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The Fountainhead Reviews

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Ayn Rand's first novel, *We the Living*, was published in 1936. After slowly selling its print run of 3,000 copies, it went out of print in the United States for 23 years. Her second novel, *The Fountainhead*, published in 1943, made the best-seller list twice—in 1945 and again in 1949, when the Warner Bros. film was released—and it brought her fame. Yet, *We the Living* was much more widely reviewed. In Ayn Rand's collection of reviews there are more than 100 *We the Living* reviews, some of which were reprinted via syndication. In contrast, there are fewer than 20 reviews of *The Fountainhead*.

Many factors help account for this discrepancy. *We the Living* was timely and political—a novel with the background of Soviet Russia—and likely more attractive to reviewers. *The Fountainhead*, in contrast, has a more esoteric background, that of architecture. Then, too, by 1943 consolidation had reduced the number of daily newspapers. It is also possible that the press clippings services (Luce's and Southwest) that provided *The Fountainhead* reviews were less capable than Romeike's, which provided hundreds of *We the Living* clippings.

THE BOOK

Although fewer in number, *The Fountainhead* reviews were of greater significance, both professionally and personally; in fact, her 1960–1961 biographical interviews contain comments on many of these reviews. Heading that list—in fact, heading her list of all-time favorite reviews—was that in the *New York Times Book Review* (May 16, 1943). Lorine Pruette wrote that “it was the only novel of ideas written by an American woman that I can recall.” She describes villain Ellsworth Toohey as “a brilliant personification of a modern devil,” “the fascist mind at its best and worst; the use of the ideal of altruism to destroy personal integrity” “the use of sacrifice to enslave.” The characters, she wrote, “are amazingly literate” and “romanticized, larger-than-life as representations of good and evil.” This review had a profound effect on Ayn Rand, an effect she described in a May 18, 1943, letter to Pruette:

You have said that I am a writer of great power. Yet I feel completely helpless to express my gratitude to you for your review of my novel.

You are the only reviewer who had the courage and honesty to state the theme of *The Fountainhead*. Four other reviews of it have appeared so far, in the daily papers—and not one of them mentioned the theme nor gave a single hint about the issue of the Individual against the Collective. They all spoke of the book as a novel about architecture. Such an omission could not be accidental. You have said that one cannot read the book “without thinking through some of the basic

concepts of our time.” You know, as I do, that the theme is actually overstated in my novel, that it’s in every line. If one reviewer had missed the theme, it could be ascribed to stupidity. Four of them can be explained only by dishonesty and cowardice. And it terrified me to think our country had reached such a state of depravity that one was no longer permitted to speak in defense of the Individual, that the mere mention of such an issue was to be evaded and hushed up as too dangerous.

That is why I am grateful to you in a way much beyond literary matters and for much more than the beautiful things you said about me and the book, although they did make me very happy. I am grateful for your great integrity as a person, which saved me from the horror of believing that this country is lost, that people are much more rotten than I presented them in the book and that there is no intellectual decency left anywhere.

If it is not considered unethical for an author to want to meet a reviewer, I would like very much to meet you. I have met so many Ellsworth Tooheys that it would be a relief to see a person of a different order.¹

Eighteen years later, in 1961, she commented on this review during biographical interviews:

That [review] really saved my universe in that period. I expected nothing like that from the *Times*. And it’s the only intelligent review I have really had in my whole career as far as novels are concerned. Later, we began to get some reviews on *The Fountainhead* from other cities. And there were several very good ones that were intelligent and which I appreciated. But you know that professionally nothing counts except the New York reviews. And more than that, the ones from the provinces, though intelligent, were not really intellectual, if you know the difference. They would summarize fairly, a great many of them weren’t afraid to mention the issue of individualism, but it wouldn’t be in the terms in which it’s stated in the book. I remember one of the best one of them that praised my theme, described Roark as a selfless architect.² It’s that sort of thing, you see, that undercuts any possible value it could have had for me personally.

