, the British publication by Cassell in January 1937, along with editions in Denmark and Italy, performed considerably better, remaining in print into the 1940s.<sup>9</sup> A revised edition, edited by Rand herself, was published in 1959 following the success of "*Atlas Shrugged*" (1957).<sup>1</sup>

## Author

Ayn Rand was born as Alisa Zinovyevna Rosenbaum on February 2, 1905, in Saint Petersburg, then the capital of the Russian Empire, to a Jewish bourgeois family.<sup>[10](#)</sup> Her father was a pharmacist whose business was nationalized after the October Revolution of 1917, when Rand was 12 years old. The revolution and subsequent rule of the Bolsheviks under Vladimir Lenin severely disrupted her family's life, forcing them to flee to Crimea during the Russian Civil War before returning to Petrograd (as Saint Petersburg was then called) where they faced desperate conditions, occasionally nearly starving.<sup>[10](#)</sup>

Despite the challenges, Rand was among the first women to enroll at Petrograd State University following the Russian Revolution's opening of universities to women. At 16, she began studying history in the department of social pedagogy. She was briefly purged from the university along with other bourgeois students but was reinstated after complaints from visiting foreign scientists. She graduated from the renamed Leningrad State University in October 1924 and spent another year studying at the State Technicum for Screen Arts.<sup>[10](#)</sup>

In late 1925, Rand was granted a visa to visit relatives in Chicago. She arrived in New York City on February 19, 1926, with the intention of staying in the United States to become a screenwriter. After learning English while living with relatives, she moved to Hollywood, where a chance meeting with director Cecil B. DeMille led to work as an extra in his film "The King of Kings" and subsequently as a junior screenwriter. While working on this film, she met aspiring actor Frank O'Connor, whom she married on April 15, 1929. She became a permanent American resident in July 1929 and an American citizen on March 3, 1931.<sup>[10](#)</sup>

Rand attempted to bring her parents and sisters to the United States, but they could not obtain permission to emigrate. Her father died of a heart attack in 1939, and one of her sisters and their mother died during the siege of Leningrad during World War II.<sup>[10](#)</sup>

After "We the Living," Rand went on to achieve greater fame with her novel "The Fountainhead" (1943) and her best-selling work "Atlas Shrugged" (1957). Following these successes, she turned to non-fiction to promote her philosophy of Objectivism, publishing her own periodicals and releasing several collections of essays until her death in 1982.<sup>[10](#)</sup>

## Why this is a Canonical Book

"We the Living" must be included in the canon of books containing major ideas that reflect elements of America's politics, governance, economics, and culture for several compelling reasons. First, it serves as a powerful firsthand account of life under Soviet communism, written by someone who experienced it directly. This perspective was particularly valuable in 1930s America, when many intellectuals were enamored with communist ideals without understanding their practical consequences. Rand regarded Americans as "far too innocent, and too ignorant of realities overseas, to understand how an all-powerful state forbids life to the living."<sup>[1](#)</sup>



Second, the novel articulates a fundamental theme that would become central to American political discourse: "the Individual against the State."[13](#) This theme resonates deeply with America's founding principles of individual liberty and limited government. Through the story of Kira Argounova and her struggles, Rand illustrates the philosophical conflict between collectivism and individualism in human terms, making abstract political concepts viscerally real for readers.

Third, "We the Living" serves as an early articulation of ideas that would later develop into Rand's philosophy of Objectivism, which has significantly influenced American political and economic thought, particularly among conservatives and libertarians. While not as explicitly philosophical as her later works, this novel plants the seeds of her advocacy for rational self-interest, personal achievement, and opposition to collectivism.[11](#)

Fourth, the novel stands as a literary indictment of totalitarianism in all forms. As Rand herself explained, it is "not a story of politics, but of the men and women who have to struggle for existence behind the Red banners and slogans. It is a picture of what dictatorship—of any kind—does to human beings."[12](#) This warning against totalitarianism aligns with America's historical stance against authoritarian regimes and its self-conception as a defender of freedom.

Finally, "We the Living" has proven remarkably prescient in its warnings about the psychological and social costs of collectivist ideologies. Its exploration of how political systems can crush individual spirit and reward moral compromise continues to provide insights into contemporary political debates about the proper role of government and the value of individual rights. As one reviewer noted, it stands as "one of the most terrible indictments of utter failure that world communism has ever been called upon to answer."[8](#)

## Five Timeless Quotes

1. "Don't you know that there are things, in the best of us, which no outside hand should dare to touch? Things sacred because, and only because, one can say: 'This is mine'? Don't you know that we live only for ourselves, the best of us do, those who are worthy of it? Don't you know that there is something in us which must not be touched by any state, by any collective, by any numbers of millions?"[7](#)

This quote encapsulates Rand's core belief in the sanctity of individual rights and the inviolability of personal autonomy. In our current era of expanding government influence and collective identity politics, this statement remains a powerful reminder of the fundamental American value of individual liberty. It challenges us to consider which aspects of human life should remain beyond the reach of collective control, regardless of how well-intentioned that control might be. As debates continue about the proper balance between individual freedom and collective welfare, Rand's defense of a sacred private sphere retains its relevance.

