

## "Mean Girl" – It Takes One to Know One

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After hearing some buzz about Lisa Duggan's *Mean Girl*, I decided to read it for myself to see what it was all about. *Mean Girl: Ayn Rand and the Culture of Greed* was published in May of 2019 by University of California Press as a part of the American Studies Now Initiative, an activist-oriented literary press whose main focus is the publication of a new series of "short, accessible books on Black Lives Matter, climate change, neoliberalism, BDS, the continuing urban crisis, indigenous politics, queer and trans issues, the crises in higher education and more. They are designed to provide timely, provocative analysis for teaching, for activism, and for engagement now."

The author, Lisa Duggan, self-identifies as a "queer feminist and leftist journalist, activist, and Professor of Social & Cultural Analysis at New York University." Although I didn't research Lisa Duggan until after I finished the book, it didn't take long for me to grasp where the author is coming from ideologically, attempting to link Rand to "our contemporary culture of greed" (Duggan 12). This is not a particularly novel tactic – nor is this a book based on new scholarship, or an in-depth analysis of Rand's work. Rather, it's a reread of all the various hackneyed accusations and misrepresentations of Ayn Rand.

Duggan herself concedes that her book "is not a biography of Rand. Nor is it social history based in original archival research, or literary criticism based in close readings of key texts. It belongs to American cultural studies, grasped through a global frame. It is focused on illuminating the 'how did we get here' questions" (Duggan xvii).

From Duggan's initial self-disclaimer, it's clear she's not afraid to deliver blame ridden connections between Ayn Rand and the current chaos of the world. Although, Duggan's curious choice of the vague phrase "how we got here," leaves the reader with a pivotal choice to either view that statement in a positive or negative light.

When I read that sentence, taking into consideration the title of the book, I assumed Duggan was referring to the media's cries about how America is falling apart. If I were reading that sentence with no initial expectations about this book, I would have inferred that the author was alluding to how America has improved greatly over the last few years, if not only pointing at how we've achieved the lowest U.S. unemployment rate since 2000.

Duggan naively assumes her readers are living in the same delusional reality as she is, where each day could be the day the world ends. The author's arguments may pass as legitimate to

close-minded readers who engage in superficial name calling (i.e. Mean Girl) towards those who think differently than them; but for any independent thinker, her partial claims won't suffice.

Duggan presents *Mean Girl* as an attempt to scapegoat Ayn Rand for the modern world's faults. Unfortunately for the author, the arguments she presents throughout the book are meek, extraneous, and contradictory at every turn. She presents minimal evidence that naggingly encourages the reader to join her in viewing Ayn Rand as a villain.

Duggan begins the book by discussing one of Rand's first characters, Danny Renahan, from one of her earliest attempts at writing a novel. In *The Little Street*, to illustrate "the ferocious rage of the whole society against one man," Rand referenced William Hickman, a murderer from the 1900s (*Journals of Ayn Rand* 27). Ayn Rand made it clear that she did not bring the criminal and malicious aspect of Hickman into her character, but rather his independence and contempt for conventional views:

[My hero is] very far from him, of course. The outside of Hickman, but not the inside. Much deeper and much more. A Hickman with a purpose. And without the degeneracy. It is more exact to say that the model is not Hickman, but what Hickman suggested to me. . . for the purpose of dramatizing the conflict of independence versus conformity, a criminal – a social outcast – can be an eloquent symbol (*Journals* 22).

As Rand explained, the connection between Hickman and Renehan did not stem from criminal acts, but rather from their disregard for public opinion and the mob's hatred for them. Rather than dive deep into Rand's analysis of Renehan, Duggan chooses to describe the horrific acts committed by Hickman.

In the introduction, before even addressing Ayn Rand, Duggan writes:

Before we get to the sexual delights, we must begin with murder. William Edward Hickman was a forger, armed robber, kidnapper, and multiple murderer. In 1927, at the age of nineteen, he appeared at a Los Angeles public school and lured twelve-year-old Marion Parker into accompanying him, supposedly to visit her father. . .

