

### Genre Fiction Without Shame

Mark McGurl. *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon*. London: Verso, 2021. xx + 316 pp. Hardcover, \$29.95.

Kim Wilkins, Beth Driscoll, and Lisa Fletcher. *Genre Worlds: Popular Fiction and Twenty-First-Century Book Culture*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2022. xiv + 234 pp. Paper, \$28.95.

Genre fiction is an embarrassing object for literary studies. It is commercial, formulaic, the object of enthusiasm or casual consumption rather than serious analysis. By definition, it seems to contradict the literary ideal of the singular work and to resist interpretive methods honed on literary complexity. And there is just so much of it; though one can select striking examples, singular genre fictions are by their nature unrepresentative. For literary critics, such a mass of fictional stuff long seemed congenial mainly as material for sweeping social diagnosis, or, less commonly, for populist celebration. Even if we now have decades' worth of serious studies of individual genres, genre fiction as such clearly remains, for academic readers, a thing apart from literature.

Yet there are many reasons why genre fiction should be an important object of inquiry. To begin with, many people have been reading and writing it for at least a century. I would date the first appearance of an institutionalized system of fiction genre to 1921, when *Love Story* magazine joined *Detective Story* and *Western Story* among the newsstand offerings of the pulp publisher Street & Smith. Though genre fiction is no longer confined to down-market media like pulp magazines or mass-market paperbacks, its markedly lower status persists. Yet this differentiation increasingly seems like a practical and intellectual disadvantage for literary studies, if not for literature itself. Academic literary studies faces an enduring crisis in its capacity to reproduce itself in the neoliberal university; fiction-reading in general is a socially honored but increasingly niche pursuit.<sup>1</sup> In these circumstances, hanging on to categorical discriminations within literary study threatens to further restrict the subject to an ever-shrinking circle of true believers. Given that genre fiction in print is intimately

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1. Wendy Griswold and collaborators describe the re-emergence of a sociologically circumscribed reading class in a 2005 review essay, remarking that it is "an open question" whether book readers "have both power and prestige associated with an increasingly rare form of cultural capital, or whether the reading class will be just another taste culture pursuing an increasingly arcane hobby." Wendy Griswold, Terry McDonnell, and Nathan Wright, "Reading and the Reading Class in the Twenty-First Century," *Annual Review of Sociology* 31, no. 1 (2005): 138.

related to visual media genres—witness the adaptability of doorstopping fantasy novel series to film and TV—it is perhaps the one kind of literature with obvious large-scale cultural salience. And a much-remarked “genre turn” in contemporary high-status fiction, with Kazuo Ishiguro remixing the tropes of fantasy and science fiction, Colson Whitehead riffing on the zombie novel, and so on, signals new high-cultural attention to such categories.<sup>2</sup>

Is literary studies on the verge of a genre turn of its own? When so eminent a literary historian as Mark McGurl argues that “genre fiction is the heart of the matter of literature” (xviii) in the present era, it might seem so. McGurl’s *Everything and Less* maps out a wide range of fiction subgenres, placing them at the center of contemporary fiction. Working in a different vein, Kim Wilkins, Beth Driscoll, and Lisa Fletcher illuminate the social dynamics of genre-fiction production in their collective monograph *Genre Worlds*. Yet like the genre turn in literary fiction, this recent genre-fiction scholarship evinces a reified understanding of its subject. McGurl relies on high-literary assumptions about genre, even as he deflates the pretensions of literary fiction; Wilkins et al., writing as insiders, take the cohesiveness and autonomy of their “genre worlds” for granted. These contrasting limitations are both, it seems to me, responses to genre fiction’s status in the literary field. Without a fuller analysis of how that status is produced, work on genre fiction misses major aspects of the phenomenon, especially the contingency of genre categories and the variability of reader response.

