

Shelf Life

Some buildings seem like dreams of the philosophers: the Chrysler Building, Chartres Cathedral. And then there is the dream-building, that great and final place

where the humanist can live forever bathed in the glory of Man.

The Martin Luther King Jr. Public Library of the District of Columbia is not it. In the dream-library, life is ordered and rational, with all human longings mapped like an international airport. In the real library, I walk in with a list of seven books that the online catalogue promised would be on the shelves, and I walk away with two. The other five are stolen or lost or misfiled. Take it like a Stoic: at least the metal detector no longer blocks the door, and the elevators less frequently smell like piss.

Wandering the dream-library would be like being set free in the card-catalogued coral brain of God. Wandering MLK is more like being trapped in the body of Falstaff.

Lemony Snicket described the dream-library thus: "If you feel, for instance, that well-read people are less likely to be evil, and a world full of people sitting quietly with good books in their hands is preferable to a world filled with schisms and sirens and other noisy and troublesome things, then every time you enter a library you might say to yourself, 'The world is quiet here,' as a sort of pledge proclaiming reading to be the greater good."

And Philip Roth, in a 1969 *New York Times* op-ed: "What trust it inspired—in both oneself and in systems—first to decode the catalogue card, then to make it through the corridors and stairwells into the open stacks, and there to discover, exactly where it was supposed to be, the desired book."

MLK is neither the dream of Reason nor its nightmare. In every reading room you can hear the throbbing bass of rock and hip-hop: the advent of earbuds brought new enforcers for the law of unintended consequences. MLK has displays up for National Crime Prevention Month, the International Day of Nonviolence, and Samuel Johnson's birthday. The computer tells me that the most popular checkout item is season one of "The Wire."

But even MLK is a home to hopes. A child coughs in the literature room, then tries an unformed word. A young woman in a purple scarf takes notes on college financial aid. Even silences are hopeful here: a man stares into space beneath the Confucius memorial, one hand supporting his exhausted head, the other on a stroller full of sleeping daughter.

The peace is broken by the frequent and seemingly random shrilling of the alarm: REET REET REET! The security guards pay it no mind.

I love libraries, though not for their order. I love them for their weirdness and surprise. I remember inspecting the dust jackets of every book in the children's room, reading from Joan Aiken down the black metal shelves to Jane Yolen. I never knew what kind of monster would be at the end of the next book.

Today at MLK, I find that some of the older books still exude the familiar library perfume—that dark smell, like whiskey made from fallen leaves. That smell seems to say, as it shudders up from yellowed pages, *This is how I smelled when you were young*. Even

when I was young I was too late for those mushroomy books, with their covert smell of lost innocence. *Pace* Emily Dickinson, there is no shipwreck like a book.

D.C.'s main public library is perfectly positioned, shelved between chic restaurants and hot-dog stands, the sloganeering "FAITH. WORKS. WONDERS." banners of Catholic Charities, and the garish cowboy riding his frozen bronco outside the National Portrait Gallery. MLK is nothing like the ideal library of the philosophers, but it's better than the city it serves. It is a place of quiet chaos, of resignation, of disappointment, of aspiration.

A little girl ahead of me in the line for the front desk tugs at her mother's hand, twisting urgently, her pink plastic barrettes clicking at the ends of her cornrows. "Mommy! Do you got any money?" she asks, pulling her mother toward the carts of books for sale. (These are mostly celebrity cancer memoirs, but I remember being her age and wanting *just to look*, too.)

"Girl! Where are your manners?"

The little girl thinks, stilled for a moment, and rephrases: "Do you *have* any money?"

Her mother and I cover our mouths so as not to laugh at her: so young and sincere, trying so hard to do right. We exchange companion smiles. Her mother pulls her close and cuddles her, while the girl wriggles and tries to figure out how she's managed to be simultaneously wrong enough for a laugh and right enough for a kiss.

MLK Public Library is more human than the humanists. ■

Eve Tushnet writes from Washington, D.C. Her blog is <http://eve-tushnet.blogspot.com/>.