What she especially liked about the Pruette review was

the fact, above everything else, that [Pruette] named the issue of individualism and collectivism, that she praised me as a writer, and that she quoted from Roark’s speech. Otherwise I would not say that it’s a review that would make me particularly happy, because of her comparisons to *The Magic Mountain* and *The Master Builder*. Why, I don’t know to this day, except that she wanted to suggest literature on a grand scale, apparently. So I can appreciate the intention. But this isn’t the kind of review that I would consider what I *really* would have wanted to give me a thrill. But within this culture and this context, it was better than I could expect from today’s people. . . . It was intelligent throughout. And that pleased me very much.³

Another prominent New York review was that in the *Herald-Tribune* (May 30), written by Albert Guerard, then an English professor at Harvard University. Guerard praised the novel as daring and colorful, intellectual but not “highbrow,” with a style that “would satisfy the most

exacting professor.” However, he characterized the selfless Peter Keating as “utterly selfish,” voiced the anti-Romanticism view that the characters aren’t “human,” and wrote that Ayn Rand is a Nietzschean who doesn’t understand America, which (he opined) is based on the rights of the majority and the Jeffersonian idea of equality, not “the divine right of genius.” But, he concludes, *The Fountainhead* is a “magnificent promise” and “marvelously clever.” In 1961 Ayn Rand also commented on this review:

[T]he review in the *Herald Tribune* was a horrible job. They gave it a very prominent place and all, but it was by some Leftist professor, who made a very careful job of not being clear what was *his* idea and what *I* was saying. So you couldn’t untangle from his review where facts ended, that is, what I said, what were *my* ideas, or what was the story, and [where] his commentary began. The two were completely a package deal. And he sat very carefully on every side of the fence. He was attacking and praising at the same time. And, you see, the key line was: This book is going to sell by the carload. And you could see that he was covering himself against that potentiality, that he didn’t like the book at all. This is the one that I disliked most, morally, as a review.⁴

If she read Orville Prescott’s May 12 review in the daily *New York Times*—she neither comments on it nor is there a copy in her collection—she must have found it as confused as that of Albert Guerard. Seemingly unaware of (or unable to understand) the novel’s ideological content (he describes Roark’s dedication as “selfless”), Prescott considers it nothing more than a melodrama. And he rides the fence: on the one hand, he holds, *The Fountainhead* makes no “claim to being art,” is filled with “grotesquely peculiar characters,” fails to make Roark “an understandable or sympathetic character,” and is difficult to take seriously. On the other hand, “seldom indeed has one first novel shone with so much concentrated intellectual passion”; *The Fountainhead*, he concludes, is “a whale of a book about architecture.”

Another New York review (author and date unknown) was singled out for her displeasure:

But the worst to me was the so-called conservatives. For instance, this man on the *Sun* wrote one of those reviews which is damning with faint praises. . . . Very interesting book. Yes, very nice, about architecture, in effect. That tone. Not one mention of the philosophical issue. It was strictly a book about two architects, one idealistic and one corrupt—that is the way he summarized it. But the worst of it was his conclusion of the summary. He said: This novel will give us great food for thought and would urge us—its message, in effect, is to urge us—to do something about clearing the slums. Believe it or not. Either the fool had never read the book, or had just glanced through it, and assuming it’s architectural, he just decided that necessarily had to be the message.⁵

The most outspokenly positive review came from the *New York Journal-American*’s syndicated columnist Benjamin De Casseres, who—in the second of his two columns (May 16 and August 11) on the book—wrote that “Howard Roark towers over any man in the United States,” that he is more real than any living American, and that he’s a real hero (not just the central character) in “the most original and daring book of fiction written in this country. . . . the ‘fountainhead’ is the ego—your ego, my ego—which is the dynamo of all action and thought whatsoever.” Casseres’s columns, which he sent to Miss Rand, led her to write to him, saying

that she'd been a reader of his column for years and always thought that Roark would be a testing stone, by which readers' reactions would measure their own natures.⁶

Another important—albeit small—review appeared in the *Nation*, part of a long column on “Fiction in Review” by Diana Trilling.⁷ It was a review that Ayn Rand termed a “nasty smear”:

Ayn Rand's “The Fountainhead” is a 754-page orgy of glorification of that sternest of arts, architecture. What Ruth McKenney's Jake Home⁸ is to the proletarian movement, Ayn Rand's Howard Roark is to public and domestic buildings—a giant among men, ten feet tall and with flaming hair, Genius on a scale that makes the good old Broadway version of art-in-a-beret look like Fra Angelico. And surrounding Howard Roark there is a whole galaxy of “lesser monsters”: Gail Wynand, who is Power, and Peter Keating, who is Success, and Dominique, who is Woman. When Genius meets Woman, it isn't the earth that rocks, but steel girders. Surely “The Fountainhead” is the curiosity of the year, and anyone who is taken in by it deserves a stern lecture on paper-rationing.