2. "What is the state but a servant and a convenience for a large number of people, just like the electric light and the plumbing system? And wouldn't it be preposterous to claim that men must exist for their plumbing, not the plumbing for the men?"[7](#)

This striking metaphor challenges the elevation of the state above the individuals it supposedly serves. In today's political climate, where government expansion is often presented as an end in itself rather than a means to protect individual rights, this quote provides a clarifying perspective. It reminds us that political institutions exist to serve human needs, not the reverse. As Americans debate the proper scope of government in areas from healthcare to education to economic regulation, Rand's fundamental question about the purpose of the state remains essential to the conversation.

3. "Well, if I asked people whether they believed in life, they'd never understand what I mean. It's a bad question. It can mean so much that it really means nothing. So I ask them if they believe in God. And if they say they do—then, I know they don't believe in life."[7](#)

This provocative statement highlights Rand's view that religious faith often substitutes for a genuine commitment to earthly existence. In our current cultural moment, where religious and secular worldviews continue to clash in the public square, this quote challenges both believers and non-believers to examine their fundamental values. For Rand, the key question was whether one's highest ideals are placed "above his own possibility," leading one to "think very little of himself and his own life."[7](#) This perspective remains relevant to contemporary debates about the role of religion in public life and the proper sources of moral values.

4. "Can you sacrifice the few? When those few are the best? Deny the best it's right to the top—and you have no best left. What are the masses but millions of dull, shrivelled, stagnant souls that have no thoughts of their own, who eat and sleep and chew helplessly the words others put into their brains?"[7](#)

This controversial quote challenges egalitarian assumptions that often dominate contemporary discourse. In an age of increasing focus on equity rather than excellence, Rand's defense of exceptional individuals and her skepticism toward majoritarian thinking provides a counterpoint that forces us to consider the costs of prioritizing equality of outcome over individual achievement. While her characterization of "the masses" may strike many as elitist, her core concern about preserving space for excellence and innovation remains pertinent to debates about meritocracy, education, and economic policy.

5. "It's a rare gift, you know, to feel reverence for your own life and to want the best, the greatest, the highest possible, here, now, for your very own. To imagine a heaven and then not to dream of it, but to demand it."[7](#)

This quote captures Rand's unique perspective on human potential and the proper attitude toward one's own existence. In contrast to both religious otherworldliness and secular resignation, she advocates a passionate commitment to achieving excellence in this life. In our current cultural climate, where many feel disempowered or alienated, this call to take ownership of one's life and to demand the best for oneself offers a bracing alternative to both victimhood narratives and passive acceptance of mediocrity. It speaks to the enduring American values of self-reliance and aspiration.



# Five Major Ideas

## 1. The Individual vs. the Collective

The central theme of "We the Living" is the conflict between individual autonomy and collective control. Through the experiences of Kira, Leo, and Andrei, Rand illustrates how collectivist systems inevitably crush individual spirit and potential. The novel shows in concrete terms how "the Individual against the State" is not merely an abstract political concept but a lived reality with profound human consequences.<sup>13</sup> Rand portrays the Soviet state as an "omnipresent force, dictating every aspect of life—what careers people pursue, where they live, what they think."<sup>2</sup> This theme remains relevant today as societies continue to grapple with questions about the proper balance between individual freedom and collective welfare.

## 2. The Sanctity of Individual Life

Rand argues for what she calls the "supreme value of an individual life, against the evil of a state that would destroy it."<sup>1</sup> The novel's title itself suggests that the right to live for one's own sake is what makes us truly alive. Through Kira's character, Rand presents a vision of passionate devotion to one's own life as the highest cause. Unlike political ideologies that demand sacrifice for external causes, Kira "wants her career, her music, her lovers — her most sacred values — for her own sake, and works tirelessly to achieve them."<sup>1</sup> This idea challenges both religious and secular ideologies that subordinate individual fulfillment to collective goals or transcendent purposes.

## 3. The Psychological Impact of Totalitarianism

Beyond physical oppression, "We the Living" explores the psychological toll of living under totalitarian control. The novel "illustrates not only the physical oppression of totalitarianism but the psychological toll it takes on those who refuse to surrender their sense of self."<sup>2</sup> Through characters like Leo, who gradually loses his spirit and integrity, Rand shows how political oppression corrupts not just institutions but human souls. The novel reveals how "a collectivist state suffocates its best individuals—those most passionately dedicated to their own values" while rewarding "the worst individuals, those willing to betray or abandon all personal values."<sup>1</sup>

## 4. The Moral Bankruptcy of Self-Sacrifice as an Ideal

While Rand would later develop a more explicit critique of altruism in her philosophy, "We the Living" already questions the moral ideal of self-sacrifice. Through the character of Andrei, a committed communist who eventually recognizes the gap between his ideals and the reality of Soviet life, Rand explores the destructive consequences of subordinating personal values to collective goals. The novel suggests that "without moral standards that transcend the individual, life is ultimately empty and purposeless."<sup>11</sup> This critique of self-sacrifice as a moral ideal challenges both religious and secular ethical systems that place service to others above personal fulfillment.

