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Publishing *Atlas Shrugged*

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SELECTING A PUBLISHER

Ayn Rand had to struggle for years to *find* a publisher for each of her first three novels. That was not necessary for *Atlas Shrugged*, for which she merely needed to *select* a publisher. The success of *The Fountainhead*, its ongoing sales, and the well-known motion picture based on that novel for which she wrote the screenplay, meant that her next novel was eagerly anticipated by the publishing industry. The publication of her first three novels in America required a tenacious strategy to find a single publisher for each that was capable and willing to reach those she knew to be her potential readers. In contrast, the publication of *Atlas Shrugged* was the result of making the most discerning and appropriate choice among many willing publishers.

Ayn Rand also had to struggle with the literary agents who had represented her first three novels. Although she exercised more plain sense about book publishing than many publishers ever displayed, and had a very clear understanding of the unique characteristics of each novel and the precise readership it would attract, she eagerly sought out any agent with specialized knowledge and established contacts in the industry who might help find the right publisher. Yet after years of frustration with the representation of *The Fountainhead* she removed it from her agent and represented it herself until it was published by Bobbs-Merrill. For the rest of her life, that novel was not represented by any U.S. agent.

After the publication of *The Fountainhead* Rand began a relationship with Alan Collins at Curtis Brown Ltd. to represent the rights for a film adaptation. (The sub-agent in Hollywood was Berg-Allenberg—which was acquired after the production of the film by William Morris in December, 1949.) Although Rand was not impressed by the performance of Berg-Allenberg during production, she became increasingly confident with the relationship with Alan Collins. By 1950 she had moved her earlier works still handled by the Ann Watkins Agency to Curtis Brown, and at that time made the decision that her next novel would also be represented by Collins.¹ From 1943 the relationship with Collins, and after his death with Perry Knowlton at Curtis Brown, continued until Rand's death nearly forty years later. This provided Rand with the trusted assistance of a well-established agent in selecting a publisher for *Atlas Shrugged*. She was effectively able to benefit from or overrule his judgment as appropriate.

As early as 1946 before Rand had even started writing the book Collins received an offer of a combined advance and advertising guarantee of \$125,000 from Appleton. In 1950 they were approaching Collins again with an offer for half that amount. At that time Archie Ogden, Rand's former editor at Bobbs-Merrill—who had famously put his job on the line to publish *The Fountainhead*—was working for them, and Rand thought they assumed she would like to work with Ogden again (she would have). But she was not yet ready to talk to publishers.²

Rand began the search for a publisher in late 1955 after completion of the radio broadcast speech by John Galt. (She did not include the speech in manuscripts provided to publishers, but held it back until she made the final selection.) The contract for *The Fountainhead* with Bobbs-Merrill gave them the first look at a new novel. Other than her contacts with her editor Archie Ogden—who had long since left Bobbs-Merrill—she had been very dissatisfied with their production, advertising, and promotion of the book. The only one at Bobbs-Merrill that she had enjoyed working with after Ogden was their editor Hiram Haydn, and he had recently departed for a position at Random House.

After reviewing the manuscript Ross Baker at Bobbs-Merrill invited Rand to dinner to discuss his list of proposed changes and cuts, and another long list of changes prepared by their editors. She did not consider that an appropriate subject for dinner conversation and declined the offer. After appealing without success to Alan Collins to be given a hearing for his cuts, Baker asserted that the book as written was unsalable and unpublishable. Although he was not shown the long speech by John Galt, Baker particularly objected to the other speeches which he thought were inappropriate in the context of the novel—especially mentioning his dislike of the “Money Speech” in that regard. From the publisher of *The Fountainhead*, with its own important speeches, that was a remarkable comment. Rand concluded of Bobbs-Merrill: “they remembered nothing and learned nothing.”³ (Although Rand was clearly in the driver’s seat for the first time in selecting a publisher for her fourth novel, that did not mean that most publishers had any better idea of what they were dealing with than they ever had.)