Other major publications dealt with the book: the *Saturday Review of Literature* (May 29), in a review by N. L. Rothman, gave it a mixed assessment but had the marvelous insight that “Roark is like the sun: it is difficult enough to see him, but to see anybody else afterward is impossible.” This was another review to draw a comment from Ayn Rand in 1961:

There was one review I liked, not as content, but as showing certain integrity in the writer, and that was in *The Saturday Review of Literature*. Because he very carefully synopsized what the book was about, praised it enormously literarily, and then in the concluding paragraphs he stated which ideas he doesn't agree with, and that he would disagree with the author on issues such and such and such. Now he didn't state the whole philosophical premise; it was more narrowly about responsibility to society or personal selfishness, so a little narrower than the theme actually is. What I admired, and which is unusual to this day, is that he could differentiate the two. That being obviously liberal, he was intellectually quite honest. . . . He did not indicate the basic ideology in the way that Lorine Pruette presented it very clearly. But he did indicate it enough that at least people would know this is not a book about architects.⁹

Aside from the New York reviews, there were, as she said, some “very intelligent ones” from other cities. Of particular meaning to her was that by Bett Anderson in the *Pittsburgh Press* (May 30). “Miss Rand,” offered Anderson,

has written an allegory, pitting Good against Evil, the individual against the herd. . . . She has set up a temple of words dedicated to all that is good and noble in man. She has written a book that is magnificent and bitter and challenging. Its impact is so terrific that the reader cannot fail to be shaken by its philosophy and its realism. Long after the book is finished, the feeling remains that it was a privilege to know Howard Roark, Architect.

And—in a brilliant prediction—Anderson termed it “a book which could conceivably change the life of anyone who read it.” Five years later, Anderson wrote to Bobbs-Merrill, requesting a

signed copy of the novel. In response, Ayn Rand sent her a tip sheet, writing that Anderson's review was "one of the only two which I shall always remember. Thank you for giving me hope at a time when I need it badly."¹⁰

Marjorie Davis's review in the *Birmingham News* (May 30) was the most philosophically oriented: "The book is the story of selfishness and unselfishness. It is an argument that the world is destroying itself by its selflessness, by its collectivist trend. The premise is that true selfishness, ego, the right of one man to be what his own mind demands, to create, alone, regardless of the pressure of opinion and of usage, is the fountainhead of human progress."

Kenneth Horan, writing in the *Chicago Tribune* (May 30), called the book original and brilliantly written, noting that it was against collectivism and in praise of the individual, but Horan thought that architecture was the *subject* rather than merely the background of the novel. In the *Boston Herald* (May 19), Alice Dixon Bond called the novel "provocative, powerful and at times brilliant" and identified the main issue as individualism vs. collectivism, quoting Ayn Rand that "there is no such thing as a collective brain."

Noted writer and critic Harvey Curtis Webster began his review¹¹ (headlined "You'll Admire This Radical") with a lengthy quote from Howard Roark at his trial ("one of the most moving trials in literature"), lauded all of the characterization and—though he considered the book a "half-truth" (since there have been self-appointed saviors who have helped humanity)—he nevertheless branded *The Fountainhead* "one of the better novels of our time."

None of the weekly news magazines, such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, reviewed it. It was, however, reviewed (but not positively) by major trade publications, so important in sales to bookstores and libraries. Felix E. Hirsch, in the *Library Journal* (April 15), thought it too long, made no mention of any ideas, and warned that "the amorous ways of Dominique Francon may not appeal to all." In *Book Week* (June 13), August Derleth found Ayn Rand's style to be "offensively pedestrian" and opined that she "has much to learn before she can write."

Four years after the U.S. publication, *The Fountainhead* was published in England but was as sparsely reviewed as in America. The *Times Literary Supplement*, in an unsigned review on November 15, 1947, said that it was not "responsible fiction," was thickly padded with concrete, an absurdly written book about a preposterous architect, pretentious and humorless, with gargoyles rather than characters—but sincere and surprisingly readable! The less-than-perceptive reviewer failed to grasp Roark's architectural philosophy (thinking it ultrafunctional, skeletal modernism) or Ayn Rand's style, damning it as "ultra-naturalistic."

