

BOOK REVIEW

EXPLORING CAPITALIST FICTION: BUSINESS THROUGH LITERATURE AND FILM

EDWARD W. YOUNKINS

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Edward W. Younkings has made a very welcome contribution to business and economic education with his book *Exploring Capitalist Fiction*. In this book he documents how various ideas about business, commerce, and economics have been communicated through literature, plays, and cinema. In doing so, he has written a book that should prove very helpful to business and economics professors who should be aware of how various economic and business-related messages are crafted in literature and cinema and would like to draw upon such media to better teach others important truths.

The importance of economic messages in media has not been lost on Austrian economists. Ludwig von Mises, for example,

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had much to say throughout his career about the importance of novels and the media in shaping people's ideas about political economy. In one of his early main works, *Socialism*, he cites the nineteenth-century romantic and social-realist authors and poets as paving the way for socialism by inspiring their less talented and creative followers to propagandize against "the blood-sucking capitalist entrepreneur" and for "the noble proletariat" (Mises, [1922] 1981, p. 420). He further identifies Dickens' *Hard Times* as an attack on utilitarianism and economic liberalism. In his great work *Human Action*, Mises asserts that one of the challenges of economic education is the impact of mass media (Mises, [1949] 1998, pp. 873–874). Mises also saw the genre of the detective novel as a particularly pernicious manifestation of anti-capitalist literature (Mises, 1956, pp. 52–55). Additionally, he argued that what he termed "social novels" mislead because they leave the reader the impression that poverty is the result of capitalism instead of a *lack* of capitalism (Mises, 1956, pp. 66–72).

Twentieth century students of Mises also demonstrated through their work that they likewise understood the intellectual impact of literature and film. Mises's journalistic champion, Henry Hazlitt, was a literary critic by trade who turned to economics and economic journalism as a second career. His authoring the novel *The Great Idea* (republished as *Time Will Run Back*) testifies to his recognizing the power of literature to communicate economic ideas. Similarly, Murray Rothbard's regular film reviews under the moniker "Mr. First Nighter" reveals an awareness of the importance of political and economic messages in cinema. More recently, following in that tradition is the work edited by Paul A. Cantor and Stephen D. Cox, *Literature and the Economics of Liberty: Spontaneous Order in Culture*.

In the work before us, Younkens serves the reader with an outstanding survey of literature, drama, and film that focuses on various topics related to business and, by extension, economic ideas. The breadth of the book is very impressive. Sandwiched between an informative introductory survey of the book and its culminating thematic essay are extensive discussions of twenty-five books, plays, and movies.

By itself it provides a cultural education of how authors, playwrights, and screenwriters conceive of the world of business, commerce and corporate culture. Younkens takes pains to include

works from across the spectrum, engaging works with both positive and negative perspectives of free markets and profit seeking enterprise. He examines, for example, works critical of commerce and a free economy such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* as well as those championing economic freedom and the life of the entrepreneur such as Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* and Hazlitt's *Time Will Run Back*.

Ultimately, *Exploring Capitalist Fiction* does what good books do: it makes the reader want to learn more. It encouraged me to pursue works with which I was unfamiliar such as *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Cash McCall*. I was also motivated to revisit works I had read or seen before. Based on Younkins' commentary on books and films I do know fairly well, I vouch for his competence. He does an excellent job summarizing the main plot lines and motivations of principle characters.

As the reader makes his way through the book, it becomes clear that Younkins is a Randian. He puts *Atlas Shrugged* in a class by itself, because, he argues, there have been no other works of literature that have so successfully integrated and unified philosophy and business. He furthermore identifies Dagny Taggart as "perhaps the most heroic female protagonist in American fiction" (p. 169). It is no surprise, therefore, when Younkins uses *Atlas Shrugged* as the standard by which to judge novels. In the midst of much praise for Garett's *The Driver*, Younkins qualifies that "it is certainly not in the same class as *Atlas Shrugged*, but what is?" Similarly, in the final concluding essay summarizing the field, Younkins finds it noteworthy that *Calumet K* by Samuel Merwin and Henry Webster was Ayn Rand's favorite novel.

Exploring Capitalist Fiction is best suited for professors who would like to incorporate literary and cinematic works in their business and economics courses. I suggest it is not so useful as a text for classes that integrate literature and business and economics, simply because it would be best to expose the students to the primary sources and not chapters about the works. The bulk of the book comprises chapters summarizing the works considered. In that sense, the book is more like master plots and less like a literary analysis of the works under consideration. I would have liked more analysis in addition to the summaries. That is not to say that Younkins does not contribute some thematic and philosophical

analysis as he considered each work. He does. I just would have liked to see a little more.

That is a minor quibble, however, as this is an excellent work that achieves what it sets out to do. It points to various ways in which literature and film can communicate economic and business messages and how they can be interpreted. I am happy to recommend this volume to anyone interested in the intersection between literature, film, and the world of commerce.

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