McGurl’s book on fiction in the age of Amazon concludes a trilogy spanning the history of American literature from the late nineteenth century to the present. *Everything and Less* is closely focused on the last three decades, and it is rather different in tone from the earlier two books. *The Novel Art* chronicled modernist fiction’s successful long march through institutions, and *The Program Era* cheekily hailed the creative variety achieved under the sign of the MFA program in the half-century after 1945 as a “surfeit of literary excellence.”<sup>3</sup> *Everything and Less* turns from high to low, treating genre fictions,

2. See Andrew Hoberek, “Literary Genre Fiction,” in *American Literature in Transition, 2000–2010*, ed. Rachel Greenwald Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), and, on the way the “genre turn” tends to reinforce distinctions between literature and mass culture, Jeremy Rosen, “Literary Fiction and the Genres of Genre Fiction,” *Post45: Peer Reviewed*, August 7, 2018.

3. Mark McGurl, *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 410.

from bestsellers to obscure self-published Kindle Direct novels, as the defining novels of recent decades and as prisms through which the novel as such can be theorized. Though McGurl finds much to be interested in, his synthesis has a decidedly sharper critical edge than *The Program Era*. For McGurl, Amazon, subjecting all fiction to the logic of genre, transforms “literary experience into customer service” (47). His survey of the enormous production of unread fiction concludes with a “depiction of contemporary literary history as apocalypse” (254), hopeful only in that it gestures towards a “world that *doesn’t need so much fiction*” (258). After Amazon, annihilation?

To be sure, the historical circumstances invite pessimistic diagnoses. Going from the Program Era to the Age of Amazon takes McGurl from the era of postwar class compromise, with its large public-serving institutions, to the era of unrestrained multinational capital and accelerating climate disaster. *Everything and Less* is entertainingly caustic about Amazon’s predatory industrial practices and toxically self-aggrandizing corporate culture. Taking up categories like the post-apocalyptic saga, LitRPG, the alpha billionaire romance, and Adult Baby Diaper Lover erotica, McGurl finds ingenious ways to read the broad social and organizational context out of every text he lays his hands on: the statistics-laden virtual-world narratives of LitRPG, for example, encode “the dreamlife of corporate IT” (80); the “mommy dom” in the diaper erotica is a “softer agent” of “consumer ‘lock-in’ ” (155). More broadly, genre fiction is exemplary in its invitation to recurrent, formulaic consumption: “According to Amazon, *all fiction is genre fiction* in that it caters to a generic desire” (14–15), which it markets in the same way it markets all other goods, organizing them in ever-more-specific niches.

Foreboding claims that burgeoning production and consumption are turning fiction into a commodity have a long history. In 1884 Henry James worried that novel-readers would believe “there could be no great character in a commodity so quickly and easily produced.”<sup>4</sup> But McGurl sets out to avoid any Jamesian claim that the refinements of taste can distinguish a few worthy literary titles from the mass. On the contrary, McGurl relegates the literary to the status of “one genre among others” (xix). In a virtuosic passage, McGurl remaps contemporary literary fiction along lines defined by popular genres. Revisiting from *The Program Era* his claim that American fiction can be analyzed through the opposition of maximalism (Faulkner) and minimalism (Hemingway), McGurl suggests that this spectrum is analogous to the way

4. Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” *Longman’s Magazine* 4, no. 23 (September 1884): 506.

genre fiction ranges from “world-expansion” in fantasy or science fiction to “world-consolidation” in romance or mystery (206). The network novel, like DeLillo’s *Underworld*, is the maximalist literary counterpart to the genre epic; claustrophobic literary autofiction can be aligned with the constricted world of genre romance.

McGurl suggests that these correspondences are evidence of “the structuring of the literary genre system by popular generic forms” (208). McGurl leaves unspecified what the “structuring” mechanism would be, and since he traces the minimal-maximal polarity in literary fiction back a century and more, it cannot be entirely rooted in a popular genre system whose categories emerged later. Still, looking for the correspondences can be provocative. McGurl seems to me completely convincing when he connects Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy, with its elaborately choreographed plot, gleefully expansive linguistic appendix, and comprehensively researched historical backstory, to the Tolkienesque fantasy saga. Ghosh’s work self-consciously provides the typically genre-fictional pleasures of “world-building” alongside the more astringent experience of reconstructing the brutal origins of capitalist globalization.

