**Critical Quarterly 59.3 : ‘Books in the Making’ Introduction**

About half way through ‘Fiction’, by Alice Munro, a woman called Joyce goes to her local store to buy a book she’s heard about called *How Are We to Live*. When she gets home, she is disappointed to discover that she has inadvertently bought a collection of short stories: ‘It seems to diminish the book’s authority, making the author seem like somebody who is just hanging on to the gates of Literature, rather than safely settled inside.’[[1]](#endnote-1)

Munro is having a bit of fun at her own expense (the story was published before she reached the ‘untouchable pinnacle’ of the Nobel Prize in 2013), but she’s also drawing attention to the short story’s precarious status in the publishing world.[[2]](#endnote-2) A genre that flourished a hundred years ago in the golden age of magazines—and is currently feeding the Internet’s ‘insatiable maw’—short fiction has rarely sold well in book form.[[3]](#endnote-3) No wonder then that the jacket of *How Are We to Live* works hard to woo readers, with a large photograph of its first-time author, and a biography boasting of a husband, cat and Creative Writing qualification. The store has also stamped the book with a ‘little gold sticker’ and the sales assistant tells Joyce that if she returns a few days later (with the sticker intact) ‘the author will be here to sign it for you’.

If ‘Joyce has never understood this business of lining up to get a glimpse of the author and then going away with a stranger’s name written in your book’ (p.49), publishers know that, in a world where another book is published every thirty seconds, marketing is ‘effectively the making of contemporary writing’.[[4]](#endnote-4) Never mind that the ‘average author event ...attracts eight people’, most of whom probably themselves have ‘authorial fantasies’, publicists always hope for a debut that’s ‘hot shit for a while’ (p.49).[[5]](#endnote-5) Writers were once able to build careers gradually and ‘break even on the third or fourth book,’ but in recent years, as Morgan Entrekin, publisher of Grove/Atlantic, has noted, even ‘the first book is expected to land a huge advance and huge sales. . . . The notion of the “first book with flaws” is gone; now we see a novelist selling 9,000 hardcovers and 15,000 paperbacks, and they see themselves as a failure.’[[6]](#endnote-6)

Whether or not to get the book signed is not the only ‘business’ that readers like Joyce have to consider. For a start, they must decide whether they want a (signable) printed volume at all, or would rather opt for the white light and swipe of an e-book, or an ‘audible’ voice in their earphones, although rarely the author’s own voice—something one commentator recently described as ‘the platonic ideal of trashing a writer’s work’.[[7]](#endnote-7) Recent surveys suggest that, rather than one of these publishing platforms replacing the others, ‘readers increasingly want to consume books in a variety of ways’.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The largest audience for e-readers, for example, seem to be women over 45, and the most popular genres are crime and romance—reinforcing all those food-related stereotypes of binging and disposability.[[9]](#endnote-9) Genre and women also drive online fan fiction. While some fanfic authors turn professional—E.L. James is the bestselling example—most see themselves as operating outside of the marketplace, writing ‘for fun (and for free)’ and ‘gifting’ their work within a clearly defined community.[[10]](#endnote-10) While detractors complain that self-publishing sites merely encourage ‘derivate amateur writing’—for ‘super agent’ Andrew Wylie, it’s ‘the aesthetic equivalent of telling everyone who sings in the shower they deserve to be in La Scala’—others argue that they offer spaces for marginalised groups to reclaim and repurpose the dominant culture’s narratives, using them ‘therapeutically, to work out their own creative urges’, and to explore alternative identities. [[11]](#endnote-11) Henry Jenkins goes even further. ‘Fan fiction,’ he claims, ‘is a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk.’[[12]](#endnote-12) The corporations, however, have a habit of repossessing and reselling folk production. Mark McGurl argues that the works produced by Amazon’s e-book self-publishing wing, Kindle Direct Publishing, themselves exemplify the company’s service model in which the customer (be she author or reader) has become a ‘quasi-deity’ for whom instant gratification, or ‘quality time’, is the primary goal.[[13]](#endnote-13)

