

Recall This Book 67
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Books in the Age of Amazon
Mark McGurl (EF, JP)

John Plotz: From Brandeis university, welcome to Recall this Book, where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events. Today, Elizabeth and I, Hello Elizabeth Ferry, are delighted to speak with the brilliant Stanford English professor Mark Mcgurl. Hello, Mark.

Mark McGurl: Good to be here.

John Plotz: It's great to have you. *Everything and Less: The Novel and the Age of Amazon* has just been published by Verso. So, listen to us and then rush to your favorite bookstore to buy it. And if I say *bricks and mortar bookstore* with a poignant twang, you will know immediately how to place me within Mark's delightfully subtle and far-ranging categorization of the various responses that we, citizens, consumers, readers and I should also say the texts of those citizens, consumers and readers can have to our era of Amazon-ification. So, in his previous influential and wonderful book *The Program Era* Mark made waves by offering a system centric approach to fiction in the post-war period in America, insisting that we look at the literal sites of production and also of accommodation for American fiction. Those hundreds of writing programs that created their own ecosystem for certain forms, certain generic tendencies within literary fiction and actually, saying that Mark, reminds me that you and Elizabeth and I obviously shared this time at Hopkins, which was a very, very early one of those programs. I think just after World War Two that was returning vet programs, yeah?

Mark McGurl: Oh yeah, Oh yeah.

John Plotz: So, then he pivoted towards the Amazon era with a hugely influential and , really influential even by non-English Professor Standards, 2017 article in *MLQ* which was called *Everything and Less: Fiction in the Amazon Era* and now comes this 300-page book that is maybe an unpacking or a next step analysis from that argument. So, Mark I have a zillion notes about how I see your argument proceeding and I should say we also have some companion texts to go along with it in this conversation, we have two older novels that directly thematize and explore the world of bookselling in its earlier pre-virtual forms and as always we are going to end with recallable books, the book that, if you enjoyed this conversation, you may also want to dive into. Before all that, maybe I can ask you to just get the ball rolling by introducing or premising or otherwise presenting your argument about how you understand the Amazon-ification of the book business and the general state of the neoliberal Internet economy?

Mark McGurl: I think I can handle that. Well, so the most basic link between the Amazonian literary sphere or ecology and neoliberalism more broadly is the concept of service and the service economy. So, something like 80% of workers in the US now work in the service economy, broadly defined. As opposed to the goods-producing or agricultural economies. And as the crystallization of that reality, Amazon as a company has always defined itself by way of its obsession with providing good service. So, it's no surprise then that its conception of the literary work is something that is as something that provides reliable service to readers. For Amazon, the reader is a customer. This being something like a total negation of the high modernist conception of the artist in the artwork as a product of wholly autonomous labor and one of the most important ways that literature is enabled to provide good service to readers is by being organized into many distinct genres that line up with many distinct taste profiles. So, as I put it in the book, for Amazon, all fiction is genre fiction, including literary fiction, which is simply another genre that some

people really like. Those of us who are of a certain age will understand, will know that Amazon started as a bookstore. That that was its first product, interestingly, and now it's so much more than that. I mean the book part of Amazon is a tiny percentage of its overall business now, but I find that intriguing. I found that intriguing from the get-go and it raised the question whether there hasn't always been a kind of literary or quasi-literary dimension to the whole enterprise. An epic dimension to the enterprise insofar as it was sort of motivated by its first product, insofar as Jeff and Mackenzie Bezos are both readers, and she is a novelist, you know. So it sort of set my thinking along those lines. And then, as I'm sure you know I had occasion to ponder. I mean books are one of the first mass produced commodities right when the first machine made things in multiples that get distributed and so the book, in a way, has always had this interesting relation to industrial modernity?

John Plotz:

So, I definitely want to go back the way you have raised that you know I'm we have had wonderful conversations in the past with Martin Puchner and Leah Price about sort of book history and the ways in which books are not just kind of representative and indicative, but in some ways kind of proleptic and causative agents at different cultural moments. So, I definitely want to go back there. But can I just hold with the point you made about like the book shop identity of Amazon being at the center of the concentric rings of its gradual pervasiveness economy? So, are you, how strong a claim is that about elective affinity, in other words, is it that it had to be a book shop doing that, because books and genres gave you actually an important paradigm, which then, you know, predicted and made easier the success of Amazon as it, you know, gave you different flavors of tapioca, different kinds of bicycle clamp, different kinds of cable? Those are just things I bought in the last week on Amazon, so is that a strong elective affinity or is it more like just contingent? I mean, books are one object among others. It happened to be a good point of insertion for this sort of retail.