Given the stated goal of treating literary fiction as one genre among many, it is surprising when McGurl seems to imply literary fiction can be distinguished from genre fiction on intrinsic grounds after all: literary fictions, he says, “are beholden even now to the ‘real world’ as a guarantor of referential gravity” (209). In the end, it seems, serious fiction tells the truth; entertainment fiction offers escape. McGurl’s position resonates with that of the first scholar to attempt a serious panorama of popular fiction, the English critic Q.D. Leavis. In *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), Leavis concluded that best-selling fictions offered “wish-fulfilment” and “compensation for life,” whereas the underappreciated great works of the day were, like Forster’s *Passage to India*, “concerned with the total human situation in the modern world.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, Leavis’s jeremiad against fiction as an object of mere consumption—“paper-covered novels by Nat Gould . . . American magazines . . . and sixpenny books . . . all go home in the shopping baskets”<sup>6</sup>—could, by converting the basket into an on-line shopping cart, be aligned with McGurl’s point about Amazon’s treatment of literature as a generic commodity among others.

5. Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), 51, 57, 265. Despite these attitudes, Leavis was a pioneer in her commitment to an empirical survey of the book market and of commercial authors themselves.

6. Leavis, 18.

McGurl is very far from sharing Leavis's high-cultural zeal or her belief that the relegation of serious literature to a minority taste was a sign of decline from a more organically unified society. Yet *Everything and Less* does basically regard genre fiction as a "compensation for life": "stories," writes McGurl, "provide therapeutic comfort to those who read them" (161). It seems that this "pointedly unheroic" claim should, for McGurl, encompass literary fiction as well (161). Yet when he turns to high-modernist or contemporary high-literary fictions, McGurl finds not therapeutic comfort but something closer to what Leavis looked for: richness of experience and a commitment to reality. Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, by comparison to the romance novel, offers "a comprehensive windfall of new experience" (147). And though McGurl graphically figures literary fiction on the margins of a world of fiction centered on genre fiction or children's fiction (209, 175), this marginality—treated heroically—was also a feature of the Leavisite account and innumerable lamentations for serious literature since.

This treatment of the literary is problematic insofar as it is twinned with limitations in McGurl's approach to genre fiction; though *Everything and Less* breaks new ground in paying detailed attention to low-status fictions of many kinds, its interpretive horizons are set by long-standing high-literary assumptions about genre fiction which foreshorten its history and reify both readers and genres themselves. McGurl's insistence on the "age of Amazon" as a context leads to overinterpretations of long-standing features of commercial fiction. McGurl describes Amazon's Kindle Unlimited e-book subscription service as an aspiration to "serial plenitude" and to "literature as a service like internet service" (34). Kindle Unlimited may be of recent vintage, but Amazon's attempt at serial plenitude harkens back to the nineteenth-century circulating library in Britain and, especially, the pulp fiction magazines of the interwar U.S. The pulps (the "American magazines" scorned by Leavis when they were imported to Britain) supplied genre-categorized fiction in bulk—a bulk described in the industrial metaphors of the day as "fiction by volume" or "mass production."<sup>7</sup> This historical precedent suggests Amazon is not so much bringing about the postmodern "liquefaction of the literary object" (88) as using electronic media to revive an old mode of low-cost, large-scale fiction circulation. As McGurl elsewhere acknowledges, the self-publishing "indie author" is

7. These phrases appeared in the *New York Times* in 1935: "Fiction by Volume," editorial, *New York Times*, August 28, 1935, 16; A. A. Wyn, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, September 4, 1935, 18.

also a “throwback to the literary tradesmen of the eighteenth century” (107)—though I would prefer, again, to cite the often pseudonymous million-wordmen of the interwar pulps as closer comparanda. For a resourceful interpreter, there are indefinitely many large-scale social and cultural contexts that can be read into any given text. But when literary scholars enter the *terra incognita* of cheap fiction, they risk mistaking established customs of the land for baleful signs of the times. Commercial fiction has a history of its own whose internal logic would be worth understanding more clearly, and not only by opposition to literary fiction, in order to avoid reifying either.

