A specter is haunting the Republican Party — the specter of John Galt. In Ayn Rand’s libertarian epic “Atlas Shrugged,” Galt, an inventor disgusted by creeping American collectivism, leads the country’s capitalists on a retributive strike. “We have granted you everything you demanded of us, we who had always been the givers, but have only now understood it,” Galt lectures the “looters” and “moochers” who make up the populace. “We have no demands to present you, no terms to bargain about, no compromise to reach. You have nothing to offer us. We do not need you.”

"Atlas Shrugged” was published 52 years ago, but in the Obama era, Rand’s angry message is more resonant than ever before. Sales of the book have reportedly spiked. At “tea parties” and other conservative protests, alongside the Obama-as-Joker signs, you will find placards reading “Atlas Shrugs” and “Ayn Rand Was Right.” Not long after the inauguration, as right-wing pundits like Glenn Beck were invoking Rand and issuing warnings of incipient socialism, Representative John Campbell, Republican of California, told a reporter that the prospect of rising taxes and government regulation meant “people are starting to feel like we’re living through the scenario that happened in ‘Atlas Shrugged.’ ”

Rand’s style of vehement individualism has never been universally popular among conservatives — back in 1957, Whittaker Chambers denounced the “wickedness” of “Atlas Shrugged” in National Review — and Rand still has her critics on the right today. But it can often seem, as Jonathan Chait, a senior editor at The New Republic recently observed, that “Rand is everywhere in this right-wing mood.” And while it’s not hard to understand Rand’s revenge-fantasy appeal to those on the right, would-be Galts ought to hear the story Anne C. Heller has to tell in her dramatic and very timely biography, “Ayn Rand and the World She Made.”

For one thing, it is far more interesting than anything in Rand’s novels. That is because Heller is dealing with a human being, and one with more than her share of human failings and contradictions — “gallant, driven, brilliant, brash, cruel . . . and ultimately self-destructive,” as Heller puts it. The characters Rand created, on the other hand — like Galt or Howard Roark, the architect hero of “The Fountainhead” — are abstract principles set to moving and talking.

This is at once the failure and the making of Rand’s fiction. The plotting and characterization in her books may be vulgar and unbelievable, just as one would expect from the middling Holly-wood screenwriter she once was; but her message, while not necessarily more sophisticated, is magnified by the power of its absolute sincerity. It is the message that turned

her, from the publication of "Atlas Shrugged" in 1957 until her death in 1982, into the leader of a kind of sect. (This season, another Rand book, by the academic historian Jennifer Burns, is aptly titled "Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right.") Even today, Rand's books sell hundreds of thousands of copies a year. Heller reports that in a poll in the early '90s, sponsored by the Library of Congress and the Book of the Month Club, "Americans named 'Atlas Shrugged' the book that had most influenced their lives," second only to the Bible.

Rand's particular intellectual contribution, the thing that makes her so popular and so American, is the way she managed to mass market elitism — to convince so many people, especially young people, that they could be geniuses without being in any concrete way distinguished. Or, rather, that they could distinguish themselves by the ardor of their commitment to Rand's teaching. The very form of her novels makes the same point: they are as cartoonish and sexed-up as any best seller, yet they are constantly suggesting that the reader who appreciates them is one of the elect.

Heller maintains an appropriately critical perspective on her subject — she writes that she is "a strong admirer, albeit one with many questions and reservations" — while allowing the reader to understand the power of Rand's conviction and her odd charisma. Rand labored for more than two years on Galt's radio address near the end of "Atlas Shrugged" — a long paean to capitalism, individualism and selfishness that makes Gordon Gekko's "Greed is good" sound like the Sermon on the Mount. "At one point, she stayed inside the apartment, working for 33 days in a row," Heller writes. She kept going on amphetamines and willpower; the writing, she said, was a "drops-of-water-in-a-desert kind of torture." Nor would Rand, sooner than any other desert prophet, allow her message to be trifled with. When Bennett Cerf, a head of Random House, begged her to cut Galt's speech, Rand replied with what Heller calls "a comment that became publishing legend": "Would you cut the Bible?" One can imagine what Cerf thought — he had already told Rand plainly, "I find your political philosophy abhorrent" — but the strange thing is that Rand's grandiosity turned out to be perfectly justified.