Word about Bobbs-Merrill circulated quickly and many publishers began to contact Curtis Brown about the book. McGraw-Hill had already been aggressively making inquiries of Alan Collins. As a strong business publisher they were evidently looking for more best-selling fiction, and offered a strong promotional campaign. Rand was initially suspicious of the religious views of the Catholic owners. Collins had a high regard for the ability of Knopf to sell the book, but they were having a bit of a management crisis as the owners had difficulty in turning control of the firm over to their son and kept going into and out of retirement. Archie Ogden had an arrangement with Viking for bringing it titles for which he would freelance as an outside editor. Neither Collins nor Rand were comfortable with such arrangements.⁴

Hiram Haydn then proposed a luncheon meeting with Random House president Bennett Cerf and his partner Donald Klopfer. They had acquired what became Random House in 1925 and turned it into a major publisher.⁵ Rand liked the intellectual atmosphere but not their left-wing reputation in the 1930s and 1940s. However Haydn told her that a single editor of many years was largely responsible for the political bias which had improved since he left the company.

Collins strongly opposed a first meeting over lunch with publishers at that level and thought Random House had too large a list to give the title adequate attention. Haydn was persistent; and then Cerf, who was publishing a lot of Curtis Brown’s authors, called Collins and asked him what he had against Random House regarding this title. That was a bit awkward for Collins and he scheduled a lunch. Rand was very impressed by that as she felt she would have done the same thing as Cerf.

Rand later called the lunch “the most exciting publishing meeting I have ever had in my career.” She felt they listened, faced ideas openly, were enthusiastic, and gave straight answers to her questions. She was most impressed by a suggestion of Cerf and a question by Klopfer. Cerf proposed the unusual step of submitting the book simultaneously to several publishers and requesting proposals on how they would respond to its ideological content and how they would

handle the book. Their respective responses to the controversial nature of the book would give a good indication of what could be expected from them if they were to publish it. Rand was delighted, but Collins was horrified as that sort of thing was just not done. He did say he would consider it and let them know. Rand told them nothing about the book except its theme as an uncompromising defense of capitalism, and that any publisher would encounter opposition from both the political Right and Left. Klopfer then asked, “But if this is an uncompromising defense of capitalism, wouldn’t you have to clash with the Judeo-Christian tradition of ethics?” She had never heard anyone else observe that and responded that that was her main point—that capitalism needed a moral defense because it does clash with Judeo-Christian tradition—which increased his interest.⁶ Later due to the response of Cerf and Klopfer, Collins conceded that the lunch was not such a bad idea. Rand appreciated the fact that her agent was open to reason and changing his mind on such issues.

Collins and Rand also met with Pat Knopf from whom there were some indications of competence if not maturity, but he could not agree to the idea of a competition with other publishers because his supposedly retired father (Alfred A. Knopf) would never approve of such an exercise.⁷ (It was just as well that Rand did not become associated with this corporate version of a family dispute. By 1960 Alfred Knopf had sold his firm to Random House after Pat Knopf had left in 1959 to found Atheneum Publications—with Hiram Haydn who had left Random House. A not unusual turn of events in American book publishing.)

Rand prepared a list of “Qualifications of Ideal Publisher” as follows:

1. Understanding of the nature of the book.
2. Understanding of the nature of the book’s appeal.
3. Ability to sell the book aggressively and properly.
4. Independence of judgment, which would withstand influence when under fire.
5. Enthusiasm: a. for job of publishing. b. for me specifically.
6. Rationality in method of approach to issues and to communication with me.⁸

About a dozen major publishers had expressed interest to Collins. Of these three were chosen to consider the manuscript and their responses were evaluated and charted based on these criteria. Random House received two question marks and five pluses; Viking Press received seven minuses; McGraw-Hill four question marks and three minuses. Rand also wrote a narrative summary of her judgment on each of the points for each publisher. The following are brief extracts from these evaluations.

1. Remarks about Random House included: “They appeared to want *me* specifically, and not just an author who sold.” “They seemed to be on the policy of figuring things out, *not* of acting on precedent and routine.” “If they go after readers as they went after me, I could not ask for anything better.” “The direct, open and purposeful method of conversation; I had the feeling of being heard and being answered, the conversation was fully in focus.”
2. Remarks about Viking Press: “[The publisher] had not read *The Fountainhead* and did not ask a single question about me or my new book” and “he displayed enormous reluctance to enter into an issue of *intellectual values* and to take a stand on his own ideas.”
3. Remarks about McGraw-Hill: There were one or two signs of hope as when the publisher remarked that “The *Fountainhead* sold because it made people think.”