But the larger problem raised by McGurl’s account concerns the conceptualization of the genre-fiction reader. Alongside Amazon, the reader is the other central protagonist of *Everything and Less*: McGurl discusses the fiction he surveys in terms of her needs and desires, her interpellation as consumer, her (“our”) self-projection into virtual worlds. Thus the book’s most ambitious claim is put in terms of the private experience of the reader: “In the Age of Amazon, we might say, fiction is nothing if not the virtualization of quality time” (59). A few authors receive attention—the self-published “indie” bestseller Hugh Howey recurs in multiple chapters as a kind of antihero—but McGurl’s sense is that the genres of genre fiction are to be interpreted in terms of their generic effects on the reader. The video-game narratives of “4X lit and LitRPG are structured as a fantasy circuit leading from the proletarianized corporate drone through the game space to the CEO and back” (82); in the billionaire romance, “to want the literary alpha billionaire is to want him to want you, yes, but it is also to want to set the terms of his desire” (125); Adult Baby Diaper Lover erotica “inspires in the customer a sense of dependent well-being” (160). In general, reading can be theorized as “as a kind of reproductive labor” or as “therapeutic comfort”:

The idea is that entering the space of the novel of any kind is somewhat like entering the womb or nursery. Its world is one the reader inhabits as irresponsibly as a newborn. The mother reads to her child, the child learns to read on her own, but ever thereafter seeks from novels—if that child happens to continue to be a reader—a kind of mediated mothering. The novel *cares*, or at least seems to. (160)

But *Everything and Less* cites no evidence about readers’ experiences to support the claim that “the reader” seeks “mediated mothering” from novels—or

any of its other claims about what readers get from particular titles or from genres in aggregate. There are certainly ways to obtain such evidence, either textual—reviews, professional and amateur (e.g., Goodreads)—or in person through ethnographic methods. As Janice Radway showed in *Reading the Romance*, what readers do with genre fiction is difficult to predict from an interpretation of the text; the apparently regressive formula romance was used by its readers as time off the job of being a housewife, as a form of education about distant times and places, and as social glue to similarly-minded readers.<sup>8</sup> The passage I have just cited from McGurl is offered as a gloss on Radway, whom he quotes on the same page. McGurl takes from Radway the idea that the romance novel could be experienced as nurturing but not the methodological challenge to examine actual people reading in their social contexts. Does McGurl’s imaginary biography of the novel-reading adult capture the major features of contemporary romance reading? It is hard to imagine evidence that would show whether, for most or even some readers, reading the latest alpha billionaire romance is “like entering the womb or nursery.” Instead, McGurl gestures, approvingly, to the superannuated Freudian framework of Norman Holland’s *Dynamics of Literary Response* (1968), adapting it for a figure of “Meaning as Defense” (174). What relation such a theory has to any plausible science of the reading mind is not addressed, despite McGurl’s brief nod to recent work in cognitive literary studies.