An alternative online, ‘post-press’ utopia celebrates formal innovation and trans-medial experimentation, the delimiting author function once again replaced but this time by a kind of deconstructive *jouissance* of ‘links, associations, and dispersions of meaning’.[[14]](#endnote-14) On this reading, technological innovation since the 1980s—from the advent of desktop publishing software to Web 2.0—has transformed ‘the formation we know as “literature” ...[into] a complex web of activities that includes much more than conventional images of writing and reading’.[[15]](#endnote-15) Some, however, remain sceptical, arguing that since here too, the corporations are in control, these new platforms produce less rather than more freedom. ‘The contemporary and evolving cultural practices of reading,’ warns John Cayley, ‘will be determined not by the innovators of electronic literature; they will be determined by those cultural power brokers who build and control the Big Software architecture of reading.’[[16]](#endnote-16)

Into these debates come the voices of those who still believe that ‘Devoutly Literary’ fiction requires physical embodiment.[[17]](#endnote-17) The codex, suggests publisher James Bridle, provides ‘the corresponding physical weight to literature's intellectual heft.’[[18]](#endnote-18) And unsurprisingly James Daunt, chief executive of the Waterstones bookshop chain, agrees: ‘With good books, there is a clear benefit to owning the real thing.’[[19]](#endnote-19) Bridle and Daunt believe that we all know what the ‘real thing’ is—presumably a hardcover book with thick paper and a well-designedjacket that gives us lots of ‘visual prompts’.[[20]](#endnote-20) Responding to what Jessica Pressman calls ‘the aesthetics of bookishness’, many publishers, big and small, are keen to emphasise that what they offer is not mere *content* but ‘beautifully designed and printed’ *objects*.[[21]](#endnote-21) These objects serve a variety of purposes. Like well plated-up restaurant dishes or carefully contoured faces, books be arranged, photographed and posted on Instagram – or rather, they can be Bookstagrammed.[[22]](#endnote-22) But more is claimed than visual pleasure. ‘Beautifully-made books recruit all our sense to the reading experience,’ writes Amy Hungerford; publishers like McSweeney’s work, she argues, by remembering ‘that we still have bodies as we read.’[[23]](#endnote-23) For Alice Munro’s character, Joyce, however, the value of the book-as-object is less aesthetic or phenomenological than pragmatic. Lying in bed, Joyce lays the volume ‘face down on her chest’ to demonstrate to her husband that she’s listening to him and, after a while, she shifts her knees to create a better angle so she can at least read the jacket (p.50). [[24]](#endnote-24)

The ‘tug of war between pixels and print’ gets all the headlines, but it is only one of many factors determining what gets written and read today.[[25]](#endnote-25) This special issue contributes to a recent ‘wave of scholarly interest in the institutions of contemporary literary production’ that aims to expand our understanding of how books are ‘made’, encompassing not only their writing and physical production, or even their reading, but also their complicated diffusion through a variety of gatekeeping and prestige-investing institutions such as reviewing, prize-giving and book clubs.[[26]](#endnote-26) All of these are undergoing their own profound changes. We are now all aware of the writing programme as ‘the engine of production and reproduction’ of most of our literary practices, but what kinds of books emerge from its classrooms?[[27]](#endnote-27) Does MFA-produced, and often MFA-referencing, ‘world lit’ offer a real alternative to the white-bread brand: ‘a fascinating, confounding accumulation of brands and music and comic books and icons, with emotions skimmed over, and each sentence stylishly aware of its own stylishness’?[[28]](#endnote-28) And how does postcolonial writing beyond the MFA ‘register anxiety about the political parameters of the literary marketplace?’[[29]](#endnote-29) Why do so many recent works of fiction, like Joyce’s choice, *How are We to Live*, masquerade as self-help books? [[30]](#endnote-30) What happens when writers believe that ‘private life has ceded to the web’? [[31]](#endnote-31) Can the novel reinvent itself simply by incorporating tweets, or by turning itself into ‘an artfully curated social media feed’?[[32]](#endnote-32) Is its ongoing dependence on the modes of fantasy and science fiction productive or merely a futile attempt to compete with video games and box-set TV? In 2012, the novelist Michael Szalay expressed anxiety that ‘the migration of literary talent into premium cable television’ had led to ‘a radical revaluation of authorial prestige and labor’. Noting that Jennifer Egan had sold HBO the rights for *A Visit for the Goon Squad* (2010), which in turn was partly inspired by the HBO show *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), Szalay asked: ‘who is borrowing prestige from whom? Put differently, what exactly is being bought and sold here?’[[33]](#endnote-33)

