Art Imitates Life

Tom Clancy's geopolitical page-turners have always been the stuff of fantasy, but the actual geopolitics of today make *The Sum of All Fears*—the fourth big-screen adaptation of a Clancy novel—look particularly out of this world. It's a what-if thriller upstaged by what really is.

Clancy's plots feed off political paranoia—superpower standoffs, terrorist threats, and doomsday scenarios. When most of his books were published, they managed to keep pace with (or even one step ahead of) headlines on those very topics. At first glance, Clancy seems to be nicely topical again here. *The Sum of All Fears* depicts a shadowy terrorist group at work. But this gang goads the United States and Russia into a war against each other, giving our age of terror attacks an extra Cold War chill. The way this juicy scenario plays out, however, makes the film feel curiously dated, even quaint.

This isn't due to laziness on the filmmakers' part, for the powers that be at Paramount Pictures have done everything possible to update Clancy's 1991 novel to 2002. The most drastic change is that Harrison Ford, who played Clancy hero Jack Ryan in *Clear and Present Danger* and *Patriot Games*, was dropped from the franchise. In came twenty-something Ben Affleck and the need to rework the story for a lead character two decades younger than in the novel.

But the emphasis on one heroic figure undermines the relevance and believability of *The Sum of All Fears*. The anti-terror campaign in Afghanistan isn't the doing of one clever CIA agent, but of thousands of fighters down the line. In *The Sum of All Fears*, all we need is Affleck. Anyone who reads the newspaper, though, knows that today's geopolitics is a team sport. No one man saves the day. So as young Jack Ryan trots across the globe on a one-man mission to expose a terror conspiracy, this movie feels more like a James Bond escapade than a drama ripped from the front page.

Ben Affleck takes a hot phone call in *The Sum of All Fears.*

Moreover, the terrorist cabal Jack Ryan is up against is a vague, rather silly international association said to include "Nazis, nationalists, and right-wing zealots." When these predictably white old men meet and conspire, they're about as threatening as the cartoon characters of the Legion of Doom. Again, actual events make *The Sum of All Fears* look like a pale imitation. Who's scared of these bozos when we've got al-Qaeda killing machines out in the real world?

The movie becomes much more serious when this gang detonates a nuclear bomb at the Super Bowl and paints Russia as the culprit. It may be unintentional and unearned, but in the wake of September 11 there's a poignant resonance to the ensuing images of post-explosion devastation. Similarly, the panicky scenes aboard Air Force One, in which the President considers retaliation, carry an extra sting in the current climate.

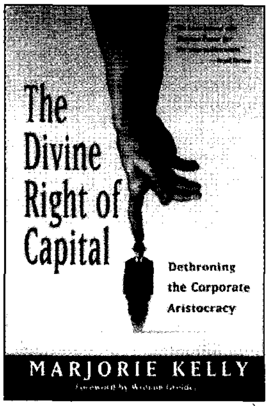
While *The Sum of All Fears* has its moments, the thrills are brief and underdeveloped. The movie plays like a kid's interpretation of current affairs while the adult version is taking place right outside the theater. Contemporary events have dramatically raised the bar for writers and filmmakers of pulp political fiction. Their competition isn't just other entertainment anymore—it's also the breaking news. —Josh Larsen

BookTalk

STEALING FROM SHAREHOLDERS

By Bruce Ramsey

The Divine Right of Capital: Dethroning the Corporate Aristocracy
By Marjorie Kelly
Berrett-Koehler, 200 pages, $24.95



The Divine Right of Capital accepts supply and demand, competition, profit, self-interest, and the market. The arguments are phrased in the language of Jefferson, not Marx. The word "socialist" is never used. Yet that's exactly what this book is.

Marjorie Kelly begins by complaining that, in most companies, shareholders are simply people who bought stock. They didn't found the firm, or do anything, yet the whole enterprise is run in their interest.

Is that wrong? Think of the buyer of an old apartment house. He hasn't created new housing; he's part of a chain of investors who allowed the creator to recoup his money and go away. The ownership rights pass from hand to hand in perpetuity.

Imagine a different rule. Say the building's ownership reverted after 30 years to the tenants. Under such an arrangement it might still be possible to entice the owner to build the building, but he would have to collect much higher rents, knowing he would lose the building at year 30. If he were enticed to build with perpetual rights and his building was then expropriated at year 30 in the name of tenant rights, that would simply be theft.

Yet that is what Marjorie Kelly proposes for American corporations: Change the rules and steal companies from shareholders. That's not how she puts it, of course. She suggests that a shareholder's rights should be pronounced used up after a certain time, with workers inheriting the shareholder's assets.

Kelly gripes that stockowners are just aristocrats who want "to be free from labor." She maintains that "shareholders serve about as many functions as an eighteenth-century French marquess, which is to say almost none. Except collecting their own income.... It is inaccurate to speak of shareholders as investors, for more truthfully they are extractors."

Do shareholders extract too much from companies? Their "extraction" is done through dividends, which have lately fallen under 2 percent. That is, for every $100 of market price stock, the shareholder gets an average of $2 per year. (Shareholders also make money when the value of the shares goes up. But that increased value is not extracted from the corporation—it comes from other stock buyers.)

Of every dollar paid to individuals in 2000 (according to official personal income statistics), employees got 65 cents, recipients of transfer payments 15 cents, savers 12 cents, proprietors 9 cents, landlords 2 cents, and shareholders 5 cents. Is that too rich an incentive for the creation of corporate capital?

There is no law against forming a company in which workers, not shareholders, own the profit and loss. It is called a workers' cooperative. But such co-ops face perennial problems. How to set the ownership shares of new workers? How to cash out workers who quit or retire? There is the lack of incentive for worker-owners to retain earnings to build the company. How do co-ops lay off employees in bad times? What if fellow worker-owners want to own but not work?

But Kelly doesn't talk about the fragility of co-ops in practice. She talks about how corporations should be made more equitable in theory. Instead of letting shareholders decide on a takeover offer, the workers, or maybe the community, should be allowed to vote on it. There would be less "brutality" that way.

Who would sink his private assets into a corporation if shareholder rights were taken away? What would happen to the value of corporate stock now held by unions, insurance companies, and pension funds—and the millions of small holders who rely on the wealth and income from those shares? Has anything like what Kelly proposes ever been tried before? You won't find the answers here.

Bruce Ramsey is an editorial writer for the Seattle Times.