More generously, one could say that the reality of “unacknowledged fantasies of return to pre-oedipal pleasures” (173) is unimportant if the idea leads to an interesting interpretation of texts. Anything that reduces the barriers to the serious study of genre fiction is welcome, but I think it is reasonable to ask for more. McGurl conceives of the reader as an isolated pleasure-seeker, but research on reading has long emphasized its unexpectedly social character. Work on fans of specific genres reveals particularly intense, and historically variable, forms of community; the book club continues to be studied as an important organizing form for leisure reading; and social media platforms provide new ways for readers to conceive their genres and themselves (and to provide data to platform companies).<sup>9</sup>

8. Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, new ed. (1984; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

9. Among fandoms, science-fiction fandom is exceptionally well-studied, both ethnographically, as in Camille Bacon-Smith, *Science Fiction Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), and cultural-historically, as in John Cheng, *Astounding Wonder: Imagining Science and Science Fiction in Interwar America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

McGurl's inferences about readers' responses to genre fictions, as well as his wry treatment of genre-fiction writers as providers of a service, also rely on a reductive understanding of genre. McGurl writes of genre as a form of implicit "contract" (xvii, 52) between writer and reader, echoing Frederic Jameson's *Political Unconscious*.<sup>10</sup> Though Jameson's book is surely one of the foundational texts for contemporary literary history, this view has significant limitations. It assumes a close match between the rules governing production and the expectations governing reception. But subgenre labels are often applied only *post hoc*, sometimes against the will of writers or even of publishers. As Rick Altman points out in his essential book *Film/Genre*, the assignment of genre categories is itself a move in a social game involving producers, critics, and audiences; even in avowedly commercial culture, consensus about following a genre formula is the exception: "When we look more closely at generic communication, however, it is not sharing and understanding that appear, but competing meanings, engineered misunderstanding and a desire for domination rather than communication."<sup>11</sup> Even the long-lasting print genre-fiction categories established in publishing—crime, science fiction, romance—emerged slowly and unevenly, as contingent products of the changing publishing field.<sup>12</sup> Reifying genre categories is a critical practice that goes back to Aristotle, but it is not the less inadequate to capturing the social struggles waged over classifications. Still, McGurl's tendency to homogenize are really defects of his book's virtues: its coherence, its comprehensiveness and innovativeness as a vista of contemporary literary culture, its insistence on the fruitfulness of reading and thinking about despised genres. *Everything and Less* compellingly sets the stage for further empirical study of how genre fictions are made and read.

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nia Press, 2012). On book clubs, Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) is foundational; more recent work continues to emphasize the interactive character of reception: C. Clayton Childress and Noah E. Friedkin, "Cultural Reception and Production: The Social Construction of Meaning in Book Clubs," *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 1 (February 2012): 45–68. Social-media-mediated genre labeling is studied computationally by Maria Antoniak, Melanie Walsh, and David Mimno, "Tags, Borders, and Catalogs: Social Re-Working of Genre on LibraryThing," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 5, no. CSCW1 (April 2021): 1–29.

10. "Genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public." Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 106.

11. Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 99.

12. I survey this emergence in "Origins of the U.S. Genre-Fiction System, 1890–1950," *Book History* 26, no. 1 (forthcoming, Spring 2023).



In fact, empirical work on genre-fiction production has a new landmark in Wilkins, Driscoll, and Fletcher's *Genre Worlds*. Their book is a sociology of contemporary genre fiction, based primarily on interviews with authors and publishers in Australia. Whereas McGurl explains genre fictions as the products of the age, Wilkins, Driscoll, and Fletcher explain them as products of less totalizing "worlds" of interacting people. They survey the landscape of the contemporary publishing industry; they document formal and informal association around the genres—conventions, writing groups, etc.—and they track some of the give-and-take between individual writers and publishers that gives shape to genre fictions. Unlike McGurl, they are not concerned to assess the overall state of fiction or to diagnose its relation to the age. *Genre Worlds* aims instead to introduce its titular concept and mode of analysis as a novel approach in the study of genre fiction.

