

## ATLAS SHRUGGED, THE BOOK (ASB)

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*"So this is the little lady who caused all the fuss..."*

by Brian Wright

Those with a historical bent will recognize the subtitle in quotes as what Abraham Lincoln (president of the US, 1861-1865) was purported to have said to Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom's Cabin—a scathing indictment of slavery that many feel led to the War of Northern Aggression.[1] I'm using it here in a reference to Ayn Rand, who was, as it turns out, a diminutive woman, and to her majestic philosophic ideas... that have and will shake up what commonly has been regarded as proper human behavior for centuries. Briefly, her philosophy, known as Objectivism, stands for objective reality, reason, egoism (enlightened self-interest), and capitalism.[2]

Atlas Shrugged the Book (ASB), Rand's magnum opus, was published in 1957, the same year the Soviet satellite Sputnik orbited the earth, and created the same level of excitement. But where the Russian space program alarmed nearly every American, ASB stirred the souls of millions of good people looking for a better way... particularly the young... which I and many of my Baby Boomer generation (born 1946-1964) were at the time. As I put it in my review of Atlas Shrugged the Movie (ASM), "... Those were heady times [late 1960s] in so many ways. The heroes and heroines [of ASB] so inspiring, so powerful. They remain so today, in ASM equally..."

In the decade or two after Shrugged came out, the Cold War-induced specter of communism taking over the world or the USSR launching a nuclear war kept many in a state of permanent anxiety and/or panic.[3] As a teenager, I became active in the Barry Goldwater presidential campaign (1964); the older brother of a friend told me that Atlas Shrugged was special, even more individualistic and freedom-oriented than Goldwater's Conscience of a Conservative. So, as a senior in high school, I read the book... and, as they say, "it changed my life." In politics, I immediately started winning arguments with socialists, even my teachers. Why? Because I no longer accepted their moral premise of altruism. Which leads me to the main behavioral tenet of Rand, well colored in the novel: rational self-interest, living for one's own sake without sacrifice. New rules.

Ideologically, the focus of ASB is rational egoism, that it's all right, moreover desirable, to have ambition and seek success in life for oneself. The context for this moral idea is a United States analog circa 1950, in which railroads and heavy industry rule the economy. In one corner, it's oil and ore and steel and machinery and engineering and bridges and skyscrapers and the men who make them, and the woman, Dagny Taggart, who runs the railroad that connects all these industrial achievements. In the opposite corner, it's the second-handers, the moochers, the government officials, and all the others who expect the indy-achievers to make life possible, even luxurious, for them.

Hank Rearden (steel) and Dagny are the flesh-and-blood persons who symbolize the indy-achievers, and they both have family who weigh on them heavily. In Rearden's case, his wife and his mother—and a whole host of family friends who sponge off his self-made fortune—are constantly laying guilt trips "that all he

cares about is work and his precious steel mills." Dagny has only to deal with her brother Jim, the president of the company he inherited from his father, the nationwide railroad built by his father, Taggart Transcontinental. Dagny, as executive vice president, does all the work, Jim plays politics; he and his Washington cohorts seem to exist solely to make her real work impossible.

Dagny grew up in the East with money, and one of her childhood friends is Francisco d'Anconia, heir to d'Anconia Copper. He, too, like Hank and Dagny, manifests enormous creative and productive ability; he's also an 'international man' who early in his career doubled and tripled his family-business fortune in a few short years. But lately, the tall, dashing Francisco, with whom Dagny was intimate in her teens, has degenerated into a tabloid playboy—he has recently lost a substantial portion of his company's net worth in the failure of the San Sebastian Mines of Mexico... an investment that Jim Taggart and all the Washington insiders felt was a sure thing. Key word: felt. No one bothered to do any due diligence, relying instead on Francisco's golden-touch reputation.

The first section of the book—and ASM Part 1—shows Hank and Dagny desperately striving to complete the Rio Norte Line (which will be made from the new technical marvel Rearden Metal—stronger, lighter, more durable, and cheaper than any metal on the market). The Rio Norte RR is critical to the shipment of oil from the Ellis Wyatt Oil Fields in Colorado, to rescue the power plants and manufacturing facilities of the heartland. [The country is running out of juice, and time. Every place looks like modern post-automotive Detroit. It seems as if someone "is shutting down the motor of the world." Further, every time Dagny turns around, a 'skilled resource' (to use a modern phrase) is quitting and disappearing. And the G-men keep on looting and interfering.]

Not to give too much away, the story culminates with a 'strike' of 'the men of the mind' who are tired of being treated as milch cows. The metaphor of Atlas 'shrugging' is someone tiring of carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders (in Greek mythology, Atlas holds up Earth in the cosmos). The main issues that emerge from the confrontation between the good guys and the bad guys are 1) the moral choice to live for one's own sake and to see self-sacrifice as the work of the devil, and 2) that the political class depends for its existence, as do we all, on the 'men' of productive achievement. Many other powerful ideas tagging along with the central issues are exquisitely personified by the starkly defined characters in Rand's novel... and her other novels.

How is she as a writer? You decide. Let me give a short passage from the first train ride on the John Galt Line, with Dagny and Hank (soon to be lovers) in the locomotive:

The green-blue rails ran to meet them, like two jets shot out of a single point beyond the curve of the earth. The crossties melted, as they approached, into a smooth stream rolling down under the wheels. A blurred streak clung to the side of the engine, low over the ground. Trees and telegraph poles sprang into sight abruptly and went by as if jerked back. The green plains stretched past, in a leisurely flow. At the edge of the sky, a long wave of mountains reversed the movement and seemed to follow the train....

I say awesome. Though I'm hardly qualified to provide literary criticism, as a voracious reader and appreciator of art's 'emotional fuel,' I find her refreshingly clear on the one hand and highly inspiring on the other. She creates characters that I admire and worlds to which I aspire... as do many of my compatriots. Further, her ideas are the apotheosis of reason, which saved my life, and in my humble opinion will save our bacon as a species. With the recent release of the Atlas Shrugged movie, I believe some very good people will be very glad, very soon, that such a remarkable woman 'made such a fuss.'

[1] "[Lincoln's] interest was in retaining [the southern] states as a source of revenue for the benefit of the industrialized North under the tariff structure then in place. However, Lincoln recognized that the cause of looting the South for the sake of a bunch of rich industrialists didn't inspire too many young Northern men to risk getting their legs blown off." [Which led to the government using abolition of slavery as the noble cause du jure and de guerre.] — 'April 15: Emancipation Day,' Pete Hendrickson

[2] As I pointed out in my column, "Atlas Shrugged Movie, the Phenom," some ambiguity exists as to whether Rand and her disciples support zero-state-privilege corporations or moderate-state-privilege corporations—but in no way does she (explicitly) endorse corporatism (fascism). Ref. Capitalism the Unknown Ideal.

[3] IM2RO (in my more recent opinion), Rand's individualism and virulent hostility to the Soviet state inadvertently added to the intellectual justification for the American military-industrial-complex (MIC)—and more grist to the mills of the giant Western Financial Cartel (WFC) that had designated the United States Government (USG)/Pentagon as its military-empire and enforcement water-carrier.

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2011 April 22

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