But he “never asked a single question about the nature of the new book.” “*Most dangerous sign for me*: his statement that, as an editor, he ‘might’ say that some paragraph is wrong because he so feels, without being able to state his reasons.”⁹

Rand had some concern if Random House would be able to “fight for a controversial book,” and in the event she was disappointed at Cerf’s “helplessness and fear” in the face of frightful reviews. (Random House did have a record from early days of supporting controversial authors, famously winning a court case to publish James Joyce in the United States.¹⁰) But Random House was the clear winner of the competition which Cerf had proposed, and Collins and Rand paid him a visit to tell him Random House would receive the first submission of the manuscript. They received the manuscript complete up to Galt’s speech in Part III. After Cerf, Klopfer, and Haydn read the script, Collins and Rand were invited to Cerf’s office where he announced: “It’s a great book; name your terms.” Rand told them about the length of the speech and the three final chapters. Then terms were agreed to on the advance, royalty, initial press run, and advertising guarantee in five minutes. A press release on September 7, 1956, conveys the tone of the relationship at that time:

Author of THE FOUNTAINHEAD joins Random House. Ayn Rand’s First Novel under Random House imprint to be called ATLAS SHRUGGED.

Random House is gratified to announce one of the most noteworthy author-publisher associations in the firm’s history, in the signing of Ayn Rand. Author of THE FOUNTAINHEAD, which sold over 700,000 copies in the original trade edition and was one of the most widely discussed books in recent decades, Miss Rand’s first novel under the Random House imprint is a major work. Approximately 1,000 pages in length, the new book is titled ATLAS SHRUGGED. The publisher expects to bring it out sometime in 1957.¹¹

The top management of Random House seemed genuinely enthusiastic about the book. Haydn reported that after reading the end of Part I on the completion of the John Galt Line railroad project, Cerf came running out of his office waiving the manuscript and calling it a great book. What impressed Rand was that both Cerf and Klopfer, while not claiming to agree with most of her ideas, took them seriously and thought they were very important. When Donald Klopfer told her that *Atlas Shrugged* had changed his mind about many issues, Rand invited him to lunch to find out what they were. He told her that he had not previously realized the extent to which success in industry and business depended on intelligence and ability. He had himself felt guilty when reproached for his success but could not understand why. He told Ayn Rand that she had solved that problem for him. While Cerf was friendly toward her ideas, he was intellectually and emotionally ill-equipped to survive the vicious reviews of the book with equanimity. That had not surprised Rand (nor had the reviews which would not have been easy for any publisher to take).

Although Rand had remained friendly for many years with her editor at Bobbs-Merrill, Archie Ogden, long after he left that publisher, she had never had a friendly personal relationship with the chief executives of any publisher. She had succeeded in establishing a substantive relationship with perhaps the two most prominent leaders in American publishing in the twentieth century. For a book that would challenge the entire intellectual establishment and culture, that was extremely fortuitous.

That relationship lasted for several years through their licensing of a paperback edition, and their publication of *We the Living* and *For the New Intellectual*. Eventually it would crumble under the pressure of Cerf's inability to stand up to the conformity of his editors—to what today would be described as “political correctness”—when during the perceived Camelot of the Kennedy Administration they could not live with a projected book project on “the Fascist New Frontier.” But by that time the course for *Atlas Shrugged* had been set on its way toward reaching millions of readers.

Ayn Rand did come to regret that when finalizing the business arrangement, things were going so well that she forgot to require her approval for any advertising by Random House for *Atlas Shrugged*.¹²

MARKETING AND PROMOTION

The advertising for the book was not significantly less inept than that for her previous novels. Suggested advertising copy given to Cerf was well received by him, but did not survive in his advertising department. (One challenge in working with any large publisher is that advertising and artistic staffs do not have time to read—much less understand—most of the new books they are promoting. They did not have a clue about what they were trying to sell.) Random House did attend at least adequately to the basics of publicity and getting out review copies.¹³

One exception was an ad done as a personal favor. It reproduced a painting of Ayn Rand's husband, Frank O'Connor, over the headline “This is John Galt.” More typical were small ads whose only message other than the title of the novel was “Ayn Rand's First Novel Since *The Fountainhead*.” Eloquent in its simplicity, but needless to say more could have been said.¹⁴