## 5. The Corrupting Influence of Power

"We the Living" demonstrates how political systems that concentrate power inevitably lead to corruption and moral compromise. The novel shows how the Soviet system rewards those who are willing to betray their values and punishes those who maintain their integrity. Through characters who navigate the complex moral landscape of post-revolutionary Russia, Rand illustrates how "collectivism crushes the soul" through "the daily methods" of control.<sup>1</sup> This analysis of power's corrupting influence applies not just to communist regimes but to any system that subordinates individual rights to collective control, making it relevant to contemporary debates about the scope and limits of government power.

## Three Major Controversies

### 1. Elitism and Contempt for "The Masses"

One of the most controversial aspects of "We the Living" is its apparent elitism and disdain for ordinary people. Rand's characterization of "the masses" as "millions of dull, shrivelled, stagnant souls that have no thoughts of their own" has been criticized as revealing a fundamentally anti-democratic sentiment at odds with American egalitarian values.<sup>7</sup> Critics argue that Rand's elevation of exceptional individuals above the common people reflects a hierarchical worldview that can justify indifference to social inequality and suffering. This controversy continues in contemporary debates about meritocracy, with critics of Rand's philosophy arguing that her individualism provides intellectual cover for policies that exacerbate social stratification and undermine collective welfare.

### 2. Rejection of Altruism and Compassion

Rand's critique of self-sacrifice and her celebration of rational self-interest have provoked strong negative reactions from both religious and secular ethical traditions. While "We the Living" presents a more nuanced view of self-sacrifice than her later works (even celebrating it in some contexts), the novel already contains the seeds of Rand's controversial rejection of altruism as a moral ideal.<sup>11</sup> Critics argue that this stance contradicts fundamental moral intuitions about human solidarity and compassion. Religious critics particularly object to Rand's explicit rejection of faith and her suggestion that belief in God is incompatible with a full commitment to earthly life.<sup>7</sup> This controversy remains active in debates about the moral foundations of political systems and the proper balance between self-interest and concern for others.

### 3. Political Polarization and Misappropriation

"We the Living" and Rand's philosophy more broadly have become lightning rods in America's political culture wars. While Rand was "a fierce champion of individual rights" who "would have found much to criticize in Trump's rhetoric and actions," many of "Trump's most ardent supporters claim to be admirers of Rand's philosophy."<sup>2</sup> This paradox highlights how Rand's ideas have been selectively appropriated and sometimes misinterpreted across the political spectrum. Critics note the "tragic irony" that "many self-proclaimed Randians—those who preach Atlas Shrugged as their Bible—are among Trump's biggest defenders" despite claiming

"to value individualism and free markets while supporting a leader who exhibits a cult of personality and the will to use state power to enforce his vision."<sup>2</sup> This controversy reflects broader tensions in American political culture between libertarian ideals of limited government and authoritarian tendencies that sometimes emerge in populist movements.

## In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read "We the Living" for several compelling reasons. First, it provides a vivid firsthand account of life under totalitarianism from someone who experienced it directly. As Rand herself stated, "For anyone who doesn't know what it means to treat individuals as sacrificial animals and rule them by physical force, 'We the Living' will help you to know."<sup>1</sup> This historical perspective is invaluable for understanding the real-world consequences of political ideologies and for appreciating the freedoms that Americans often take for granted.

Second, the novel offers profound insights into the relationship between individual and state that remain relevant to contemporary political debates. As Americans continue to grapple with questions about the proper scope of government and the nature of individual rights, "We the Living" provides a powerful argument for the primacy of individual freedom that challenges readers to examine their own assumptions about the role of the state in human life.

Third, regardless of whether one ultimately agrees with Rand's philosophical conclusions, engaging with her ideas promotes the kind of critical thinking essential to democratic citizenship. The novel raises fundamental questions about human nature, moral values, and political systems that every thoughtful citizen should consider. By presenting these questions in the form of a compelling human story rather than abstract philosophical arguments, "We the Living" makes these vital issues accessible to a wide audience.

Fourth, the novel's exploration of how political systems affect individual character and moral choice speaks to perennial concerns about civic virtue and personal integrity. Through characters who face difficult moral decisions under oppressive conditions, Rand illustrates how political contexts shape—but do not determine—human character, a lesson that remains relevant in any political system.

Finally, "We the Living" reminds us of the importance of vigilance in protecting individual freedom. As Rand observed, "America still doesn't get it that freedom requires a devotion to reason and self-interest and Americans do not understand that if you denounce self-interest in the name of self-sacrifice as a virtue... inevitably there will be totalitarianism."<sup>6</sup> Whether or not one shares Rand's specific concerns about self-sacrifice as a value, her warning about the fragility of freedom and the need for eternal vigilance in its defense speaks to core American values that transcend partisan divisions.

In an age of increasing political polarization and challenges to democratic norms, "We the Living" offers a passionate defense of individual liberty that can inspire civic engagement and renewed commitment to America's founding ideals, even among those who may disagree with

aspects of Rand's philosophy. It stands as a powerful reminder of what is at stake in our ongoing experiment in self-governance.

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