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Publishing *The Fountainhead*

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FINDING A PUBLISHER

Although Ayn Rand had one novel published in America and two in Great Britain by the late 1930s, and was the author of a successful play with an extended run on Broadway, the effort to publish what proved to be her first best seller required a relentless struggle over a period of several years. In many ways it was her most challenging struggle to reach what she often described as “my kind of readers.” As with all of her works, she could not just delegate the effort to find a publisher to her agent or promotional efforts for her book to a publisher. She remained intimately involved with every detail of publishing. Although for years she had relentlessly sought an agent that could adequately represent her work to publishers, she did not hesitate to fire an agent that no longer did so and, if necessary, to serve as her own agent.

Within two years after Ayn Rand began making notes and conducting research for *The Fountainhead* in 1935, she began the active search for a publisher.¹ After *We the Living* was published by Macmillan, her editor there, Jim Putnam, asked her about her next novel over lunch. His response to her brief description was “Howard is not the right name for a hero.” By that time Macmillan had, in violation of contract, allowed *We the Living* to go out of print. Macmillan agreed to reprint if they could obtain rights for the next novel with an advance of \$250. Unhappy with Macmillan’s lack of promotion of *We the Living*, Rand would have accepted that, but required a publicity guarantee on the new book of \$1,200. “I would not allow another book to be just printed and forgotten. I demanded that they advertise it, and they wouldn’t.”²

Ayn Rand’s agent at this time was Ann Watkins. Watkins represented some well-established authors, such as Sinclair Lewis, and had persisted in a lengthy struggle to find a publisher for *We the Living* that culminated in the publication by Macmillan. Watkins’s response to reading the first three chapters of the new book was enthusiastic, and she told Ayn Rand that it would be easy to get an advance from a publisher. She soon promised a contract from Knopf and got one, but it provided no advance until delivery of a completed manuscript, which was required in two years.³

In any event, it took seven years to complete the book, with an interruption for the unsuccessful production of a dramatization of *We the Living* on Broadway. Ayn Rand showed Knopf about one quarter of what she had written of the book and asked for a partial advance, but upon reading it Knopf declined an advance.

When Ayn Rand told Watkins that she needed an advance, the agent started circulating a partial manuscript to many publishers—which resulted in cascading rejections. During an intelligent conversation at a luncheon meeting with Doubleday, Rand was told that two of their

three editors wanted to publish the book and that they would try to persuade the third after lunch. Ann Watkins received a negative reply that afternoon.⁴

Ayn Rand was angry with Watkins when she heard that Simon and Schuster had rejected the book because she thought that Watkins should not have submitted it to a publisher with a reputation (from the 1930s) for being sympathetic to “Red” issues. A businessman Rand knew who was related to one of the owners (Simon) did not think the rejection was due to any “Red” sympathies and arranged for a meeting between Simon and Rand. During the meeting the owner read from a report by their editor, describing *The Fountainhead* as a bad story badly written. (After years of conspicuous antifascism, that editor had justified the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact, so he was clearly a blind follower of the Moscow party line.) The owner said that the editor might have been wrong, but that his evaluation was not political. “We really are conservative . . . we even publish Trotsky.” Rand said she had to make an effort not to laugh, but was not too upset because it was clear that “this was not the publisher for me.”

Although Ann Watkins was not having any success pitching the novel, she introduced Ayn Rand to Richard Mealand of Paramount in New York. He had read some of the manuscript of *The Fountainhead* at a time when Paramount was considering the purchase of both book and movie rights of books prior to publication, but he could not get his management in Hollywood to buy it. Ayn Rand was looking for work as a reader (preparing synopses of novels for possible screen adaptation) to supplement her income and soon started work for Frances Hazlitt (wife of Henry Hazlitt), who was Mealand’s assistant in charge of readers, earning \$25 for each synopsis of a long novel.

