

AYN RAND GOES MAINSTREAM

By KENDRA MARR | 11/12/09 4:34 AM EST



For some, she never went away. But Ayn Rand is having a mainstream moment.

Tea party protesters hoisted signs reading "Ayn Rand was right" and "Who is John Galt?" at the Sept. 12 taxpayer march. There's talk that Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt are attempting to bring "Atlas Shrugged" to the big screen. Nearly every major media outlet — including GQ and The Daily Show with Jon Stewart — reviewed the two new Rand biographies. South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford (R) penned a piece on Rand's newfound relevance for Newsweek.

Rand has even gone prime time. In a sketch on Jimmy Fallon, recession-stricken audience members ate pages out of Rand's books for sustenance. Chris Matthews, Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh all recommend her work. CNBC reporter Rick Santelli's on-air tirade against government intervention made him a cult hero. He later explained: "I know this may not sound very humanitarian, but at the end of the day I'm an Ayn Rand-er."

While interest in Rand may simply be cyclical, this round comes at a time of renewed government intervention in the private sector — from bailouts to salary caps to health care reform. It's an era of big government all too similar to the dystopia described in "Atlas Shrugged."

Rep. John Campbell (R-Calif.), who counts Rand among his strongest influences, sees the interest as a natural development of the times. "What you're seeing is a president and a Congress that very much favor collective over individual and believe we should all operate as units of a larger homogenous group," he said, "rather than individuals with separate ideas and choice. When you see that kind of threat over the horizon, which it is right now, people begin to fall back on what has been learned in past and what has been written in the past."

But Rand's popularity almost crashed with the stock market. As the current economic catastrophe unfurled, former Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan issued a mea culpa. The once-infallible Maestro — one of Rand's most powerful disciples and once a member of her New York salons — admitted he had misplaced faith in the ability of

markets to self-regulate.

When Jennifer Burns, author of new book “Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right,” heard that, she worried. “I thought, ‘Wow, Ayn Rand. Dead and buried forever.’ But she’s come roaring right back. People are not looking so much at the origins of the crisis, but the response to the crisis.”

And it’s not just more media attention. Penguin shipped more than 300,000 copies of “Atlas Shrugged” in the first half of 2009. Last year, the publisher distributed 85,000 books. When the Cato Institute hosted a forum last week for Burns and another Rand biographer, the audience nearly doubled the auditorium’s capacity. Chairs had to be set up outside, so people could watch it broadcast on television.

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