A curious review appeared June 13, 1957, in the *Jewish Post*, a Winnipeg paper, which pointed out that Jewish youths were turning away from liberals and to *The Fountainhead*, despite it having "no Jewish characters, no Jewish issues." Apparently, the individualistic message of the novel was lost on that reviewer.

In 1968, on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *The Fountainhead*, the *New York Times* (May 7) published a retrospective on the novel's history and on Ayn Rand by Nora Ephron,¹² a piece so snide that Ephron was described in the author line as promising never again to read the novel. Ephron's cynical theme was a standard one for opponents of Ayn Rand: it's a novel and philosophy that she liked as a youth ("it is better read when one is young enough to miss the [philosophical] point"), but then she grew up and now realizes it's fit only for immature, unsophisticated teenagers—a sentiment that Ayn Rand had already analyzed in her preface to that particular edition.¹³

THE FILM

In 1949, six years after the publication of *The Fountainhead*, the film version opened. In her biographical interviews, Ayn Rand had little to say about the film reviews, though she did deplore some of the “conservative” reviews, such as that in the *Chicago Tribune*, whose Mae Tinee (July 26) found the script “a first-rate bore,” the characters “intolerant,” and the film in general “incredibly stupid.” Miss Rand’s collection contains only a few reviews, mostly from New York and Los Angeles. Most of the Los Angeles papers were very positive, in fact more positive than was Ayn Rand herself. The *Los Angeles Times*’s Ruth Waterbury (June 24) couldn’t imagine better casting than Gary Cooper as Roark, a performance praised by the other Los Angeles dailies. All reviews mention (almost in passing) that the theme is “rugged individualism.” Harrison Carroll of the *Evening Herald-Express* (June 24) wrote that Cooper’s “performance, like the character, has integrity,” and the *Mirror*’s Jack D. Grant (June 24) wrote that “seeing such heroes and heroines on the screen, I wonder why Hollywood bothers to turn out so many biographies of real people. Most real ones are far less interesting.” However, Darr Smith of the *Los Angeles Daily News* (July 24) was in the unique position of maintaining that the ideas of *The Fountainhead* were confusing, in fact “gargantuan” in their lack of clarity: “it is as if the producers were afraid to state any idea clearly—afraid that they might be called capitalistic social pariahs on [the] one hand or dangerous radicals on the other.”

The trade publications were also generally positive, *Box Office Digest* (June 25) calling King Vidor’s directing “masterful” and Gary Cooper’s performance “powerful” and quoting *Variety*’s conclusion that it’s “a blue-chip picture.” In a rave review, *Daily Variety* (June 23) termed Ayn Rand’s adaptation of her novel “masterful” and “a memorable achievement.” *The Hollywood Reporter* (June 23) was mixed, calling the film “compelling” but the characters “weird” and Ayn Rand’s dialogue “a poor imitation of Eugene O’Neill.”

National magazines were less than positive. *Newsweek* (July 25) complained that the “intellectual and moral issues become so complicated that it will bewilder anyone who has been clinging to the few wisps of logic that survive an even more baffling narrative.” And, rather than grant the film a review, *Life* magazine (March 6, 1950) merely listed it as one that it was “not sorry to snub,” branding it “a masterpiece of inanity.”

The New York media were brutal: “pretentious” (*World-Telegram*), “absurd” and “confusing” (*Daily News*); “silliest picture of the year” (*Sun*); and “half-baked philosophy” (*Daily Mirror*).¹⁴ *Cue* magazine (July 9, 1949) found the film even more “incomprehensible” than the novel and thought Ayn Rand had turned it into a “Sunday supplement story fit for the tabloids and the trash basket.” *The New Yorker* (July 17, 1949) made fun of the plot and revealed its own philosophic premises when it concluded that the “trial scene adds up to an endorsement of the notion that a talented individual owes nothing to society, a point of view that was probably popular in Cro-Magnon days.”

