

For some, she never went away. But Ayn Rand is having a mainstream moment.

Tea party protesters hoisted signs reading "Ayn Rand was right" and "Who is John Galt?" at the Sept. 12 taxpayer march. There's talk that Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt are attempting to bring "Atlas Shrugged" to the big screen. Nearly every major media outlet — including GQ and The Daily Show with Jon Stewart — reviewed the two new Rand biographies. South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford (R) penned a piece on Rand's newfound relevance for Newsweek.

Rand has even gone prime time. In a sketch on Jimmy Fallon, recession-stricken audience members ate pages out of Rand's books for sustenance. Chris Matthews, Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh all recommend her work. CNBC reporter Rick Santelli's on-air tirade against government intervention made him a cult hero. He later explained: "I know this may not sound very humanitarian, but at the end of the day I'm an Ayn Rand-er."

While interest in Rand may simply be cyclical, this round comes at a time of renewed government intervention in the private sector — from bailouts to salary caps to health care reform. It's an era of big government all too similar to the dystopia described in "Atlas Shrugged."

Rep. John Campbell (R-Calif.), who counts Rand among his strongest influences, sees the interest as a natural development of the times. "What you're seeing is a president and a Congress that very much favor collective over individual and believe we should all operate as units of a larger homogenous group," he said, "rather than individuals with separate ideas and choice. When you see that kind of threat over the horizon, which it is right now, people begin to fall back on what has been learned in past and what has been written in the past."

But Rand's popularity almost crashed with the stock market. As the current economic catastrophe unfurled, former Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan issued a mea culpa. The once-infallible Maestro — one of Rand's most powerful disciples and once a member of her New York salons — admitted he had misplaced faith in the ability of markets to self-regulate.

When Jennifer Burns, author of new book "Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American

Right,” heard that, she worried. “I thought, ‘Wow, Ayn Rand. Dead and buried forever.’ But she’s come roaring right back. People are not looking so much at the origins of the crisis, but the response to the crisis.”

And it’s not just more media attention. Penguin shipped more than 300,000 copies of “Atlas Shrugged” in the first half of 2009. Last year, the publisher distributed 85,000 books. When the Cato Institute hosted a forum last week for Burns and another Rand biographer, the audience nearly doubled the auditorium’s capacity. Chairs had to be set up outside, so people could watch it broadcast on television.

Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) picked up his magnum opus on Objectivism earlier this year and tweeted about it: “Still reading Atlas Shrugged — it’s quite the read.”

And in Campbell’s office, every departing intern is given a copy of “Atlas Shrugged.” “I point out to them that it’s not an easy read because it’s a long book and rather tedious at times,” Campbell said. “But I explain to them, it shows power of individual over the power of the state.”

Others fans in Congress include Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) and Rep. Ed Royce (R-Calif.).

“Our staff is very well read, from Ayn Rand to Friedrich Hayek to Hernando de Soto,” Royce’s press secretary Audra McGeorge wrote in an e-mail to POLITICO. “Their hope is to better understand the implications of what appears to be a drastic shift toward a government-run economy.”

True Randians see some inconsistencies though. “While they claim to be big fans and claim to support the ideas, they certainly don’t vote that way,” said Yaron Brook, president of the Ayn Rand Institute. “It’s an endless frustration to us.”

“Some people didn’t get the philosophical message,” said David Boaz, Cato’s executive vice president, who noticed that some readers simply digest the plots of “Atlas Shrugged” and “The Fountainhead.” “To them, it is an exciting novel about a woman who runs her own railroad or an architect who blows up his own building. But even if 10 percent get the philosophical message,

that's a lot of free marketers being created."

The Ayn Rand Institute is not just maintaining a museum. It sponsored the Sept. 12 taxpayer march, and this year shipped 350,000 free copies of "Anthem," "The Fountainhead" and "Atlas Shrugged" to high school teachers across the country. The institute's annual "Atlas Shrugged" essay contest offers (what else?) cash prizes.

What makes 2009 the Year of Ayn Rand is that there's a growing acceptance of the author's most stringent beliefs. Her fans disregard that Rand hated compromise — and therefore politics. She was an atheist and disdained libertarians, whom she deemed hippies and plagiarists. ("Please don't tell me they're pursuing my goals," Rand said in an interview. "I have not asked for, nor do I accept, the help of intellectual cranks.")

Nick Gillespie, editor-in-chief of Reason.com and Reason.tv, media with strong Randian roots, said Rand would probably hate her current moment in the spotlight. "As much as she hated people, she saved her true ire for those who were actually fans of hers," he said.