

The libertarian novelist held money to be "the root of all good" and Alan Greenspan was a devotee. Why, when capitalism is in crisis, is Ayn Rand enjoying a revival?

### **How big is Rand's comeback?**

She has always had a strong libertarian following in the US, but her magnum opus, the 1,088-page *Atlas Shrugged*, has enjoyed a big surge in sales since the start of the financial crisis. It sold 200,000 copies in the US in 2008; this year it's selling at its fastest rate since first published in 1957. Sales have spiked, says the *Economist*, whenever the US government has tried to prop up the economy: during the sub-prime crisis, last October's bank bailouts and the passing of Obama's economic stimulus package. In January the book reached 33 on Amazon.com's bestseller list, briefly surpassing Obama's *The Audacity of Hope*. It is now at number 20, four places above Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* and *The Rights of Man*.

### **What happens in *Atlas Shrugged*?**

Rand's fourth novel describes a dystopian United States in which industrialists and the rest of America's "producers" – oppressed by government regulation – are persuaded by the novel's hero, charismatic inventor John Galt, to forsake the world of mediocrities, parasites and "second-handers" (ie those foolish enough to care about altruism and looking after the needy) and go on strike. The strikers, or "Atlases", retreat to a mountain hideaway, where they build an independent, unregulated economy. The strike stops the "motor of the world": machines break down, factories close, Fifth Avenue shops are boarded up, skyscrapers crumble, people riot, pirates roam the seas. The litter-strewn streets become hunting grounds for beggars and criminals. In the end, the socialists who have provoked this catastrophe beg Galt to take over the economy.

### **To whom does the book appeal?**

People more scared of governments than bankers. Many right-wing pundits and bloggers in the US see shades of socialism in the response to the present crisis. Obama's economic strategy "is right out of *Atlas Shrugged*", writes Stephen Moore in the *Wall Street Journal*. "The more incompetent you are in business, the more handouts the politicians will bestow on you." More fanatical market liberals even predict a Rand-style revolution, in which those tired of making sacrifices for fellow citizens decide to "Go Galt", by withdrawing labour or refusing to pay taxes. On Capitol Hill, Republican congress-man John Campbell has been handing out copies of the novel to his interns. "The achievers, the people who create all the things that benefit the rest of us, are going on strike," he says.

### **And who was Ayn Rand?**

Born Alissa Zinovievna Rosenbaum in 1905 in St Petersburg, her father was an entrepreneur whose business was seized by the Bolsheviks. In 1925 she fled to America, changed her name to Rand, and began working for Cecil B DeMille in Hollywood, before moving to New York to become a writer. She wrote two short novels before gaining popularity in 1943 with *The Fountain-head*, the story of a fanatical architect driven by the "second-handers" to blow up his own building. But it was *Atlas Shrugged*, published 14 years later, that made her a national institution and gave the world, or at least the US, a new philosophy.

### **What was the name of that philosophy?**

Objectivism, which she described as "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". The only social system consistent with this morality, Rand insisted, is pure, unfettered capitalism, and the only function of government is the protection of individual rights. She rejected religion. Altruism, in her view, was evil. President Obama's view that the crisis requires all Americans to make sacrifices would have left her distinctly unimpressed. Noam Chomsky described Rand as "one of the most evil figures of modern intellectual history".

### **And which Americans took Objectivism seriously?**

Rand attracted a group of disciples, known (with self-conscious irony) as *The Collective*, which included former Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan. It wasn't just her ideas that inspired the group: it was Rand's charisma. At the height of her popularity in the 1950s and early 1960s, Rand cut a highly exotic figure with her bobbed hair, heavy Russian accent, dollar-sign brooches and long cigarettes, smoked with a holder. She saw smoking as a Promethean symbol of creativity and regarded health warnings as a socialist conspiracy. When she died in 1982, a 6ft-high floral dollar sign was erected by her open coffin.

### **And did Objectivism outlast the death of its founder?**

Rand's turgid prose and uncomfy message made little impact in Europe, but a 1991 survey by the Library of Congress described *Atlas Shrugged* as the second-most influential book in the US after the Bible. Several universities have founded centres for the study of her views. Ronald Reagan was a fan; so were sports stars like Martina Navratilova and Chris Evert. But of all her prominent admirers it was Alan Greenspan who was most devoted. He even invited Rand to his swearing-in to Gerald Ford's Council of Economic Advisers in 1974. His 18-year reign as chairman of the Fed, during which he presided over the unprecedented growth and deregulation of the US economy, was arguably the apogee of Objectivism.

### **Is Greenspan still a devotee?**

Not as ardent as he once was. Last year Greenspan admitted there was a "flaw" in his

free-market ideology. "I was shocked," he told Congress, "because I had been going for 40 years or more with very considerable evidence that it was working exceptionally well." This admission hasn't gone down well with Rand disciples, who have distanced them-selves from their former champion. "I believe Greenspan sold his soul to the devil," says Yaron Brook, the head of the Ayn Rand Institute.