

The Fountainhead

by Ayn Rand

Penguin, 1943. Xiii, 736 pages.

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I am not drawn to reading novels but when I have indulged it has usually been Upton Sinclair, Charles Dickens, or others who have painted a bleak picture of corrupt business leaders. So I promised a couple years ago that I would read something more business positive: the famous novel *The Fountainhead*, published in 1943 by Russian immigrant Ayn Rand (1905 – 1982). *The Fountainhead* is a kind of cult classic and has sold more than 6.5 million copies. It was made into a movie in 1949 starring Gary Cooper with Ayn Rand herself writing the screenplay. Libertarian and minimal government advocates like Paul Ryan sometimes hail Rand as their thought leader.

The novel centers on an uncompromising young architect named Howard Roark. When we meet him in chapter one he has just been expelled by his university school of architecture for his refusal to respect the architectural traditions and canons of the field. Throughout the seven hundred pages, Roark is the self-assured, uncompromising, heroic, creative, individualist. He designs buildings in faithfulness to his own creative vision of what is appropriate to the location and proposed use. He is a modernist with no interest in imitation, tradition, or approval by others, including the leaders in his field. His critics and competitors are threatened and offended by his attitude as well as his genius.

Over against Roark are several other key personalities. Peter Keating is a contemporary who succeeds by constantly playing to the crowd without an original thought in his head and incapable of standing up to anybody around him. He secretly asks (and receives) some brilliant design help from Roark without acknowledging its source and engaging in betrayals of Roark whenever it suits his needs. Roark's response is more or less silent and arrogant lack of concern over what this wimp does or says. Ellsworth Toohey is a manipulative newspaper columnist who pursues his self-interest by using others but always with the rhetoric of community and concern for others and for tradition. Keating is a gutless wimp; Toohey is a conniving, self-aware rip-off artist. Gail Wynand is the up-from-poverty success story as publisher of a newspaper which bases its popularity on exploitative, sensationalist, or gossipy, yellow journalism. He actually comes to admire Roark and builds a friendship only to draw back from authentic individualism in the end, in order to save his business from going under.

The most interesting character, because most fluid and developmentally dynamic, is Dominique Francon, drawn to Roark but unable to freely construct a life with him until the very end of the book. You can't help but think that Ayn Rand is imagining herself as Dominique as she writes the book. All of Rand's characters come close to being cartoonish caricatures and oversimplified stereotypes. And yet she writes about them with such insight and purpose that we put up with the excesses.

The Fountainhead is a very philosophical book with extended monologues and dialogues about freedom, tradition, choice, and other deeply philosophical topics. For the most part the narrative moves along in an interesting way and the long philosophical passages do not derail the reader.

Rand's first twenty years or so were spent in Russia as the communists took over. Undoubtedly that negative experience of collectivism and its suppression of individual freedom gave Ayn Rand a lifelong foe. She did embrace the atheism and scientific rationalism of Marxism but not the political and economic ideology. Two quotations from Ayn Rand explain her core commitments: "I am not *primarily* an advocate

of capitalism, but of egoism; and I am not *primarily* an advocate of egoism, but of reason. If one recognizes the supremacy of reason and applies it consistently, all the rest follows" (*The Objectivist*, Sept 1971). "The essence of Objectivism is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute."

Rand admired a great deal about Friedrich Nietzsche whose atheism and individualistic "will to power" have much in common with her heroic individualism; she did repudiate Nietzsche's post-modern irrationalism in the end, preferring to believe in a more universally accessible rationality and an objective reality. Rand dismisses "second-handers" — those who attempt to live through others, placing others above the self. She loathes all forms of altruism and notions of sacrifice for others.

Rand's message has some positive value, in my opinion. People should not just play to the crowd, manipulate, and use others but boldly express their own gifts and visions in an authentic way. Entrepreneurship is unleashed by this book. But Rand's description and dismissal of concern for others and for tradition is very weak. She views concern for others as weakness but there is no reason that concern for others should deprive anyone of heroism or creativity. Human beings are herd animals — social-relational beings --- and our welfare is bound up with that of others. Rand is right to reject the pathetic weakness and manipulation of Keating, Toohey, and Wynand. But they by no means represent what collaboration, teamwork, or care for others are really about. And as admirable as Roark may be, he is ultimately a very deformed and diminished individual who is incapable of constructive relationships with others.

Dominique ultimately comes across as a pretty pathetic, frequently cold, lost soul as well. Rand's world has no children, no love, no forgiveness, no celebration. It ends with Dominique high on a skyscraper construction project looking up admiringly at her angular, heroic, self-absorbed, uber-mensch outlined against the sky.

I have often thought that an adult Sunday School class or study group should read this book together and discuss it chapter by chapter --- and deliberately invite Mr. Jesus to have a seat in the circle and speak up from his Gospel teachings at appropriate points each week. It would not take long to realize the choice is Rand *or* Jesus. The choice is stark and the point is essential in our age of biblical illiteracy and the worship of the self. Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* is if anything even more clearly anti-Christ.