By this time, Ayn Rand had reached the end of the line with Ann Watkins. After rejection by eight publishers, Watkins’s evaluation of the novel had changed, and she began to tell Rand what was wrong with it. Watkins thought the central character (Howard Roark) was “unsympathetic.” Rand obviously disagreed, and Watkins had no answer when she pointed out that unsympathetic characters did not appear to be an obstacle for Faulkner. After Rand dispensed with specific objections, Watkins explained that she could not give reasons for not liking the book; it was just her “feelings.”⁵ Rand never simply let a comment like that go by, and the result was the end of their business relationship with respect to *The Fountainhead*, as explained in a May 17, 1941, letter to Watkins:

Now, as to my novel, I had no desire or intention to take that away from you. I wanted to have you continue as my agent on the novel, because it was being handled personally by you and Margot [Johnson]—and I had confidence in both of you. I did not hold against you in any way the fact that the novel had not yet been sold—because I knew you had both done your best and I realize the difficulties connected with that novel perhaps even better than you do. But when I asked you whether you wished to continue with the novel, *you* told me you did not. You said that you did not want to handle the novel further because I made it impossible for you to sell it. When I asked “Why?” you answered—here are your exact words, Ann, I remember them because they made a deep impression on me and I’ll remember them all my life—“Why? Why? You always ask me why. I can’t answer you. I don’t go by reasons, I act upon instinct.” That, Ann, was the epitaph on our relations. There was nothing I could say after that. Words are an instrument of reason and instincts are unanswerable. . . .

You close your letter by saying that you regret there should be in the end these repeated misunderstandings between us. That is exactly my own feeling. If

you really mean it, if you do regret misunderstandings—*please* let us clear them up. I am more than willing. But any problem can be cleared up only in person, directly and on the basis of facts. If you wish to tell me your reasons for your changed attitude toward me—I’ll be more than willing to listen. But it must be a sincere conversation, Ann. Without resentment, without generalities and without “instincts.” What do any of us know about instincts? What do they mean? What do they prove? Only language can be a means of communication between people and a means of understanding. Words, thoughts, reasons. If we drop them—we will have nothing but misunderstandings left. If we want to face things honestly and reasonably, we can still end up as friends, and I think we both deserve that much—after the years we have behind us.⁶

From that point Ayn Rand represented the book herself. Although she later began a long relationship with Curtis Brown Ltd. for the motion picture rights, she never again had an American agent for the book. After the break with Watkins, Richard Mealand offered to recommend it to a publisher of her choice. She selected Little, Brown, because of its reputation for publishing “serious” novels. In a meeting with the publisher’s New York editor, Angus Cameron, he told her that the editors in Boston thought the book was “high grade literature” but it would not sell because it was “too intellectual and controversial.” Although it was later known that Cameron was a member of the Communist Party at the time, that may not have explicitly been a factor in Little, Brown’s evaluation of the book. In conversation with Ayn Rand, his comments indicated that he had wildly misunderstood her point of view and assumed she was a left-wing anarchist. That night Rand told her husband that she could understand Simon and Schuster rejecting the book if they thought it was a bad novel, but her response to the rejection by Little, Brown, because the book was too good was horror.⁷

By this point, other publishers who had rejected the book included Duell, Sloan & Pearce, Doubleday, Dutton, Dodd Mead, Lippincott, Reynal & Hitchcock, and Random House. In addition to Knopf’s decision to lose the book rather than pay an advance, and Paramount’s lack of interest, twelve publishers had rejected *The Fountainhead* by 1941. (Macmillan, Dutton, Simon and Schuster, and Random House all became publishers of Ayn Rand’s books later in the century.)

Although Rand did not want to impose further on Mealand, he was a persistent advocate for the book and encouraged her to name another publisher to whom he would provide an introduction. She selected Bobbs-Merrill in spite of their reputation for publishing undistinguished, “homey” small-town novels.