As disappointed as Ayn Rand was with the advertising she was generally forgiving of Random House. She felt they did the best job they were capable of doing, and a better job than any other publisher would have done. Her judgment at that time was: “Random House is wonderful and the best of what there is today.”¹⁵

Rand herself took up the primary role of promoting the book. She had projected her highest vision of man's potential as a heroic being in *Atlas Shrugged*. If that was to serve what she later described as “the motive and purpose of my writing” it would need to reach those worthy of and in need of that vision.¹⁶

Ayn Rand did not enjoy public speaking yet she had welcomed opportunities to speak for many years in order to call attention to her novels *We the Living* and later *The Fountainhead*. After the publication of *Atlas Shrugged* she began to respond to invitations from colleges to lecture. She also made herself available and gave frequent interviews to print and broadcast media. Over the years, talks such as “The Objectivist Ethics” (at the University of Wisconsin) or “Philosophy: Who Needs It” (to the U.S. Military Academy) became the leading articles in published anthologies of her nonfiction. In one sense, all of her writing and public speaking over the next twenty-five years can be understood as a means of elaborating on and explaining concepts introduced in *Atlas Shrugged*, but just as importantly of promoting that book to new readers. More than twenty extensive interviews were conducted at Columbia University from 1962–1966 and broadcast on radio. A remarkable series of seventeen substantive lectures were delivered for the Ford Hall Forum in Boston between 1961 and 1981. Many television interviews were broadcast including those with Johnny Carson, Tom Snyder, Phil Donahue, Edwin

Newman, Louis Rukeyser, and Mike Wallace. Substantial printed interviews were given to such diverse publications as *Playboy* and *The Christian Science Monitor*.¹⁷

Rand also tried to answer as much fan mail as she could, as she had for earlier novels. She especially liked to respond to any spark of understanding revealed in a fan letter. To give one example, in 1960 she responded to a letter expressing concern about the indeterminate fate of the character Eddie Willers at the end of *Atlas Shrugged*: “Eddie Willers is not necessarily destined to die; in a free society, he will live happily and productively; in a collectivist society he will be the first to perish. He does not have the ability to create a new society of his own, but he is much too able and too honest ever to adjust himself to collectivism.”¹⁸

One specific objective of Rand’s in the publication of *For the New Intellectual* was to promote sales of the paperback edition of *Atlas Shrugged*. (It probably did that, as *For the New Intellectual* itself has sold more than one million copies.) This was the first of seven books of philosophy prepared in her lifetime ranging from ethics and epistemology to political economy and literature. They all referred to and were rooted in the philosophical principles incorporated in *Atlas Shrugged*.

An editor at one of Ayn Rand’s publishers, when asked many years later how they had sold Rand’s books, answered “they sell themselves.”¹⁹ While that may be insightful, it is not entirely true as a publisher is definitely needed to both produce and effectively distribute any book so that those who are looking for a book can easily find and acquire it. Rand would have said that “word of mouth” was the most effective means of promotion.

Realizing this, it is obvious that Ayn Rand nonetheless vigorously and continuously supported this phenomenon with her own speaking and writing. Since her death in 1982 this confrontation of the culture with the vision of man presented in *Atlas Shrugged* has been sustained by the Executor of the Estate of Ayn Rand, Dr. Leonard Peikoff, in his own writing and lecturing, and in his close oversight of the publication and sale of *Atlas Shrugged* and Rand’s other books. His establishment of the Ayn Rand Institute also created an enduring institutional structure that continues to promote Ayn Rand’s works, including *Atlas Shrugged*, to young people and their teachers, scholars, business professionals, and other new readers.

PUBLISHING HISTORY AND SALES

The initial press run by Random House was 100,000 copies. Three days after the publication date of October 10, 1957, the book appeared on the *New York Times* best-seller list as #6. It remained on the list for twenty-one weeks, peaking at #4 for a six-week period beginning December 8, 1957.²⁰ Net sales of the book were nearly 70,000 copies in the first twelve months, which in those days put the book firmly in the “best-seller” category.²¹ *Atlas Shrugged* was Ayn Rand’s first novel to achieve that status immediately upon publication. Total sales of the Random House hardcover editions reached 250,000 copies by the time Dutton, a division of Penguin Group (USA), became the publisher in 1992.²²