In fact, any editor certainly would cut the Bible, if an agent submitted it as a new work of fiction. But Cerf offered Rand an alternative: if she gave up 7 cents per copy in royalties, she could have the extra paper needed to print Galt's oration. That she agreed is a sign of the great contradiction that haunts her writing and especially her life. Politically, Rand was committed to the idea that capitalism is the best form of social organization invented or conceivable. This was, perhaps, an understandable reaction against her childhood experience of Communism. Born in 1905 as Alissa Rosenbaum to a Jewish family in St. Petersburg, she was 12 when the Bolsheviks seized power, and she endured the ensuing years of civil war, hunger and oppression. By 1926, when she came to live with relatives in the United States and changed her name, she had become a relentless enemy of every variety of what she denounced as "collectivism," from Soviet Communism to the New Deal. Even Republicans weren't immune:

after Wendell Willkie's defeat in 1940, Rand helped to found an organization called Associated Ex-Willkie Workers Against Willkie, berating the candidate as "the guiltiest man of any for destroying America, more guilty than Roosevelt."

Yet while Rand took to wearing a dollar-sign pin to advertise her love of capitalism, Heller makes clear that the author had no real affection for dollars themselves. Giving up her royalties to preserve her vision is something that no genuine capitalist, and few popular novelists, would have done. It is the act of an intellectual, of someone who believes that ideas matter more than lucre. In fact, as Heller shows, Rand had no more reverence for the actual businessmen she met than most intellectuals do. The problem was that, according to her own theories, the executives were supposed to be as creative and admirable as any artist or thinker. They were part of the fraternity of the gifted, whose strike, in "Atlas Shrugged," brings the world to its knees.

Rand's inclusion of businessmen in the ranks of the Übermenschen helps to explain her appeal to free-marketeers — including Alan Greenspan — but it is not convincing. At bottom, her individualism owed much more to Nietzsche than to Adam Smith (though Rand, typically, denied any influence, saying only that Nie-tzsche "beat me to all my ideas"). But "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" never sold a quarter of a million copies a year.

Rand's potent message could lead to intoxication and even to madness, as the second half of her life showed. In 1949, Rand was living with her husband, a mild-mannered former actor named Frank O'Connor, in Southern California, in a Richard Neutra house. Then she got a fan letter from a 19-year-old college freshman named Nathan Blumenthal and invited him to visit. Rand, whose books are full of masterful, sexually dominating heroes, quickly fell in love with this confused boy, whom she decided was the "intellectual heir" she had been waiting for.

The decades of psychodrama that followed read, in Heller's excellent account, like "Phèdre" rewritten by Edward Albee. When Blumenthal, who changed his name to Nathaniel Branden, moved to New York, Rand followed him; she inserted herself into her protégé's love life, urging him to marry his girlfriend; then Rand began to sleep with Branden, insisting that both their spouses be kept fully apprised of what was going on. Heller shows how the Brandens formed the nucleus of a growing group of young Rand followers, a herd of individualists who nicknamed themselves "the Collective" — ironically, but not ironically enough, for they began to display the frightening group-think of a true cult. One journalist Heller refers to wondered how Rand "charmed so many young people into quoting John Galt as religiously as 'clergymen quote Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.' "

Inevitably, it all ended in tears, when Branden fell in love with a young actress and was expelled from Rand’s circle forever. That he went on to write several best--selling books of popular psychology “and earned the appellation ‘father of the self-esteem movement’ ” is the kind of finishing touch that makes truth stranger than fiction. For if there is one thing Rand’s life shows, it is the power, and peril, of unjustified self-esteem.

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