Rand hand delivered the manuscript to Archibald Ogden, the New York editor of the Indianapolis-based Bobbs-Merrill. She was not impressed with Ogden at that first meeting and was surprised when he called a week later to praise the writing, “great” theme, and the characterization of Roark. He had decided to publish the book but needed to get authorization from Indianapolis for the advance. Rand needed what was then considered a large advance of \$1,200 in order to devote herself full time to finishing the book in one year. Ogden had to go to the mat for the book. One of the readers in Indianapolis reported to the editor that *The Fountainhead* was a great book but would not sell; another that it was a bad novel but would sell. Ogden asserted himself and told the editor, “If this is not the book for you, I am not the editor for you.” The editor responded, “Far be it from me to dampen such enthusiasm. Sign the contract,” and approved an advance of \$1,000. Richard Mealand and Frances Hazlitt agreed to continue to give Rand reading assignments for weekend work. They and all of the other struggling writers

working as readers for Paramount celebrated this breakthrough with her. Just before the contract was signed, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Ogden later told her that by one week later the deal would have been cancelled due to concerns about the rationing of paper (which did prove to be a challenge). Soon all publishers were looking only for manuscripts that were light, humorous, and—most importantly—short.⁸

Rand's British publisher, Cassell and Co., was still successfully selling *We the Living* and *Anthem*, and had long expressed interest in any new title from Ayn Rand to her agent in London, Laurence Pollinger Ltd. At that time the war imposed even more severe restrictions on British than on American publishers, and the British edition did not make it into print until 1947. The British edition stayed in print for many years, and with later paperback editions has sold about half a million copies. In 2007 a new British edition of *The Fountainhead* is being published in London by Penguin Modern Classics.

Rand had little difficulty over editorial issues with Ogden or others at Bobbs-Merrill during the next year. She had planned to publish the book with the title *Second Hand Lives*, when Ogden pointed out that the title implied that the book featured Keating and the villains rather than Howard Roark. So she immediately knew that she had to have a title describing Roark.⁹

MARKETING AND PROMOTION

After delivering the manuscript on time at the end of 1942, Rand's concern turned to reaching the book's optimal audience. She never considered massive sales to be an end in itself but was more interested in the quality than the quantity of readers. In this regard she had no expectation that reviews would call the book to the attention of the readers whom she wanted, but considered advertising by the publisher to be critical in positioning the book correctly. Unfortunately, apart from Ogden, she did not think that anyone at Bobbs-Merrill knew what kind of book they had.

Before publication, Rand was sent the first half-page ad from Bobbs-Merrill for Sunday papers. *The Fountainhead* was presented merely as a big book about architecture that would do for architects what *Arrowsmith* did for doctors. Many years later she reported that she "raised hell" with Bobbs-Merrill about the ad, but "it was like talking to cotton." Hell was raised via a long letter to Ogden on May 6, 1943, about the general failure of Bobbs-Merrill to promote the book. About the ad in question or a similar one she wrote:

I don't mind the fact that your advertising appropriation is limited. But precisely when an appropriation is limited one must weigh the tone and nature and every word of an ad most carefully, to get the utmost good out of it. The horrible crap you read to me over the phone wouldn't sell a book to a half-wit. It is not intellectual appeal, it is not commercial appeal, it is not even good blurb-writing. It is just simply dull and meaningless. It says nothing. It's just wasted space, wasted words, wasted money.¹⁰

The letter evidently had an impact. An unexpected ad in the *New York Times* resulted in another letter to Ogden on July 29, 1943:

I don't know which way one gets more out of publishers—by being a holy Russian terror or a happy Pollyanna, but at the present moment I'm not thinking

of proper diplomacy. I'm just simply happy and grateful to all of you, and I hope this idyll will last for both sides.

Seriously, I think the ad was excellent, wording and all, even the nude statue. . . .¹¹

Rand added a postscript to the second letter: "This letter is to remain in force up to, but not including the next time I get mad at Bobbs-Merrill."