Amid all this, and much, much more, how do agents and editors decide what, how and where? Are bestsellers *found* by luck, or algorithm, or are they *made* by socially complex ‘webs of collective belief’?[[34]](#endnote-34) On the one hand, the ‘merchants of culture’ are fewer and more powerful than ever. The corporate consolidation of publishing and, especially, retail into fewer and fewer hands has meant that ‘an ever smaller number of books continues to sell more and more broadly’. [[35]](#endnote-35) Only a few years ago Sessalee Hensley, the chief fiction buyer for Barnes & Noble, was described as the ‘most powerful woman in publishing’, to the extent that publishers even sought her approval for book jackets.[[36]](#endnote-36) Looking at a New York branch of Barnes & Noble in 2009, the sociologist John Thompson noted that 60% of non-fiction and 67% of fiction on the store’s front pages ‘were published by the five largest corporate groups’. [[37]](#endnote-37) But already this seems out of date. While bookstores offer ‘diminishing diversity’, online retailer Amazon operated on a ‘Long Tail’ model, turning small-selling ‘unprofitable customers, products and markets into profitable ones’. ‘The story of the Long Tail,’ argues Chris Anderson, ‘is really about the economics of abundance...what happens when.... everything becomes available to everyone.’ [[38]](#endnote-38)

But if Amazon’s warehouse offers a low-overhead ‘everything store’, it is now readers who face a crisis of ‘resource allocation’.[[39]](#endnote-39) The reliance of bookstores on a ‘celebrity system’ and special offers may indeed be ‘market censorship’, but at least it offers a solution to the ‘problem of abundance’.[[40]](#endnote-40) How else might we choose what to read? The role of tastemakers, gatekeepers, curators, advisors, critics—call them what you will—seems more important than ever. With the (mostly male) reviewers of the beleaguered newspaper books pages arguing for their jobs—none more passionately than A.O. Scott, of the *New York Times*, who declared that ‘criticism, far from being a minor, petty, secondary art, is in fact larger than the others’—digital communities of ‘lay readers’ (such as the Amazon-owned Goodreads) form their own networks, what William Marling calls ‘crowd-sourced gatekeeping’.[[41]](#endnote-41) Book clubs too promise ‘handpicked’ choices, directing readers towards large communities (personalised under the names of Oprah or Richard and Judy), or specific niches (translations, say, or works selected by author, genre or even press) in the carefully ‘curated’ manner of a craft beer or coffee subscription.[[42]](#endnote-42) While presenting themselves as responding to personal taste, these ventures remind us that the book is essentially a sociable medium; we don’t just want to read, we want there to be ‘books we have read in common’.[[43]](#endnote-43)

All the essays in this special issue insist that the ‘core circuit of literary social activity’ concerns much more than the traditional triumvirate of author, reader and text.[[44]](#endnote-44) Collectively, they trace every stage in the ‘making’ of books—from the creative writing classroom to the publishing house, and from the computer desktop to the dynamics of reading and reception. Loren Glass’s piece fills an important gap in the study of writing instruction, exploring the place of poetry in the Program Era. Developing Mark McGurl’s argument that MFA programs have preserved, rather than displaced, the protocols of literary modernism, Glass’s account of ‘Program Era poetics’ looks back to the likes of T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens, moves through the Beats and Language poetry, and concludes with a discussion of the contemporary poet (and graduate of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop) Joshua Clover. In the second essay, Claire Squires examines contemporary trade publishing, asking how technological changes might affect editorial decisions. Drawing on interviews with commissioning editors, Squires finds that ‘big data’ remain largely absent from their work, which still revolves around taste and ‘gut instinct’—albeit in interaction with institutional and market pressures. But if book commissioning is surprisingly untouched by new technologies, the next essay argues that they are transforming the very idea of authorship. Exploring what we mean when we say that computers can ‘write’, Martin Eve questions the rhetoric of ‘abundance’ surrounding the digital economy, claiming that it elides the complex forms of labour that now underpin literary production. The fourth essay, by Günter Leypoldt, shifts the focus from production to reception, investigating the reputation of one of today’s most prestigious authors: the Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard. For Leypoldt, Knausgaard’s extraordinary international success hinges upon the phenomenon of ‘charismatic trust’, an aspect of the reading experience which involves not only aesthetic but moral value. Expanding the issue’s purview still further, we then end with a ‘collective interview’, in which a wide variety of leading contemporary writers, critics, publishers, agents, and others offer their thoughts on what’s at stake in the making of books today.

