

Some products do comparatively well in times of recession: alcohol, chocolate, cinema tickets, cigarettes. But one surprise bestseller of the economic Armageddon is a decades-old science fiction novel about an imaginary economic Armageddon - popular now, its fans insist, because the collapse of civilisation it describes is on the verge of coming true.

Sales of Ayn Rand's 1957 book *Atlas Shrugged* - a hymn in praise of radical individualism, extreme self-interest and laissez-faire capitalism - are surging as the crisis deepens, according to TitleZ, a service that tracks sales trends on Amazon.

As of yesterday, the book's 30-day average rank on the website was 110, far above its average rank of 542 over the last two years. On 13 January it even briefly outperformed Barack Obama's wildly popular work *The Audacity of Hope*. Yesterday it was in 55th place, between *The Reader* and a book on cultivating very small gardens.

*Atlas Shrugged* tends to inspire either cult-like devotion or sarcastic mockery in readers, who are either thrilled or appalled by Rand's vision of a world in which the "men of the mind" - inventors, entrepreneurs and industrialists - withdraw their labour from a society intent on bleeding them dry with taxes and regulations.

Furious at being exploited by the government on behalf of the masses, who are described as "parasites" and "moochers", the striking capitalists retreat to a camp in the mountains of Colorado, protected by a special holographic shield.

Starved of their genius, society collapses and wars break out until eventually bureaucrats are forced to beg the rebels' leader, John Galt, to take over the economy.

There is a reason, then, that Amazon categorises the book as fantasy. But Rand adherents see looming parallels in today's Washington.

The Obama administration's support for beleaguered homeowners and banks, they argue,

smacks of tyrannical socialism, forcing the strong and successful to prop up the weak, feckless and incompetent. "The current economic strategy is right out of Atlas Shrugged," the commentator Stephen Moore wrote recently in the Wall Street Journal. "The more incompetent you are in business, the more handouts the politicians will bestow on you."

Obama's frequently expressed view that the crisis demands that all Americans make sacrifices - and that those earning the most will need to "chip in a little more" - would have disgusted Rand, who believed that altruism was evil.

"It only stands to reason that where there's sacrifice, there's someone collecting the sacrificial offerings. Where there's service, there is someone being served. The man who speaks to you of sacrifice is speaking of slaves and masters, and intends to be the master," she wrote.

Some even predict a Rand-style revolution, in which those tired of supporting their fellow citizens decide to "go Galt", withdrawing their labour or refusing to pay taxes.

In cities around the US, conservative activists have been organising street protests known as "tea parties", inspired by the CNBC correspondent Rick Santelli, who in a high-profile rant last month called for direct action by taxpayers in the manner of the 1773 Boston Tea Party, the anti-British protest that helped trigger the American revolution.

Rand, who emigrated from the Soviet Union to the US, considered her thousand-plus pages of overwrought prose to be the ultimate statement of her philosophy of objectivism, but mainstream philosophers have largely ignored it. Noam Chomsky called her "one of the most evil figures of modern intellectual history".

The notion of a Rand rebellion has its sympathisers on Capitol Hill, however. "People are starting to feel like we're living through the scenario that happened in Atlas Shrugged," John Campbell, a Republican congressman who gives copies of the book as gifts to his interns, told the Washington Independent.

"The achievers are going on strike. I'm seeing, at a small level, a kind of protest from the people

who create jobs ... who are pulling back from their ambitions because they see how they'll be punished for them."

The book's peak sales days on Amazon seem to correspond to major events in the attempted rescue of the economy, including the bailout of Northern Rock, the US decision to buy shares in nine major banks, and the passing of Obama's stimulus bill. The Ayn Rand Centre for Individual Rights claims that US-wide sales almost tripled over the first seven weeks of 2009, compared with the same period in 2008.

But sceptics have described the threats of Galt-style tax boycotts as the rightwing equivalent of "moving to Canada".

Many liberals claimed they would emigrate northwards if George Bush won the 2004 election. But when he did, they didn't.