But most of the new advertising had portrayed the book as just another steamy romance. With few exceptions, reviews were no better than she expected at calling the book to the attention of the readers she was after. Thus in 1943 sales prospects did not seem to be auspicious.

As was the case when *We the Living* was published, Rand was eager to do what she could to personally promote *The Fountainhead*—in spite of her dislike for public speaking. In 1943 she accepted an invitation from Ely Jacques Kahn to address the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects. The *New York Times* announced the meeting in advance, as well as the fact that Rand had worked in Kahn's office when researching *The Fountainhead*.¹² After the event, the *New York Herald Tribune* reported, "Ayn Rand received an exceptional recognition for her novel *The Fountainhead*; she was invited to be the guest of honor and speaker at a luncheon of the Architectural League last week. . . . The one thing we wanted to know was, did she spot any red-headed architects among those present. She said no, though she looked for one; and we'll bet everyone else did too."¹³

In a lengthy interview in the *New York World*, Rand recounted her first sight of New York skyscrapers: "There was one skyscraper that stood out . . . and it seemed to me the greatest symbol of free men. That was 17 years ago, and I made a mental note that someday I would write a novel with the skyscraper as a theme. Now after all these years I have done it, and it is my tribute to America." In the same interview she described the McGraw-Hill building at 330 W. 42nd St. as the most beautiful in New York City. (McGraw-Hill moved out many years ago, but this blue-green building by architect Raymond Hood still stands on 42nd Street. Hood was also the architect of Rockefeller Center—of which Rand thought only the perspective of the RCA building from Fifth Avenue was distinctive.)¹⁴

In October 1943, Rand participated in a weekly newspaper debate syndicated nationally called "Wake Up, America," sponsored by the American Economic Foundation. She was identified as "author of the current best seller novel on individualism *The Fountainhead*." She continued public speaking after moving to California, as reported by R. C. Hoiles in a remarkable article in the *Santa Ana Register* (now the *Orange County Register*) under the heading "Meeting a Close Reasoning Russian Woman":

I had the pleasure recently of attending a dinner meeting of eleven men and one Russian woman at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. The dinner meeting was given in honor of Ayn Rand, author of *The Fountainhead*.

The interesting part about the meeting was that the conversation lasted four hours, and that the Russian woman was there defending the rights of individuals with better understanding and knowledge, it seemed to me, than some of the men in attendance who hold degrees of Doctor of Philosophy and who were economists, or had been at the various colleges. The amazing part was that she, speaking in English with a foreign accent, which made it a little difficult at times to catch every word, was telling men who had received the blessing of the founding fathers how they were losing their liberty and how they would become

impoverished and enslaved unless they about-faced and more nearly came to respect the rights of the individual.

The one thing that made me realize the very precarious position we are in was the erroneous belief, it seems to me, among most of the men and doctors attending the dinner, that the success of some people must be detrimental to others. In other words, they seem to believe in the Malthus theory that the population would increase to the point resulting in starvations. They did not seem to realize that each man produces his own wealth, and every time A produces something different from what B produces, it benefits B. . . .

I am under obligation to the host of the meeting whom I had never met until the dinner. He sent me an invitation because I had suggested that he read Ayn Rand's book, *The Fountainhead*, and quoted her sentence, "Civilization is the process of setting man free from men." He was so impressed with the book and the author, whom he met after reading the book, that he gave the dinner inviting eleven guests that they might meet the author and see the necessity of putting forth every effort to get people to believe in a government that attempted only to set man free from men.¹⁵

A businessman from Michigan, Monroe Shakespeare, was an intelligent fan who clearly understood the central ideas of *The Fountainhead* and attempted to raise money for an advertising campaign for the book from conservative manufacturers. The conservatives they approached were interested only in politics, which they felt was completely divorced from books and principles, let alone philosophy. After some effort, Rand gave up on the attempt to get conservatives to support her books or any moral defense of individualism.¹⁶

