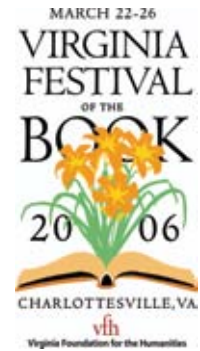


The Fountainhead by Ayn Rand recommended by Edward Cline

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the "VABooks!" column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Edward Cline—Yorktown resident and author of the *Sparrowhawk* historical novel series, *First Prize*, a detective novel, and *Whisper the Guns*, a suspense novel—recommends *The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



One of my favorite movie lines is spoken by Joan Fontaine in Max Ophüls's *Letter from an Unknown Woman*: "I think everyone has two birthdays—the day of his physical birth, and the beginning of his conscious life."

I date the beginning of my own "conscious" life – conscious of ideas and how they moved or stopped the world—when I entered a trashed library and, in the course of un-trashing it, found Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*—a novel that not so much recast my life as sustained it through some gruelingly confusing periods. The book sanctioned the conduct of my life before and after, and ever since.

How did I end up there? At the age of 16 I had informed my foster family that I was an atheist. This family was nominally Catholic, so an atheist under its roof was intolerable, especially when he might influence that family's own children. Back I went to the state, back to Juvenile Court, back to square one. The Court eventually placed me for my senior year of high school in a hostel for the homeless called Boys Town near Pittsburgh. I was too young to appreciate the irony of that sentencing, so it was lost on me.

Charles Dickens would have loved fashioning a novel around it. The place was chiefly a holding pen for criminals judged too young to incarcerate in regular prisons: burglars, car thieves, rapists, boys with strange personal habits, and various other felonious incorrigibles. The wardens were Catholic and wore long brown robes. The

head priest was an aged, white-haired saint who wasn't all there. His second-in-command was a cigar-chomping ex-football player; in his eyes, I was worse than the vandals he slapped around. It was "bad cop, good cop" in sackcloth; one wielded a rosary, the other a cosh.

Mixed in its population were a few oddities such as myself, who had committed no crime. Years later, when I read about the Soviet Gulag and the policy of imprisoning "politicals" with hardened criminals, I could appreciate the dilemma of anyone convicted of thinking outside the box of official dogma and sentenced to a spell of hell. It's this kind of thinking that pits the hero of *The Fountainhead*—Howard Roark—against the other characters and against society in general. He was a rebel with a cause – a rebel against the conventional, the stale, the second-hand, and a champion of the new and the genuinely radical.

The book battles that regularly trashed the Boys Town library (battles consisted of inmates hurling armloads of books at each other) would leave the room a mess. I would come later and restore the books to the shelves. One day, as I was setting aside some battered tomes that looked interesting, I came upon *The Fountainhead*. I read the first sentence. "Howard Roark laughed." Then the next paragraph. And the next two pages.

I was hooked. It was a literary and aesthetic union made, well, not in heaven, but in the mind, a salutary mutuality of in-

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recommended by Edward Cline (continued)

corrigible moral intransigence. Simply put, it was an instance of fiction and real life complementing each other.

Today, high school students need not be dumped into juvenile hostels to discover *The Fountainhead*. It is being includ-

ed in literature courses in schools around the country, together with Rand's other novels. I don't envy those students. Then again, I do. "Howard Roark laughed." It's a line to last a lifetime.