 Kasia Boddy and David Winters

1. Alice Munro, ‘Fiction’, in *Too Much Happiness* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2009), 32-61 (pp.49-50). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Fiction’ first appeared in *Harper’s* (August 2007, 71-80), one of the few general monthlies that still regularly publishes stories. On the demise of fiction in mainstream magazines, see Deirdre Carmody, ‘The Media Business; From Magazines Flashes of Fiction’, *New York Times*, June 20, 1994. On short fiction and digital publishing, see, for example, Leslie Kaufman, ‘Good Fit for Today’s Little Screens: Short Stories’, *New York Times*, Feb 15, 2013; Julian Gough, ‘The Big Short - Why Amazon’s Kindle Singles are the Future’, *The Guardian*, Sept 5, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Gabriel Zaid, *So Many Books*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (London: Sort Of Books, 2004), 21; Claire Squires, *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing* (London: Palgrave, 2007), 16. In 2004, another Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood, came up with the idea of the ‘LongPen’, later developed by Syngrafii, using robotics and the internet to deliver a signature remotely. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Matthew Gallaway, ‘Nine Writers and Publicists Tell All About Readings and Book Tours’, *The Awl*, April 10, 2012; Anakana Schofield, ‘Publicising a Novel – the Problems’, *The Guardian*, July 25, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Michael Meyer, ‘About That Book Advance’, *New York Times*, April 10, 2009. Amy Hungerford discusses the relationship between the ‘celebrity’ and ‘subsistence’ writer in *Making Literature Now* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2016), 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Wyatt Mason, ‘Letter of Recommendation: Audiobooks Read by the Author’, *New York Times*,July 13, 2016. In July 2016, the Audio Publishers Association reported a 21% rise in sales from the previous year. Jennifer Maloney, ‘The Fastest-Growing Format in Publishing: Audiobooks’, *Wall Street Journal*, July 21, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Alison Flood, ‘Ebooks sales falling for the first time, finds new report’, *The Guardian*, Feb 3, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. A survey undertaken by the Canadian e-reader manufacturer Kobo in 2016 concluded that, of ‘the most avid readers’ (defined as 10% of their estimated 28 million customers), 75% were women and 77% were 45 and over. ‘How the Best Readers in the World Read’, *Kobo* (April 2016), 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Francesca Coppa, ‘Introduction’ to *The Fan Fiction Reader* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 1-17 (p.3). On fanfiction as a gift economy, see Karen Hellekson, ‘A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture,’ Cinema Journal, 48.4 (2009), 113–18.  [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, ‘Introduction’, in *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, eds. Hellekson and Busse(Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 5; ‘Wylie Praises “End to Publishers Cowering to Amazon”’, *The Bookseller*, Oct 29, 2014; Cory Doctorow, ‘In Praise of Fanfic’, *Locus Magazine Online,* May, 16, 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Amy Harmon, ‘In TV’s Dull Summer Days, Plots Take Wing on the Net’, *New York Times*, Aug 18, 1997. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Mark McGurl, ‘Everything and Less: Fiction in the Age of Amazon’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 77.3 (2016), 447-471 (pp. 457, 465). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Nick Levey, ‘Post-Press Literature: Self-Published Authors in the Literary Field’, *Post45* (February 2016); Mark Poster, *What’s the Matter with the Internet?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 68 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. John Cayley, ‘Aurature at the End(s) of Electronic Literature’, *electronic review book*, May 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Jim Collins uses the phrase in *Bring on the Books for Everyone: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), chapter 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. James Bridle, ‘Literature Needs Much More Than E-books’, *Wired*, April 21, 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Flood, ‘Ebooks sales falling’. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Peter Terzian, ‘Portrait of a Cover Artist: An Interview with Peter Mendelsund’, *The New Yorker*, August 5, 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Jessica Pressman, ‘The Aesthetics of Bookishness in Twenty-First-Century Literature’, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 48, 4 (Fall 2009), 465-82; Will Barrett, ‘Pub Chat: Test Centre’ (Interview with Jess Chandler), *Poetry School*, 2015. Poetryschool.com. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Bookstagrammer meetings now regularly take place; one was held at the 2017 Hay-on-Wye Book Festival. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Amy Hungerford, ‘Wild Things: The Book of the Film of the Book’, *Huffington Post*, May 25, 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. On the ‘relation, or lack thereof, that two persons can establish, in the presence of a printed third party’, see Leah Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Alexandra Axel, ‘The Plot Twist: E-Book Sales Slip, and Print is Far from Dead’, *New York Times*, Sept 22, 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*, 161. See James F. English, ‘Everywhere and Nowhere: The Sociology of Literature after “the Sociology of Literature”, *New Literary History*, special issue on ‘New Sociologies of Literature’, eds. James F. English and Rita Felski, 41.2 (Spring 2010), v-xxiii. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Mark McGurl, *The Program Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 284. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. See, for example, Nick Hornby, *How to Be Good* (2001), Mohsin Hamid, *How to Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) and Ali Smith, *How to Be Both* (2014). The phenomenon is discussed in Beth Blum, ‘The Self-Help Hermeneutic: Its Global History and Literary Future’, *PMLA* (forthcoming). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Andrew O’Hagan, ‘Will Social Media Kill the Novel?’, *The Guardian*, June 17, 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Hari Kanzuru, ‘Impossible Mirrors’, *New York Times*, Sept 5, 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Michael Szalay, ‘The Incorporation Artist’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 10, 2012. See also, ‘Salman Rushdie Says TV comparable to Novels’, *The Guardian*, June 12, 2011; Adam Kirsch and Mohsin Hamid, ‘Are the New Golden Age TV Shows the New Novels?’, *New York Times*, Feb 3, 2014; Kira Cochrane, ‘Eleanor Catton: “I'm strongly influenced by box-set TV drama”’, *The Guardian*, Sept 7, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. On algorithms, see Jodie Archer and Matthew L. Jockers, *The Bestseller Code* (London: Penguin, 2016). Their model revealed, for example, that ‘the topic that is most overrepresented in bestselling books when compared to non-bestsellers’, and which thus ‘has considerable predictive power’, is ‘human closeness’ (p.67). On the workings of the ‘web of collective belief’, see John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 193. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Jonathan Galassi, the president and publisher of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, quoted in Rachel Donadio, ‘Promotional Intelligence’, *New York Times*, May, 21, 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Miriam Markowitz, ‘Here Comes Everybody’, *The Nation*, November 19, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture*, 392, n.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid, p.393; Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion, 2006), 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Brad Stone, *The Everything Store: Jeff Bezos and the Age of Amazon* (London: Corgi, 2014), 38; Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*, 160. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid, 14; André Schiffrin, *The Business of Books* (London: Verso, 2000), ch.4; Matthew Wilkens, ‘Contemporary Fiction by the Numbers’, *Post45* (November 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. A.O. Scott, *Better Living Through Criticism: How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty and Truth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016), 20; William Marling, *Gatekeepers: The Emergence of World Literature and the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 150. Since 2010, the organisation VIDA: Women in Literary Arts has monitored gender breakdown in literary features and reviews. On ‘book section layoffs’, see, for example, Tom Lutz, ‘Future Tense’, *LA Review of Books*, August 6, 2011; and, on the many varieties online criticism, see *The Digital Critic: Literary Culture Online*, eds Houman Barekat, Robert Barry and David Winters (New York: O/R Books, forthcoming) [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. The website for ‘And Other Stories says it ‘works with writers and translators to handpick the best international books for its subscribers’. Thanks to Michael Kalisch for the craft-beer comparison. On the ubiquity of curating contemporary discourse, see David Balzer, *Curationism* (London: Pluto Press, 2015) and Michael Bhaskar, *Curation: The Power of Selection in an Age of Excess* (London: Piatkus, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Hungerford, *Making Literature*, 16 [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Alan Liu, ‘From Reading to Social Computing’, in *Literary Studies in the Digital Age: An Evolving Anthology*, eds. Kenneth M. Price and Ray Siemens. MLA Commons, Modern Language Association of America, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)