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By HEATHER WILHELM

Say what you will about Ayn Rand, but one thing is certain: She had no use for common niceties. A grimly precocious, friendless Rand declared her atheism at age 13. "Atlas Shrugged," Rand's secular sermon-as-novel, boils with revulsion toward the "looters" and "moochers" who consume public funds. Rand scornfully excommunicated followers who disagreed with her, and in 1964 she told Playboy that those who place friends and family first in life are "immoral" and "emotional parasites."

Shoddy manners aside, 52 years after the release of "Atlas Shrugged," Rand seems to be roaring back. Sales are surging—Brian Doherty, author of "Radicals for Capitalism" (2007), recently calculated that in one week in late August, "Atlas" sold "67 percent more copies than it did the same week a year before, and 114 percent more than that same week in 2007." Two buzzed-about Rand biographies hit the shelves this fall, and an "Atlas" cable miniseries is reportedly in the works. Designer Ralph Lauren recently listed Rand as one of his favorite novelists, and CNBC host Rick Santelli, whose on-air antibailout rant inspired hundreds of "tea party" protests across the nation, admitted the same. "I know this may not sound very humanitarian," he said, "but at the end of the day I'm an Ayn Rand-er."

To many, it doesn't sound humanitarian at all. To be an "Ayn Rand-er" sounds, as the New York Times recently put it, "angry" and "vulgar." In its review of the new Rand biographies, the New Republic bemoaned the "cacophony of rage and dread" surrounding Rand's acolytes. Even in Rand's heyday, many conservatives shrank from what they saw as her toxic blend of atheism, absolutism and ruthless individualism. "William F. Buckley must be spinning in his grave to hear all this chatter about Rand," says Jennifer Burns, the author of "Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right," "because it was a goal of his to make Rand an untouchable."

In this, apparently, Buckley failed. Despite her tendency to lose friends and alienate people, Rand's guru-status in today's free-market establishment, detailed in Mr. Doherty's book, is undeniable. "People who are in influential positions at leading free-market organizations were very likely influenced by her at one point," says Chip Mellor, head of the libertarian Institute for Justice. And, he notes, with the spike in government spending and wealth-redistribution programs, "the prescience of her writing has been brought home with a vengeance this year."

But in an age where hope, change and warm-hearted marketing clearly resonate, is revitalizing and glorifying Rand's acerbic "virtue of selfishness" doing the free-market movement any good? Doubts are starting to emerge. Leonard Liggio, a respected figure in libertarian circles and a guest at Rand's post-"Atlas Shrugged" New York get-togethers, sees value in Rand but admits she wasn't a bridge builder. "She used strong, confrontational language, forcing people to react," he says. "And maybe that's not the best way to educate people." Mr. Mellor agrees: "Is Rand's exact message the best for most audiences today? Probably not."

Others, however, go further. "Rand has this extremist, intolerant, dogmatic antigovernment stance," says Brink Lindsey of the libertarian Cato Institute, "and it pushes free-market supporters toward a purist, radical vision that undermines their capacity to get anything done." The Rev. Robert Sirico, head of the free-market Acton Institute, agrees. "If you want to offend, Rand accomplishes that. But if you want to convert—well, for instance, who could imagine Rand debating a health-care bill? I wouldn't want to take an order from her in a restaurant, let alone negotiate a political point."

Rand's tendency to enrage certain audiences could also be blocking a huge opportunity for proponents of small government. Cato's Mr. Lindsey, a proponent of what he calls "bleeding-heart libertarianism," notes that free markets are ultimately the best way to help the poor and disadvantaged. It is a familiar argument and a cogent one. Rand's insistence on the folly of altruism, however, tends to overshadow and even invalidate this message.

For her fans, Rand's appeal lies in her big-picture, unified, philosophical approach to man's purpose and the meaning of life. But ultimately ideas need more than size and a potboiler plot to overtake the dominant, big-government political paradigm. Rand held some insight on the nature of markets and has sold scads of books, but when it comes to shaping today's mainstream assumptions, she is a terrible marketer: elitist, cold and laser-focused on the supermen and superwomen of the world.

How are free markets best "sold"? A more compelling approach flips Rand's philosophy on its head, explaining how everyone, especially society's neediest, benefits from economic liberty. It's a compelling story about how freedom and prosperity can change lives for the better. And Ayn Rand is of little help in telling it.

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