Though genre is a perennial sociology-of-literature topic—it was already central in Goldmann's 1963 *Sociology of the Novel*—*Genre Worlds* is unusual for its ethnographic method, inspired by Howard S. Becker's *Art Worlds* (1982).<sup>13</sup> Becker is a significant sociologist, but his ethnography of art-making has been far less influential in work on literature than Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the literary field. For example, Ken Gelder's *Popular Fiction* brings the Bourdieusian theory to bear on genre fiction, insisting that it should be conceived as the "opposite of Literature."<sup>14</sup> By contrast, *Genre Worlds* sets Bourdieu respectfully but firmly aside, instead following Becker in tracking all the personnel who collaborate in producing cultural artifacts. A "genre world," they write, "is a textual, social, and industrial complex in which people work together to create and circulate specific types of books" (16): as this definition implies, the book is distinctive not only for the emphasis on collaboration but for the significance it assigns to the social and industrial aspects of genre-fiction production.

Against the theoretical view of a genre as a writer-reader "contract," Wilkins, Driscoll, and Fletcher point to the multiple interactions that make a book into genre fiction. The big multinational publishers have genre-

13. Lucien Goldmann, *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1975); Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, 25th anniversary ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

14. Ken Gelder, *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (London: Routledge, 2004), 11. Like Wilkins, Fletcher, and Driscoll, Gelder is Australian. Many other names could be cited as a testament to the continuing strength in Australia of sociologically-informed approaches to popular culture in the tradition of the Birmingham School.

specialized imprints and publish the biggest genre bestsellers, providing “each year’s most reliable moneymaking books” (30); but many small presses also act as genre specialists. A manuscript may acquire a genre only when its author brings it to “industry personnel” (39). Yet this industrial intervention may also be enabling; for a new author, the notoriously detailed editorial guidelines of Harlequin for its category romances constitute “a form of genre training as well as early or preemptive editorial intervention” (41). Turning to self-publishing and Amazon’s algorithmically sorted marketplace, Wilkins et al. point out that self-published authors may position their books in response to the algorithm, but the algorithm itself is a black box which often mixes generic categories with other affinities—notably “recommending” items by nationality as well, in the Australian case (53).

McGurl provocatively positions the LitRPG subgenre as exemplary “multinational literature” by treating it as an allegory of corporate IT working conditions. One of Wilkins et al.’s best case studies concerns the novelization of the video game *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed*—a very literal instance of multinational literature, in which the Australian author Sean Williams collaborated with a team from Lucasfilm USA, including the video-game designer, the “continuity people” (90) responsible for the coherence of the *Star Wars* transmedia universe, and George Lucas himself. Wilkins et al. interview both the author and the game designer, noting how the former chafed against having to follow the narrative lead of the latter. At the same time they register the author’s own fan enthusiasm for *Star Wars* and his use of fan work (the voluminous Wookieepedia website) in his writing. Though this working relationship is hardly typical of science fiction or of genre fiction in general, it nonetheless sheds new light on one of the most salient subcategories of genre fiction today, the transmedia franchise narrative.

The other dimension of interaction emphasized by Wilkins et al. is the universe of largely informal ties of collaboration, friendship, and mentorship among writers, sometimes embedded in organizations like writers’ associations and fan conventions. These ties are what they call the “social layer” of genre worlds, though this label is overgeneral. The industrial relations among writers, agents, editors, and so on are also social, but they are not so easily portrayed as communal. Wilkins et al. are particularly interested in supportive relationships among writers, claiming that “community and creativity intertwine” in genre worlds (132). Their analysis strikes a more skeptical note about organized fandom; in a section of “auto-ethnography” describing Wilkins’s trip to Worldcon in Helsinki, the emphasis shifts to the divisions and hierarchies among fans and

writers: encountering Jeff VanderMeer, “Kim . . . felt intimidated by the difference in their comparative market successes and was keen not to be seen as a hanger-on” (151). As in a discussion of globalization in genre-fiction publishing, the less collegial dimensions of genre production emerge when Australian writers are most self-conscious of being peripheral to the US-dominated global publishing industry.