The killer had dismembered her body, drained it of blood, cut her internal organs out, and stuffed her torso with bath towels. He had wired her eyes open to make her seem alive and propped her body upright in his car, swathed in clothing. Pieces of her body were found all over LA (Duggan 2).

Duggan nonchalantly writes about the grotesque and twisted event, completely disregarding the privacy and integrity of those affected. Reading about Hickman's acts leaves the reader struggling with a pit in their stomach and yearning for some sort of justice. Conveniently, in the next sentence, Duggan introduces Ayn Rand, giving the reader someone to blame. Duggan manipulates the reader's natural emotions, encouraging them to draw a connection between their disgust for Hickman and young Ayn Rand.

Duggan lacks real evidence to support her suggestion that Rand wanted to paint a murderer as her literary hero. She actually states that "Rand made it quite clear that she did not admire their

crimes” (Duggan 3). Duggan completely skims over Ayn Rand’s own reasoning behind her character’s connection to Hickman, cynically exposing her own disdain for the readers’ ability to draw their own conclusions.

Duggan continues the smear campaign throughout the pages of *Mean Girl* by presenting a vague, often malicious idea and then placing it next to Ayn Rand’s name. Duggan smugly assumes her audience will gullibly adopt her beliefs as their own.

In the same vein, Duggan mashes libertarianism and Ayn Rand into one big mess, linking the two without clearly defining the political ideology. By not clearly outlining libertarianism, Duggan deliberately relies on her reader’s previous skewed definition of the word, which has real meaning as a political doctrine that values natural individual rights and freedom from the government.

According to David Boaz, Executive Vice President of the Cato Institute:

Libertarianism is the view that each person has the right to live his life in any way he chooses so long as he respects the equal rights of others. Libertarians defend each person’s right to life, liberty, and property – rights that people possess naturally, before governments are created. In the libertarian view, all human relationships should be voluntary; the only actions that should be forbidden by law are those that involve the initiation of force – actions like murder, rape, robbery, kidnapping, and fraud.

How at odds with Duggan’s caricature of libertarianism as “the advocacy of inequality and cruelty” (Duggan 78).

Without ever alluding to what libertarianism actually is, the author conflates the ideology with conservatism and classical liberalism. Perhaps Duggan fears were she to include legitimate definitions of prevalent terms and cited actual evidence, her readers would see through her nonsense. By keeping the reader confused, Duggan instead attempts to control the narrative. Because her words sound so similar to what Gen-zers and Millennials and Gen-zer’s hear constantly from media sources, they accept them as true.

The irony of Duggan’s entire attempt to link Ayn Rand with a false connotation of libertarianism, is that Rand was rather critical of libertarians.

[Libertarians] plagiarize my ideas when that fits their purpose, and denounce me in a more vicious manner than any communist publication when that fits their purpose. . .

Please don’t tell me they are pursuing my goals. I have not asked for, nor do I accept, the help of intellectual cranks. I want philosophically educated people: those who understand ideas, care about ideas, and spread the right ideas (*Ayn Rand Answers* 74).

*Mean Girl* carries countless contradictions similar to this one; Duggan enjoys depicting Rand as a scapegoat for the imaginary cruel, greedy world Duggan would like us to believe that we live in. *Mean Girl* is a lazy, cynical and dishonest attack on one of the most compelling bestselling authors in history. Whether you agree or disagree with her ideas, having sold more than 14

million copies of her two most popular novels combined, Rand deserves to be treated as a respected woman in literature at the very least.

Duggan ends her book with a call to action, explicitly telling her readers: “Reject Ayn Rand. After all, she rejects you” (Duggan 90).

This book’s main purpose is to convince youth to hate Ayn Rand so that they never read any of her novels. Ayn Rand isn’t for everyone, but it’s up to the individual to make that decision for themselves. Youth must learn to form their own opinion on Ayn Rand based on her actual writing, not based on *Mean Girl*, which is a lame attempt to demonize one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century.