



NEW Centrum[®] Silver[®] Ultra Men's
has Antioxidants and Vitamin D
to support your prostate and colon.*

Click Here to Save
\$2.00

* This statement has not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease.

Atlas Drugged

Her fans still find her intoxicating, but will the right ever truly embrace Ayn Rand?

LINDA Y. LI | November 6, 2009 | web only

David Boaz read all 1,168 pages of *Atlas Shrugged* in four days during his senior year of high school. "It was the most fascinating thing I'd ever read," he announced to the Cato Institute audience. As Cato's executive vice president, Boaz launched last week's Ayn Rand book forum with a clarion call for "individual rights, free enterprise, and strictly limited government." Conservative groups of every stripe were represented: the gun-toting U.S. Bill of Rights Foundation; the protectionist Manufacturers Alliance; and the Atlas Society, heir to the original Objectivist Institute. These varied delegates all could pinpoint the feverish moment in their adolescence when they experienced a Randian epiphany. One audience member testified that he, too, "was one of those 19-year-olds" who discovered *The Fountainhead* and thought he was "the only rational person on the earth."

The publication of two new Rand biographies by Jennifer Burns and Anne Heller coincides with Rand's apparent resurrection. In February, CNBC's Rick Santelli inspired the tea party movement when he decried President Barack Obama's housing bailout as anti-Rand and encouraged every freedom-loving American to go John Galt. That same month, *Atlas Shrugged's* sales ranking on Amazon.com surged into the top 100, well above its place in the 500s over the past two years. After languishing at the sidelines of the political arena, Rand has entered into public discourse. Will this "Ayn Rand moment" last?

Maybe Boaz knows something we don't. "America's most influential novelist of ideas," he said of Rand, "just keeps selling by word of mouth." Yet, astonishingly, he failed to acknowledge that just last year, Ayn Rand's intellectual legitimacy crumbled with America's financial infrastructure. As the root causes of the crisis were successively exposed, from sub-prime mortgage loans to derivatives to credit-default swaps, Washington's conservatives resorted to one government bailout after another -- invisible hand be damned. Even self-professed Randian John Campbell, a congressman from California, voted for the \$700 billion bill that was "anathema to everything [he believes]." The most devastating blow to Rand's legacy was dealt when former Federal Reserve Chair Alan Greenspan, one of her most illustrious protégés and mastermind of our deflated bubble economy, publicly acknowledged the flaws of free-market ideology. If anything, it seemed that libertarianism and Rand's brand of unyielding self-interest were as good as dead.

A year later, right-wingers are rallying around Ayn Rand once more. But this comes as no surprise to Burns, author of *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right*. Rand's popularity has always been cyclical, Burns said during an appearance on *The Daily Show* in October: It "tends to correlate with political cycles." In other words, the reanimated spirit of Rand appears whenever the Democrats are in power. Rand debuted on the political scene spouting vitriol against the social welfare reforms of Franklin Roosevelt. Her ideas caught on, promoted further by the 1949 movie adaptation of *The Fountainhead*. Her second boost came following the election of John F. Kennedy, when her nonfiction work *For the New Intellectual* went through five hard-copy editions and 200,000 paperback prints in 1961. Rand's resurgence continued throughout the 1960s, in the wake of Johnson's Great Society programs, as **comic books**, television appearances, and billboard ads proselytized individualism. The current Democratic administration's stimulus plan sparked the latest iteration of this trend.

Burns calls Rand the "ultimate gateway drug to life on the right." Rand's novels are accessible and seductive, and they sell the delusion that perfect rationality is possible, and that it begets happiness. Conservatives use her to gain new converts but ultimately sideline her ideology. As an atheist who made selfishness a sacrament, her preachings are a political liability for mainstream conservatives. To them, godless capitalism promises hellish social consequences.

Rand's ruthless individualism also proved improbable in the reality of human sympathies. While she preached fealty to reason, her fame and career were dependent upon the very emotions and interdependencies that she publicly abhorred. She ultimately circumscribed her own ascendance by prohibiting open debate of objectivism. As Heller, author of *Ayn Rand and the World She Made*, explains, it is Rand's legacy, diced and repackaged with the ideas of Milton Friedman and other rightist thinkers, that survives in modern conservatism. Rand is left as nothing but a hollow symbol.

For libertarianism and its place in the broader conservative movement, Rand's intellectual divergence from the right's platform feels less important than the idealized spirit of Ayn Rand. Inside the Cato auditorium, enthusiasm for Rand and her ideas was unchecked by the biographers' talk of Rand's antagonistic personality and the incompatibility of her ideas with mainstream politics. Self-assured laughter followed Burns' remark that Rand "pretty much got into a fight with everyone [on the right]." When Heller dismissed criticisms of Rand's works ("It's the rare book reviewer who understands Rand"), the crowd burst into applause. As the group purportedly most interested in understanding Rand in full form -- insecurities, foibles, and all -- they looked willfully past her critical flaws. Such an unreflective and uncritical stance is perplexing, to say the least. Only one audience member -- the one

who was caught up in Randian ecstasy at age 19 -- questioned the "cognitive dissonance" between what Rand did and what she preached. In a room full of Ayn addicts, he seemed the only one close to sobering up.



Linda Y. Li is a *Prospect* intern.