Only in *Genre Worlds*'s penultimate chapter do the authors turn to the textual dimension of genre worlds. Pointing to “how texts acknowledge the genre reader's competence . . . and how they reveal market influence” (169) in a selection of examples, the discussion is convincing enough, but also notably restrained in its claims. Wilkins et al. insist they will not render political value judgments, nor is there any McGurl-style allegorization of production here. Yet I think it would be possible to carry further their reading of genre fictions not “as simple windows into the ideological attitudes of a culture or industry” but “for evidence of the collaborations and conflicts that brought them into being” (162). But *Genre Worlds* should not be faulted for failing to produce the kinds of interpretive fireworks on display in *Everything and Less*. The test of a fine-grained account of the social relations of genre-fiction production is not whether it produces exciting close readings but whether it explains genre fiction as a social and cultural phenomenon. By this criterion, the most successful aspect of *Genre Worlds* is the proposition that genre fiction is distinguished as much by its relations of production, including both industrial relations and informal, “friendly” relations, as by its adherence to formula. Indeed, both formula and the particular system of genres itself appear, in this account, as *results* of the configuration of genre worlds. Even more usefully, *Genre Worlds* reveals how, as products of interaction and sometimes of struggle, genre categories carry multiple meanings for the people who use them.

The contrast could not be more marked between the “dark apocalypse” of genre fiction in McGurl and the sunny rendition of the same system in Wilkins, Driscoll, and Fletcher. According to the latter, the people making genre fiction “largely seek[] to do good in the world by nurturing creative work” (xi), and twenty-first-century publishing is “a magnificent space of possibility” (198). The overwhelming emphasis of the book is on *successful* collaboration: writers who draft together or take research trips; authors who have found their publishing niche; publishers who are proud of their adjustment to the shifting media landscape. Genre worlds are said to exemplify the “We-paradigm” of creativity rather than an obviously less compelling “He-paradigm” (119). In short, *Genre Worlds* identifies strongly with the genre-fiction-producing uni-

verse it describes, even concluding each chapter with a vignette recasting the topic in formula tropes. Methodologically, the book's critical distance is limited by reliance on non-anonymous interviews. That the book's subjects, chosen on the basis of their success in the field, paint a positive picture of fruitful collaboration across the genre-fiction sector is hardly surprising; they are publicly discussing the relationships on which their livelihood depends. Probably the friendly informal networks that foster and mediate success do not appear so friendly to the unsuccessful.

The need for a more distanced analysis is clearest—just as in McGurl's book—when genre fiction's relationship to literary fiction comes into view. Wilkins et al. drily remark that, for several of their interviewees, “The genre of writing imagined to be brimming with hostility was literary fiction. . . . Genre fiction as a whole is seen as having a flatter hierarchy than literary fiction; each genre world sees itself as distinctively friendly” (103). This observation is surprising evidence of the power of literary fiction, even now, to condition the social dynamics of its large-scale rival. In an even more remarkable moment, Wilkins et al. quote the Australian Aboriginal science-fiction writer Claire Coleman as refusing the label “Indigenous author” because “when people think of Indigenous authors they think of memoir, historical fiction, and poetry . . . and I don't write any of those” (115; the ellipses are Wilkins et al.'s). But Coleman nonetheless reports going to literary festivals more than science-fiction and fantasy conventions, and she was short-listed for an Australian literary award. Coleman's career may show “how the supportive social relationships of a genre world may intersect with other book-culture communities” (130), but this “intersection,” in which literary institutions seem to override an author's genre-world affinity, also reveals the limits of treating genre worlds as self-contained.

In treating them this way, *Genre Worlds* positions itself at the opposite pole from the basically literary approach to genre fiction in *Everything and Less*. McGurl's confident survey, unlocking the hidden truths of genres in the social conditions that transcend them and perpetually raising an eyebrow at the pleasures they promise, has all the authority of the wide-ranging cultural critic. *Genre Worlds*'s optimistic account of the harmony between genre pleasure and commerce—and its celebration of genre-world collegiality—is the product of participants in the industry. In short, these two books are shaped by a correspondence between positions *in* culture and views *about* culture. The most useful theory of this correspondence is still Pierre Bourdieu's; in *Distinction*, he suggests that “actors involved in the game” perform “partial objectifications” on