By the time *Atlas Shrugged* was published, it had become clear to Ayn Rand that a paperback edition, if preceded by a successful hardcover edition, would reach far more readers and have the most impact on the culture. This reflected a major change in book publishing following the publication of *The Fountainhead*, which did not go into a paperback edition until nine years after it was first published. The paperback publisher was New American Library (NAL). Ayn Rand had a good working relationship with Victor Weybright, one of the founders with Ken Enoch of NAL. In many ways they held a similar stature as major figures in American

paperback publishing to that of Cerf and Klopfer at Random House for hardcover books. They had been hired in 1945 to head an American branch of Penguin Books. They went on to found their own firm in 1948, the New American Library of World Literature. (In 1987 NAL was acquired by Penguin Group (USA), closing the circle, as it were.)²³ The fact that *Atlas Shrugged* benefited from a literary agent, a publisher, and a paperback publisher at this level in whom Ayn Rand had confidence was entirely unprecedented in her experience.

The first paperback edition was published by NAL in July of 1959 with an initial press run of 150,000 copies. It also had a net sale of nearly 70,000 copies in the first twelve months.²⁴ *Atlas Shrugged* appeared on the paperback best-seller list of the *New York Times* on at least a couple of occasions, including #8 on January 15, 1961, and #8 on April 7, 1963.²⁵

Many translations have been published in the last fifty years. Those currently in print include Chinese, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Marathi, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, and Turkish.

Most remarkable about a novel in print for fifty years is the increasingly strong trend in sales over recent years. Paperback sales by New American Library to the book trade averaged 77,600 copies a year in the 1980s, 95,200 copies a year in the 1990s, and 134,600 copies a year so far in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In its fiftieth anniversary year (2007), annual sales reached an all-time high of more than 180,000 copies. A new British edition was published in 2007 by Penguin Modern Classics in London, and a new Penguin edition in Australia in 2008. Penguin Group (USA) currently publishes four editions: hardcover, two trade paperback editions, and one mass market edition. At this writing total sales exceed 6,250,000 copies²⁶—a remarkable total for a lengthy, serious, intellectual novel that enshrined businessmen and industrialists as the unacknowledged heroic leaders of human progress, and directly challenged the traditional moral and philosophical pretensions of modern society.

While marketing and sales activities of the publisher have expanded and become more effective in recent years, and have taken optimal advantage of opportunities such as the centennial of Ayn Rand's birth and the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Atlas Shrugged*, that alone cannot explain the steady increase in sales far beyond those achieved during the author's lifetime. Ayn Rand always respected the important role that word-of-mouth promotion played in the gradual increase in sales of all of her books. She was always confident that if she reached enough of "my kind of readers" they in turn would reach even more. No one promotes *Atlas Shrugged* to new readers more effectively than readers of *Atlas Shrugged*. That is the most enduring of all sales trends. It is the direct result of the immutable and eternal artistic achievement of *Atlas Shrugged* dedicated "to the glory of Man."²⁷

NOTES

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1. Michael S. Berliner, ed., *Letters of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 488.
 2. Berliner, *Letters of Ayn Rand*, 469.
 3. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).
 4. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).
 5. "A History of Random House" (Random House website).
 6. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).
 7. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).
 8. Unpublished notes (Ayn Rand Archives).

9. Unpublished notes (Ayn Rand Archives).
10. "A History of Random House."
11. Random House Press Release (Ayn Rand Archives).
12. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).
13. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).
14. Press Clippings (Ayn Rand Archives).
15. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).
16. Ayn Rand, "The Goal of My Writing," *The Romantic Manifesto* (New York: Signet, 1975), 162.
17. Published and broadcast interviews preserved in Ayn Rand Archives.
18. Berliner, *Letters of Ayn Rand*, 564.
19. Interviews, Ayn Rand Archives.
20. Press Clippings and Publishers' Reports in Ayn Rand Archives.
21. Royalty Ledgers, Curtis Brown Ltd., New York City.
22. Publishers' Reports (Estate of Ayn Rand).
23. "About Us" New American Library, Penguin Group (USA) website.
24. Royalty Ledgers, Curtis Brown Ltd., New York City.
25. Press Clippings in Ayn Rand Archives.
26. Publishers' Reports (Estate of Ayn Rand).
27. Rand, "The Goal of My Writing," 172.