WHAT AMAZON HAS DONE TO BOOKS

Q&A with Mark McGurl, PhD

Interview by
Sandi Sonnenfeld

Mark McGurl is the Albert Guérard Professor of Literature at Stanford University, the author of *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James* and *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, for which he received the 2011 Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism. He received his BA from Harvard University and a PhD in comparative literature from Johns Hopkins University. His most recent book, *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon*, (Verso, October 2021), has triggered widespread interest and debate, including reviews and articles in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. We thank Professor McGurl for taking the time to talk with us about his book and its significance for Guild members and all authors.

AG: What was your impetus for writing *Everything and Less*, and how do you think literature's role and influence have changed because of Amazon?

MM: I come from a school of literary criticism that takes the material conditions of culture as seriously as possible. What kinds of institutional supports need to be in place before literary history can even begin? One day, as I was opening yet another Amazon box, it occurred to me that while we weren't looking, Amazon had become one of those institutional supports, surely among the most important of them all. It wants to be *the* platform of contemporary literary life.

If we use Amazon as an interpretive key, we see literature being subsumed into the larger world of everyday commodities. From that perspective, literature looks perhaps a little less glamorous or noble than we would like, but also like something millions of us need to get by. It is an unsettling trade-off.

AG: Can you talk about what you mean by the "contemporary genre system," which you say categorizes individual works of fiction as iterations of a generic kind?

MM: For Amazon, all fiction is genre fiction in the simple sense that different kinds of fiction appeal to different kinds of readers, including so-called literary fiction. Genre is a version, within literature, of the broader phenomenon of market segmentation. The number of distinct genre categories recognized by Amazon is truly amazing. There are literally thousands of them. And yet, if you step back, you start to see broader patterns emerging. One of the most important concepts I noted is how gender plays a role in the types of genres readers are drawn to—with, for instance, romance skewing starkly toward a female readership and things like the military thriller skewing toward the male. Literary fiction is less visibly marked in this way.

AG: In your earlier book, *The Program Era*, you focused on the role that MFA creative writing programs have had in shaping contemporary fiction, with an emphasis on craft and mentoring. In *Everything and Less*, Amazon has turned all that on its head. Where does that leave craft in the evolution of American fiction?

MM: Creative writing programs continue to thrive! And books themselves, always the most important teachers, continue to show new generations of writers how to ply their craft. For Amazon, however, what matters most are questions of marketing and sales. It wants to collapse the distinction between artistic success and market success. As a college teacher, this disturbs me, of course, since market value is not what I am asking my students to assess in the classroom. But out in the wilds of popular literary consumption, matters of craft as I might measure them often take a back seat to other values, above all to the familiar pleasures we seek in genre fiction, with its emphasis on plot.

AG: Literary critics often classify Western literature written after WWII as postmodern. Your subtitle, "The Novel in the Age of Amazon," suggests that you believe postmodernism is dead. If so, can you define events or specific books that have shifted us away from postmodernism?

MM: Postmodernism means so many different things. If by "postmodern" we refer to a set of relatively experimental and difficult writers who came to prominence in the 1960s—Thomas Pynchon, for instance—then I think we have moved well past that moment into something else. There is so little patience for experimentalism and difficulty in the mainstream literary market today. The idea that the reader should have to work for her pleasure seems an increasingly strange one. If, instead, as some theorists would say, postmodernism means exactly this assimilation of literature to the law of easy consumption and entertainment value, then we have never been more postmodern. It's a terminological thicket that I mostly stay out of.

AG: Amazon promotes a populist message about how it is eliminating "elite literary gatekeepers" who prevent riskier works or those from diverse

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—MARK MCGURL

A SERIES OF TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE BOOK BUSINESS BEGINNING EVEN BEFORE THE RISE OF AMAZON HAVE PUT TREMENDOUS PRESSURE ON AUTHORS AND MADE IT MORE DIFFICULT THAN EVER TO MAKE A LIVING FROM WRITING. THE ADVENT OF AMAZON IS JUST THE LATEST STAGE IN THAT PROCESS, INAUGURATING A NEW ERA OF HYPERABUNDANCE, OR EVEN SURPLUS. IT HAS CREATED A WHOLE NEW CHANNEL FOR THE SALE OF BOOKS, BUT IF IT STARTS TO SEEM NORMAL THAT THOSE BOOKS SHOULD BE PRICED AT $2.99, THEN WE HAVE A PROBLEM.

backgrounds from being published. But you also write about the "unspeakable conventionality" of novels self-published through Kindle Direct Publishing. What do you think is needed for truly unique voices or experimental works to get noticed, through Amazon or a traditional publisher?

MM: In theory, you could go ahead and publish something truly wildly experimental via Kindle Direct Publishing right now. And there are no barriers, visible ones at least, to any person of any kind publishing their work by those means. The trickier question is how you would get people to read those works and take them seriously. What Amazon has taught us is that the technical fact of publication is only half the battle, maybe not even half. Mainstream publishing has substantial resources for marketing. So-called indie writers market their works, too, but the most important way they do so is by way of generic identifiability: "If you liked that best-selling romance novel, you might like the one I wrote too. The pleasures they offer are almost identical."

AG: What, if anything, surprised you about your research into the genre novels published through KDP?

MM: Just the sheer energy of the human imagination at work. The staggering scale of the popular desire to live a literary life, either as a writer or reader. It's all so huge and terrifying and wonderful.

AG: Writers like Margaret Atwood, Ursula Le Guin, Neil Gaiman, and Walter Mosley have elevated "genre" fiction to great literature. If a reader went to a librarian and asked her to recommend a well-crafted sci-fi novel with a strong female protagonist, there's a good chance that the librarian would indeed recommend a book by Le Guin. Amazon's algorithms do not recommend books to readers in that way. Can you explain how their system works and why you think Amazon views all books equally regardless of the quality of the writing and production value?

MM: Amazon's recommendation algorithms have an interesting history. My understanding is that, once upon a time, customers were grouped into presumed social types and that recommendations were made on that basis. You are the kind of person who would read X. Now the recommendations are made by way of associations between products: you bought novel Y, and that is associated with the purchase of novel Z. What's lost in either case is the human touch. There is no longer a knowledgeable person leading you to what you want, but even more importantly, to what you

didn't know you wanted. I hate algorithms that steep me in my own taste profile! I want to evolve! But I guess they work to move the product.

AG: In the chapter "Surplus Fiction," you write that "to say that the specter of commoditization hangs over contemporary literature is, of course, to admit that, as a specter, it is not quite yet manifest." For most Authors Guild members, the commoditization of books has been manifest for a long time, and **author incomes continue to fall**. What do you think this says about the survival of professional authors and the future of American literature?

MM: This is the crucial question for the profession of authorship going forward. Books will probably never be fully commoditized in the sense that the author's identity, or brand, will continue to distinguish one work from another. With truly commoditized commodities, you don't care who made something as long as it does the job as inexpensively as possible. And yet, as most of your members don't need to be told, a series of transformations in the book business—beginning even before the rise of Amazon—have put tremendous pressure on authors and made it more difficult than ever to make a living from writing. The advent of Amazon is just the latest stage in that process, inaugurating a new era of hyperabundance, or even surplus. It has created a whole new channel for the sale of books, but if it starts to seem normal that those books should be priced at $2.99, then we have a problem. Behind the romance of the starving artist is the reality that a thriving literary culture requires that writers be paid enough to put food on the table. AG

Sandi Sonnenfeld *is a published fiction and creative nonfiction writer. With an MFA in fiction writing from the University of Washington, Sonnenfeld has taught fiction and memoir writing as an adjunct college instructor and through public libraries.*

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