Ayn Shrugged

Objectively speaking, Rand's opus is a literary disaster.

By Daniel Hannan

ONE OF THE UNLIKELY beneficiaries of the current financial crisis is the estate of Ayn Rand. Sales of *Atlas Shrugged*, her dystopian classic, have soared in the past year. The book has been solidly in the Amazon bestseller list and briefly edged into that of the *New York Times*. Not bad for a novel published in 1957. And especially impressive for a work that—viewed purely as literature—must be accounted a disastrous failure.

Pace, all you Randians: I am one of you. I have a small picture of the lady on my desk in the European Parliament, next to a signed photograph of Margaret Thatcher, a bust of Thomas Jefferson, and a silver medal from the Ludwig von Mises Institute. The most pleasing compliment paid to me as a politician was when some conservative students started selling a T-shirt with the slogan “Who is Dan Han?”—a reference to the famous opening line of Rand's *magnum opus*, “Who is John Galt?”

Rand was a visionary, and her critique of the corporatist order was eerily apt. She argued that her book was prophylactic: a portrayal of a future she wanted to avoid. In some ways, it worked. Very few people argue, nowadays, that economies should be run on the basis of state planning or that socialism is inevitable. In other ways, her analysis of the business-political order—the monopolistic instincts of industrialists, the favoring of back-room deals over open competition, the way party politics punishes integrity and promotes moral cowardice—is eternally true.

In the institutions of the European Union, which were designed by and for

bureaucrats and lobbyists, I see Randian scenes being played out every day. Conversations are conducted on the basis of unstated *ententes*, and directness is considered the height of bad taste. Slogans about the welfare of the citizen are trotted out without thought or meaning, while unspoken plots are hatched against the public weal.

Never mind the EU. Who can meet the directors of a mammoth multinational without thinking of Rand's description of a company board: “Men who, through the decades of their careers, had relied for their security on keeping their faces blank, their words inconclusive and their clothes impeccable”?

Yet there is no getting away from it: the book simply doesn't work as a novel. At this stage, I should insert a spoiler warning: the rest of this article will make no sense unless I give away what the book is about. Then again, as we shall see, one of the flaws of *Atlas Shrugged* is that it is poorly paced. You can see every twist in the plot coming hundreds of pages before you reach it.

Let's start with the most basic problem. *Atlas Shrugged* is too long. Way too long. Its point could have been very adequately made in 200 pages rather than the 1,168 of my Penguin edition. Now you might argue that some books need to be long. A novelist who sets out to create a plausible universe, and to people it with developed characters, must give himself room, be he Tolstoy or Tolkien. But there is nothing especially developed about the characters in *Atlas Shrugged*. They are all more or less interchangeable, speaking in dissertations and behaving in set patterns.

It's true that the reader travels a long way, morally and politically, between the covers. In the opening pages, we see the railroad chief executive, James Taggart, talking in cliché about the need to “do something for the people,” about there being “higher values than profit.” Toward the end, we see the destructive nihilism of those values. As Taggart hurls a Venetian vase against his wall, we are told,

He had bought that vase for the satisfaction of thinking of all the connoisseurs who could not afford it. Now he experienced the satisfaction of a revenge upon the centuries which had prized it—and the satisfaction of thinking that there were millions of desperate families, any one of whom could have lived for a year on the price of that vase.

That is not a journey on which the reader can be hurried. Had the author baldly stated, “People who talk about non-material virtue and the imperative of need are, in reality, death-cultists who are running away from their own moral emptiness,” the audience would have scoffed. So, yes, a certain amount of space is called for. But having given herself the room, Rand makes little use of it. Her argument is not so much developed as repeated in words that barely alter. It is as though she is trying to push her thesis into us with repeated hammer blows, falling in the same place and with unvaried force.

The novel lacks any sense of movement. We begin and end in a world where nothing works very well. Although there is some mention in the closing chapters