Rand continued to speak in public about the book. On May 8, 1945, she spoke to the Los Angeles Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. The status of architecture at the time was deeply colored by years of New Deal controls, large public works projects, and wartime conditions. Her talk was substantial, and as recorded in the chapter's newsletter, they got the point: "Her theme is not architecture but individualism versus collectivism, presented and argued with an unusual consistency and lack of compromise." Following are two representative paragraphs from the talk:

Those of you who have read *The Fountainhead* will understand me when I say that it is actually not a book about architecture at all. It is not about the structure of buildings, but about the structure of man. What makes a man stand or fall. What are the girders and the supports of a man's spirit, and what are the rotted beams and the shoddy foundations. It is the story of the self-respecting, self-sufficient ego against the filthy corruption which is altruism. If there is any doubt in your mind about my attitude towards the profession of architecture, please accept—as the greatest tribute I can offer you—the fact that I consider individualism the only sacred cause on earth and that I have made the champion of that cause an architect. . . .

But architects, above all men, should be the guardians of human freedom. And this is what I am most anxious to say to you, since you have so generously given me an opportunity to be heard: there is a direct connection between architecture and freedom. Observe that every step in the progress of architecture has come at a time when a new step was made in the progress of man's freedom.

Man's individual freedom. There is no other. Observe that the great schools of architecture were born in the great periods of individualism. I am speaking of architecture as a structural art—not as a mere piling up of masonry.¹⁷

Possibly due to her respect for the importance of “word-of-mouth” advertising in reaching her audience, Rand read and responded to a lot of her fan mail. (Her experience when meeting fans was not usually edifying because she found that even many of those who expressed admiration did not understand the novel.) She especially enjoyed the many letters from men in the armed forces. Years later she recalled letters from flyers who told her that after every mission they would gather around a candle and read passages from *The Fountainhead*. One soldier said that he would have felt much better if he thought that the war was being fought for the ideals of *The Fountainhead*. She answered as many of the letters from servicemen as she could.¹⁸ When the volume of mail became overwhelming, she wrote a pamphlet entitled “A Letter from Ayn Rand, Author of *The Fountainhead*,” which Bobbs-Merrill printed as a reply to fan mail. The entire text of this letter is included in an appendix to *Letters of Ayn Rand*.¹⁹ Sixty years later this letter is well worth reading, as it must have been in 1945, for any “fan” of *The Fountainhead*. Here a few sentences will have to suffice: “There is nothing of any importance to be said or known about me—except that I wrote *The Fountainhead*.” “The specific events of my private life are of no importance whatever. I have never had any private life in the usual sense of the word. My writing is my life.” “I decided to become a writer—not in order to save the world, nor to serve my fellow men—but for the simple, personal, selfish, egotistical happiness of creating the kind of men and events I could like, respect and admire. I can bear to look around me levelly. I cannot bear to look down. I wanted to look up.”

PUBLISHING HISTORY AND SALES

The initial printing by Bobbs-Merrill was 7,500 copies against an advance (pre-publication) sale of 6,000 copies. Sales in the summer of 1943 were slow. The book was occasionally at the bottom of best-seller lists in the *Herald Tribune*, but not on the list of the *New York Times*. Ayn Rand knew that if *The Fountainhead* did not make her famous, nothing ever would. When asked by Isabel Paterson, she said that she wanted a sale of at least 100,000 copies because that would ensure the book would reach “my kind of readers, wherever they are. My whole concern with sales was to reach the right minds.”

By that fall a reprint was needed. Ogden recommended a second printing of 5,000, but the business manager in New York thought that the book would never sell more than 10,000 copies and ordered a printing of only 2,500 copies. Ogden bet him a dollar that he would need to reprint again by Thanksgiving. By then the book had sold 18,000 copies, and the business manager left a dollar on Ogden's desk without comment. Although the book kept running out of print due to the small press runs required by paper rationing, the book sold almost 50,000 copies in its first year.

