

## WORST NOVEL OF THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY

By Ron Kenner

Decades ago, when I was the token pinko working on the copydesk of the Register in Orange County, CA, I used to argue at length with publisher RC Hoiles (1878 – 1970), late publisher of the Freedom Newspapers, and well recognized by journalists, at least, as one of the loopyest publishers in the nation then. I was on the desk for more than a year and Hoiles liked me because I was one of the few reporters or journalists who would take the time to argue with him (on his paycheck, anyway).

Even in Orange County those days, which brought in the biggest votes for Goldwater, Reagan, and Nixon, the word then was that only some seven percent of the readership read the editorial page. Not too surprising, actually, given that Hoiles' simple idea of unrestrained individualism was that anything that cost tax money was communistic – schools, fire departments, post offices, police, etc. And as some of you already know, Hoiles's one great hero was Ayn Rand, the novelist who gave "message writing" a bad name even among right wing reviewers.

I still well recall how once I attended a luncheon in Catalina, CA, and fortuitously was seated next to the architect Richard Neutra's wife, and somehow the subject of *The Fountainhead* came up, Ayn Rand's first major literary success and one of the few books in which even the movie was better. It had Gary Cooper and Patricia Neal.

As with *Atlas Shrugged*, *The Fountainhead*, kind of the fountain of Rand's lifelong Objectivist philosophy, extolled individualism and creative egoism, another book in which even the movie was better. At least It had Gary Cooper. But either book would be, for my take, another "worst novel" contender.

In *The Fountainhead*, published in 1943, Rand pays tribute to a creative architect, Howard Rourke, whom she feels should not be held back by cheap commercialism and who finally blows up his project because he didn't like the end result after the businessmen got through with it. Of course as Neutra's wife pointed out, such works are not merely the work of one individual, no matter how creative, and hardly merely "his" property because even the very creative design is to considerable extent based on the material made available to him from others.

Maybe because this plot boasts rebellion by a creative adult the book seemed particularly popular among teens and young readers.

*Atlas Shrugged*, another testimony to 'rational' self interest and individualism carried to extreme, and presuming it will get Angelina Jolie for the movie, augurs to be another of those occasional movies better than the book.



I mention all this to say, OK, *Atlas Shrugged* may be the worst novel of the year that you might have reread except that you could see the movie. However, I have another candidate as the worst novel of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and I'm surprised it has received so little mention in recent times. And that's Michael Crichton's *State of Fear*, a novel about hysterical environmentalists who turn terrorists and seek to create a major environmental catastrophe to prove their case for global warming — a concern that Crichton himself, at least in past years, hasn't taken too seriously.

Given the relevance of the extremist deregulation and unrestrained "individualism" in modern times — from Reagan to GWB (who supposedly has evangelical faith but apparently little appreciation of credible science) *Atlas Shrugged* may be a good candidate for one of the worst novels ever. It's certainly more poorly written than anything Crichton ever wrote, and yet there are good arguments that sometimes the message is significant, especially if it's a highly questionable message and coming from someone of the stature of Crichton.

I must admit I've enjoyed some of Crichton's other literary works and acknowledge that he's not without literary talent. And in the case of *Jurassic Park*, at least, this time the movie, despite its lively animation, was much worse and even seemed to miss the main point of the novel.

There isn't space here to comment at any length on Crichton's *State of Fear*, and admittedly it was tough enough to finish reading it the first time, let alone reread it; but, concerning this work, I have read some follow-up material that seems considerably more credible to me . Here's a sampling.

<http://www.wunderground.com/education/stateoffear.asp>

<http://www.realclimate.org/index.php?p=74>

[http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2005/0128energy\\_sandalow.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2005/0128energy_sandalow.aspx)