each other, mapping the cultural universe as they understand it; these “partial objectifications” tend to express and to justify the positions those actors themselves occupy.<sup>15</sup> Bourdieu’s point is not simply that bias is ubiquitous but that the stakes of taking a position need themselves to be “objectified” or laid open to analysis. As I have tried to suggest, the stakes here are nothing other than the social and cultural standing of genre fiction in particular and of literature in general. Neither *Everything and Less* nor *Genre Worlds* gives an account of the forces that place genre fiction where it stands, and the least convincing aspects of their interpretations of genre fiction are closely tied to their divergent *partis pris*.

In cultural sociology, the persistence of hierarchies even as formerly “low” cultural genres gain stature has been extensively studied in the last thirty years of work on cultural omnivorousness: the elite disposition to appreciate widely but selectively across genres in any medium. Richard Peterson introduced the term “omnivore” in a 1992 study of changing elite musical preferences, from “high” genres exclusively (classical music, opera) to selective tastes for *both* high and popular musical genres.<sup>16</sup> In place of early-twentieth-century divisions between highbrows and the masses, the last half-century of elite taste—including, in fact, the tastes of literary scholars—is characterized by its self-consciously superior breadth. Though the details have been highly contested, sociologists have documented the omnivorous disposition across many cultural domains and shown its correlation with status in many societies.<sup>17</sup> Such work implies that the pleasures of genre fiction, far from being as individualized as McGurl implies in his emphasis on the mind and body of the isolated reader, signify differently for different social strata. By the same token, disaggregating readerships would fill in the underspecified role of readers in the genre worlds of Wilkins et al.; *Genre Worlds* tends to conceive of all genre readers as “the genre reader,” possessed of a specific “competence” (169). A fuller sociology of literary taste would make sense of the different possible uses of this competence.

15. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 12.

16. Richard A. Peterson, “Understanding Audience Segmentation: From Elite and Mass to Omnivore and Univore,” *Poetics* 21, no. 4 (August 1992): 243–58.

17. A persuasive synthesis of previous research can be found in Omar Lizardo and Sara Skiles, “Reconceptualizing and Theorizing ‘Omnivorousness’: Genetic and Relational Mechanisms,” *Sociological Theory* 30, no. 4 (December 2012): 263–82. For a recent empirical study of the way omnivorousness is expressed “inclusively” at the level of genres but “exclusively” at the level of particular objects, see Clayton Childress et al., “Genres, Objects, and the Contemporary Expression of Higher-Status Tastes,” *Sociological Science* 8 (2021): 230–64.

As Michael Denning wrote in his classic study of the nineteenth-century American dime novel, the products of a culture industry should not be reduced to a unitary meaning: “As in other capitalist industries, there are struggles both at the point of production . . . and at the point of consumption, the reading of cheap stories.”<sup>18</sup> Though Denning’s heroic metaphor of struggle may not always be apt, the products and the meanings of popular fictions are results of a process involving people with divergent goals and resources who cannot be assumed to be working in harmony, any more than they can be assumed to all be the dupes of Capital. When it comes to genre fiction, the temptation to take the genre categories for granted as the beginning and end of interpretation is particularly strong, even for an exceptional synoptic literary historian like McGurl or for empirically adventurous literary sociologists like Wilkins, Driscoll, and Fletcher. Much work remains to be done on the shifting historical character of genre fiction as part of larger print and media fields; even more work remains on the perennially hard problem of reading and readership in an era of very rapid change for those practices. Nonetheless, *Everything and Less* in particular should mark an epoch in the study of genre fiction, elevating it from a niche subject to one which might bear on almost any broad literary-historical question. Both McGurl’s book and *Genre Worlds* are clear signs that the study of genre fiction is less encumbered by embarrassment than it has been, and this understudied subject may at last come into its own.

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18. Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987), 26.