Wartime paper quotas were allocated to publishers based on their sales in a base year. Blakiston, a small publisher of a one-shot Red Cross manual in that year, had a much larger quota than it could use and based on their government-provided access to paper made license deals with major publishers that now sound like a scene from *Atlas Shrugged*. After years of frustration with Bobbs-Merrill's inept advertising and production problems, she thought that the company's decision to sub-license *The Fountainhead* to Blakiston was the most decent thing it

had done. To Rand's delight, Blakiston ran ads that stated the theme of the book as the story of an individualist, and they sold nearly 100,000 copies by 1945—more than Bobbs-Merrill during the same period. The book began to appear on best-seller lists in various cities. Rand thought that this was an example of word-of-mouth: her "special readers" telling other special readers about the book. In 1949 the book reappeared on best-seller lists after the release of the motion picture based on the book. The hardcover edition has remained in print by Bobbs-Merrill, and through mergers and acquisitions by Macmillan, Simon and Schuster, and Scribner.

In 1945 Bobbs-Merrill received an offer of \$20,000 for rights to an abridged paperback edition. Rand refused to give permission for an abridgement. In 1952 Signet was licensed to print a complete paperback edition. That and other paperback editions have always remained in print, and through mergers and acquisitions Signet, as a part of New American Library, is now a division of Penguin Group (USA). In recent years Penguin acquired all American rights and publishes hardcover (Dutton) and trade-paperback editions (Plume).

By 1967 Bobbs-Merrill reported that more than 452,500 hardcover copies had been sold, including Blakiston and Peoples Book Club editions, and that New American Library had reported paperback sales of 1,424,182.²⁰ Ten years after they began publishing the hardcover edition in 1985, Macmillan reported that they had sold 29,632 copies in that period—an unusually high sales volume for an expensive hardcover novel in print for fifty years.²¹

Translations of *The Fountainhead* have been published in Chinese, Czech, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Norwegian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, and Turkish. Most of these translations are still in print, and the novel is currently being translated into additional languages.

At this writing sales of *The Fountainhead* in English, stated conservatively, have exceeded six and one-half million copies.²² (Many more copies are "in print.") That is remarkable for a lengthy and serious novel of ideas and has assured that the book has achieved much of Ayn Rand's objective of "reaching the right minds." The phenomenon is not just historic but contemporary and dynamic as annual sales have continued to climb since Rand's death in 1982. *The Fountainhead* is increasingly a part of the established curriculum of American literature in secondary schools, reaching more young readers every year with what Rand described as "a confirmation of the spirit of youth, proclaiming man's glory, showing how much is possible."²³

NOTES

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1. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).
 2. Except where indicated, Ayn Rand quotes are from the Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).
 3. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).
 4. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).
 5. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).
 6. Unpublished letter (Ayn Rand Archives).
 7. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).
 8. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).
 9. See Ayn Rand, *The Art of Nonfiction: A Guide for Readers and Writers*, ed. Robert Mayhew (New York: Plume, 2001), 168–69.
 10. Michael S. Berliner, ed., *Letters of Ayn Rand* (New York, Dutton, 1995), 69.

11. Berliner, *Letters of Ayn Rand*, 86.
12. *New York Times*, June 23, 1943.
13. *New York Herald Tribune*, July 4, 1943.
14. *New York World*, June 7, 1943.
15. *Santa Ana Register*, December 27, 1943.
16. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).
17. Newsletter of the Los Angeles Chapter of the American Institute of Architecture, June 1945.
18. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).
19. Berliner, *Letters of Ayn Rand*, 669.
20. Unpublished Bobbs-Merrill memorandum (Ayn Rand Archives).
21. Unpublished letter from Macmillan (Ayn Rand Archives).
22. Publishers' Reports (Estate of Ayn Rand).
23. Ayn Rand, "Introduction to the Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition," *The Fountainhead* (various editions).