What Amazon Did to Fiction

By Leah Price

Oct. 19, 2021

**EVERYTHING AND LESS**
**The Novel in the Age of Amazon**
By Mark McGurl

If you’ve been lucky enough to spend the lockdown reading, you probably lined Jeff Bezos’ pocket. Even though books make up just a sliver of Amazon’s total business (less than 7 percent of the company’s $386 billion revenue now comes from the commodity with which it started), Amazon’s cut of the book business just keeps growing. About half of all paperback and hardback purchases in the United States are made on Amazon, as are nine out of 10 e-books.

For those of us who stop to wonder about the company that advertised those books to us and trucked them to our door, Amazon will also deliver. On my Kindle, I downloaded Brad Stone’s perky corporate history “[Amazon Unbound](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/13/books/review/amazon-unbound-brad-stone.html%22%20%5Co%20%22)” (2021). Through Amazon’s subsidiary Audible, I listened to Alec MacGillis’s exposé of union busting and tax evasion, “[Fulfillment: Winning and Losing in One-Click America](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/24/books/review/fulfillment-alec-macgillis.html%22%20%5Co%20%22)” (2021).

In “Everything and Less,” Mark McGurl asks a narrower question: What does Amazon’s rise mean for literature? And conversely, what can literature reveal about the world that Amazon has made? McGurl, an English professor at Stanford, shows that what Americans want out of fiction has changed in the age of vertically integrated e-commerce. Guaranteeing “reliable service” to ever more niche readerships, the “everything store” has splintered the novel form. Far from lumping customers into an impersonal mass, the company draws on troves of data to match buyers with genres ranging from sci-fi epics to cozy mysteries such as “Chocolate Chip Cookie Murder” (2000) and “its 24 sequels, each tied to a different baked good,” to the romances that cast life, in McGurl’s fierce phrasing, “as gendered, as generative and as generic, and as lived in conditions of radical disparities of power.” His account of fiction-reading as “quality time” builds on the feminist ethnographer Janice Radway’s counterintuitive 1984 thesis that clawing back time from housework to read romances asserted women’s right to an inner life. No matter how patriarchal the content of their pulp paperbacks, Midwestern housewives made the act of sitting down with a book revolutionary.

Unlike Radway, McGurl doesn’t interview novel readers. Nor does he data-mine customer reviews (as other literature professors like James F. English and Ed Finn have recently done) or pump publishing professionals for industry details (as the sociologist John B. Thompson does in this year’s “Book Wars”). A breezy description of Bezos’ ex-wife, MacKenzie Scott, as “the wealthiest published novelist of all time by a factor of … whatever, a high number” signals that for him statistics play a largely decorative role.

Instead, “Everything and Less” enlists literary sources to explain the place of culture in a neoliberal economy. Placing Amazon’s story alongside those within the books it distributes, McGurl reduces fictional plots to allegories of the tech behemoth. As insatiable as any zombie, as submissive as any heroine in an “alpha billionaire romance,” McGurl’s hypothetical genre-fiction junkie looks diametrically opposed to the skeptical analyst cultivated in college classrooms.

Lurching from roguish biographical anecdotes about Amazon’s gossip-ready founder to coolly pedagogical expositions of Marxist theory, McGurl squelches any hopes that books can save us — from ephemerality, from passivity, from commercialism. His own literary slumming doesn’t stop him from returning to the classics treated in his distinguished earlier work (“The Novel Art,” “The Program Era”). In fact, “Everything and Less” bundles Ishiguro and DeLillo in with the kind of “bad novel that best expresses our historical moment” — bedfellows as strange as the entrepreneurial Bezos and his ex, the highbrow writer Scott. Cheerfully mocking Amazon’s own demotion of literary fiction to “one genre among others,” “Everything and Less” analyzes the “Loving the White Billionaire” series with the same deadpan neutrality it grants to Adelle Waldman’s “The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.” In both cases, McGurl’s decision to replace close reading with plot summary enables insights ranging from the rise of the trilogy to the motif of the “beta intellectual.” However scattershot his evidence, you may still recognize yourself in these disheartening pages.

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Instead, “Everything and Less” enlists literary sources to explain the place of culture in a neoliberal economy. Placing Amazon’s story alongside those within the books it distributes**ok rephrasing? MUCH IMPROVED, THANKS! BUT CAN WE SAY “the books it markets,” TO AVOID REPEATING “DISTRIBUTES”?**, McGurl reduces fictional plots to allegories of the tech behemoth. As insatiable as any zombie, as submissive as any heroine in an “alpha billionaire romance,” McGurl’s hypothetical genre-fiction junkie looks diametrically opposed to the skeptical analyst cultivated in college classrooms.

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Everything and Less asks a narrower question: what does Amazon’s rise mean for literature? And conversely, what can literature tell us about the world that Amazon has made? Stanford English professor McGurl shows that what Americans want out of fiction has changed in the age of (he’s too cagey to say “been changed by”) vertically-integrated e-commerce. Guaranteeing “reliable service” to ever more niche readerships, the “everything store” has splintered the novel into genres ranging from sci-fi epics, to cozy mysteries such as “Chocolate Chip Cookie Murder (2000) and its twenty-four sequels, each tied to a different baked good,” to the romances that cast life “as gendered, as generative, and as generic, and as lived in conditions of radical disparities of power.” McGurl’s account of fiction-reading as “me-time” builds on feminist ethnographer Jan Radway’s counterintuitive demonstration, back in 1984, that clawing back time from housework to read romances asserted women’s right to an inner life. No matter how patriarchal the content of their pulp paperbacks, Midwestern housewives made the act of sitting down with a book revolutionary.

One difference is that Radway talked to her informants. McGurl neither datamines customer reviews (as have literary critics such as Jim English and Ed Finn) nor interviews publishing professionals (as sociologist John B. Thompson does in his 2021 study Book Wars). And a breezy description of Bezos’s ex-wife MacKenzie Scott as “the wealthiest published novelist of all time by a factor of ... whatever, a high number” signals that his data won’t involve statistics.

Instead, Everything and Less enlists literary sources to explain the place of culture in a neoliberal economy. Placing the story of Amazon in parallel with stories distributed by Amazon – especially a scattershot selection from its self-publishing arm -- McGurl reduces fictional plots to allegories of the company that distributes them. As insatiable as any zombie, as eager to submit as the heroine of “alpha billionaire romance,” the genre-fiction junkie hypothesized by McGurl forms a mirror-image of the skeptical analyst cultivated in college classrooms.

Lurching from roguish biographical anecdotes to cool theoretical exposition, McGurl squelches any hopes that books can save us—from ephemerality, from passivity, from commercialism. While McGurl’s own literary slumming doesn’t stop him from returning to the art novels that formed the subject of his distinguished earlier monographs, Everything and Less does lump Ishiguro and DeLillo with the “bad novel that best expresses our historical moment.” (In this respect, the structure of McGurl’s argument resembles the marriage of scifi-reading entrepreneur Jeff to highbrow writer MacKenzie.) Demoting literary fiction to “one genre among others.” Everything and Less analyzes Loving the White Billionaire with the same deadpan neutrality granted to The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.. In both cases, McGurl’s decision to replace close reading by plot summary enables insights ranging from the rise of the trilogy to the motif of the “beta male.” However scattershot their evidence, you may recognize yourself in these depressing pages.