With her flowing cape, ivory cigarette holder, dollar-sign pin and a pen name lifted from a typewriter, Ayn Rand was a tempting target for satirists.

Her novels, according to an army of critics, were horrendously written -- and could not be taken seriously as political philosophy. And yet, 20 years after her death, she remains an icon in libertarian and conservative circles.

In 2008 alone, sales of "The Fountainhead" (1943) and "Atlas Shrugged" (1957) exceeded 800,000 copies.

Jennifer Burns, a professor of history at the University of Virginia, provides a splendid account of Rand's life, ideas and influence. Drawing on Rand's private papers and journals, Burns identifies her as one of the first American writers to "celebrate the creative possibilities in capitalism" and to indict "altruism."

She excavates a "hidden" Rand as well:

A rationalist philosopher who wrote romantic fiction and failed to resolve in her own tumultuous relationships the tension between a need to control and a desire for autonomy.

Born Alisa Rosenbaum, Rand fled the Soviet Union in 1926, taking a hatred of communism with her to the United States. As a screenwriter and playwright, Rand's "steady intellectual companion" was Friedrich Nietzsche, whose emphasis on the will to power matched her emerging sense of herself.

In her novels, Burns writes, Rand sought to answer Nietzsche's call for a new morality to "replace the desiccated husk of Christianity."

She did it with a defense of "egoism" and an attack on the "doctrine which demands that man live for others and place others above self."

Her heroes, the architect Howard Roark in "The Fountainhead" and the shadowy John Galt in "Atlas Shrugged," are men of "physical beauty, outsize genius, and granite integrity."

Convinced that sympathy for the downtrodden is counter-productive, they are not afraid of the competition and creative destruction at the core of capitalism.

Why were these long novels, "with cardboard characters in the service of an overarching ideology," so popular?

They appealed to small businessmen who felt threatened by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, Burns reminds us. And to young people as well who wanted to believe that "things made sense, that the world was rational, logical, and could be understood."

In a fan letter to Rand, one college student reported that "as a result of my enthusiasm I have lost two friends. I am beginning to realize how unimportant these people are."
Less persuasive is Burns' claim that Rand is "a source of perennial fascination" because her work is "remarkably malleable," but, let's face it, Rand was an extremist. She insisted that her ideas were not subject to interpretation, let alone revision.


And she lambasted Ronald Reagan as a false friend of conservatism, who blended libertarianism with religion, and vitiated his defense of capitalism by endorsing the ethics of altruism.

For all her emphasis on reason, Burns suggests, duly noting the irony, it is the emotional and psychological elements of her novels that are timeless. Rand's message -- be true to yourself -- continues to resonate as it did in 1965 with Lee Clettenberg, a 43-year-old Detroiter.

Every time he tried to improve his life, Clettenberg confessed, "I felt like a thief, a robber of the dead." But then "BANG! ... just like that ... YOU ... gave ME ... back to ... MYSELF."

That's why, Burns concludes, to the continuing consternation of critics, she's likely "to remain a fertile touchstone of the American imagination."

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

"Bob Hoover's Book Club" is available exclusively at PG+, a members-only web site of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Our introduction to PG+ gives you all the details.

First published on December 20, 2009 at 12:00 am