But the most important comments came in the *New York Times*, where it was reviewed by Bosley Crowther, the dean of reviewers, and in such a way as to presage much of the treatment of Ayn Rand in the next 33 years. In his formal review (July 9, 1949), Crowther blasted the film as “twaddle” and a “long-winded preachment on the rights of the individual.” But it was his July 17 column (“In a Glass House: Reckless Ideas Spouted by *The Fountainhead*”) that drew Ayn Rand’s written response. Crowther twitted Warner Bros, for making the film because, he opined, it justifies writers destroying films if studios change them. Crowther said almost nothing about the film, instead focusing on the message. Without naming any of the film’s ideas, he charged it

with having contempt for the masses, with being pretentious, and with having illogical, absurd, empty, and half-baked ideas. And, of course, a megalomaniac hero. One week later (July 24), the *Times* printed, as a letter to the editor, Ayn Rand's 750-word response.¹⁵ After praising Warner Bros, for its integrity and for producing "the most faithful adaptation of a novel ever to appear on the screen," she proceeded to name the things that Crowther damned by innuendo, i.e., the "dangerous ideas" and the "high-sounding but absurd and empty things." "Man," she wrote,

has an inalienable right to his own convictions and to his own work, the right to exist for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself; neither forcing his ideas upon others nor submitting to force, violence or breach of contract on their part; the only proper form of relationship between men is free exchange and voluntary choice. To whom can this philosophy be dangerous? Only to the advocates of man's enslavement, the Collectivists, such as Communists, Fascists, and all their lesser variations. To them, this philosophy is very dangerous indeed. . . . Am I to understand that Mr. Crowther shares (that) philosophy?¹⁶

With *The Fountainhead*, Ayn Rand became a presence in America culture. Her next (and final) novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, was not published for 14 years. Although she was far from pleased with reviews of *The Fountainhead*, they mark a high point: no other Ayn Rand book was reviewed positively in the *New York Times* until *Letters of Ayn Rand*, published 13 years after her death. Reviews of *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) and subsequent nonfiction books were generally so vitriolic as to make the *Fountainhead* reviews seem glowing by comparison.

NOTES

1. Michael S. Berliner, ed., *Letters of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 74–75. Ayn Rand's daily calendars note four meetings with Pruette, the first in 1947 on one of her visits to New York from California. The Ayn Rand Archives contains seven letters to her from Pruette and six letters from her to Pruette, between 1946 and 1951.

2. S. M. Sharkey Jr., in the *Philadelphia Inquirer Public Ledger*, May 23, 1943.

3. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).

4. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).

5. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).

6. See Berliner, *Letters of Ayn Rand*, 75, 91.

7. *The Nation*, June 12, 1943. In her 1993 memoir, former Communist sympathizer Trilling writes that "As fiction critic of the *Nation*, I would write as an avowed anti-Communist" (*The Beginning of the Journey* [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993], 181). However, she remained an avowed "liberal," who had become disillusioned with Stalin rather than with left-wing ideology—and thus hardly sympathetic to Ayn Rand's individualism.

8. Jake Home is a character in Ruth McKenney's 1943 novel of the same name.

9. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).

10. In the Ayn Rand Archives.

11. The clipping in the Archives contains the date (June 6) but omits the name of the newspaper. A longtime professor at the University of Louisville, Webster reviewed books for many major publications.

12. “*The Fountainhead Revisited*” is one of twelve chapters in *Wallflower at the Orgy*, a collection of Ephron essays (Viking Press, 1970).

13. “It is not in the nature of man—nor of any living entity—to start out by giving up, by spitting in one’s own face and damning existence. . . . Some give up at the first touch of pressure; some sell out; some run down by imperceptible degrees and lose their fire, never knowing when or how they lose it. Then all of these vanish in the vast swamp of their elders who tell them persistently that maturity consists of abandoning one’s mind; security, of abandoning one’s values; practicality, of losing self-esteem. Yet a few hold on and move on, knowing that the fire is not to be betrayed, learning how to give it shape, purpose and reality. But whatever their future, at the dawn of their lives, men seek a noble vision of man’s nature and of life’s potential. There are very few guideposts to find. *The Fountainhead* is one of them.”
(xi)

14. Alton Cook, *New York World-Telegram*, July 9, 1949; Wanda Hale, *New York Daily News*, July 9, 1949; Eileen Creelman, *New York Sun*, July 9, 1949 (Creelman also lamented that Roark “had no thought for the people who’d been counting on those homes” he blew up); Lee Mortimer, *New York Daily Mirror*, July 9, 1949.

15. For the complete letter, see *The Intellectual Activist*, March 1996.

16. The film continues to attract attention (usually unsympathetic) as a subject of cultural analyses. See, for example, Peter Biskind’s *Seeing Is Believing* (Pantheon, 1983) and Robert Spadoni’s “Guilty by Omission: Girding *The Fountainhead* for the Cold War” (*Literature Film Quarterly*, January 1, 1999).