Mark McGurl: I would yeah.

John Plotz: How strong an argument?

Mark McGurl: I mean I would aim for something sort of in between those two claims. I mean the very strong claim just sounds to me a little bit fanciful. That said, it wasn't purely arbitrary either. I think that, you know, Bezos by most accounts, was intrigued by this, by the Internet, and thought it should be (in the 90s) and thought it should be used for a new kind of business. And there's some evidence that he always was thinking about selling everything on the Internet. He just looked around and saw that books have specific qualities that make them, that made them, very convenient to start with. Most importantly that there are so many more books in existence than can possibly be housed in even a huge bookstore, right? That and then very importantly, books were already, already had the ISBN number system, so that books were rigorously trackable. In a way so it had, and then add onto that they're relatively similar physical objects. They're relatively durable physical objects, so they're not too delicate, right?

Mark McGurl: So, when you bring it together, all of these elements books made a heck of a lot of sense, as the sort of thing to begin with. There are also all these practices intrinsic to the way Amazon does business that are quite peculiar and quite literary seeming. So, like no PowerPoints are allowed at Amazon, you have to deliver your information in the form of a six-page narrative that people can read before the meeting starts. So, a commitment to textual linearity and argumentation over and against the sort of visual so you could look at that, just for instance. If you want to introduce a new product at Amazon, I don't know if this is still true, but it used to be true that you would present a futuristic press conference discussing the success of the product that, you know. I mean so that there, so you can start to sort of see like literary elements being sort of built into the fabric

of the way the corporation does business, and then just most overarchingly to go back to your thing about the hero, clearly Bezos (and this has been true since he was high school valedictorian, talking about his dreams of us going to space), clearly it's not just that he's a science fiction guy, it's also an epic science fiction guy with a certain a little bit of an old fashioned conception of the hero, of the hero that will lead us where we need to go as a people. And I think that Amazon has always had that epic heroic dimension.

Elizabeth Ferry: And also reading as a kind of model for that right? Like, reading as the way that you're going to transcend your specificity and travel to...

Mark McGurl: Yeah, at least initially. Yeah, yeah, you read your way into the future.

John Plotz: So, I want to tilt this conversation towards something that I'm basically going to sit back and listen to you guys talk about methodology because I, as Elizabeth, as an anthropologist, I think you have some thoughts about the methodological, you know, the sort of divides around how one writes a book like this Mark, but can I start that by saying I really admired and I would love to hear you say more about your notion that, kind of buried within the genres that succeed within the Amazon universe of you know self-publishing, but just book distribution more generally, within those genres itself you read basically a coded or implicit referentiality to the system itself, so I'm going to drop, I'm going to drop in on, because now I get to talk about something I've never talked about before. Adult diaper, baby fiction. No, that's not what it's called adult diaper...?

Mark McGurl: It's "adult baby diaper lover" adult baby ABDL yeah.

John Plotz: Diaper lover. OK ABDL, Google it now. Except have a screen

up when you Google it yeah. So, if I understand your argument and this is what I want you to say more about, you're saying that in the kind of framework of adult baby.

Mark McGurl: Not safe for work.

John Plotz: Diaper Lover is a notion of, kind of, like, it actually models the subservient succoured dependent consumer of Amazon products and then the loving dominatrix giant mammary of Amazon? I guess. So yeah, yeah. Is that tongue in cheek? I couldn't tell it is your analysis tongue in cheek, or is it? Do you think that yeah?

Mark McGurl: Well, I think I mean well, OK, only tongue in cheek to the extent that there one could multiply, I think, possibilities for this sort of allegory of Amazon's own business. Just that's a very particular, particularly direct, and I admit, kind of sort of funny one, yeah, because so, because it's an image of a formerly alpha-heroic male who eroticizes being dominated by a mother figure, right? And provided with everything he needs rather than having to go out there and provide it for himself. You know that –

John Plotz: A mother who looks a little like Jeff Bezos in other words?

Mark McGurl: Basically yeah, I mean yeah. Yeah, so I was just sort of interested in the erotica space in general, because it's the most, it's the sort of wildest sort of affordance (to use that term) of the Amazon system the things least likely to make it through any kind of like ordinary literary gatekeeper. But you can't keep the people from producing innumerable versions and permutations of their kink out there, and this was just and I was sort of interested in that as a general phenomenon, and then I stumbled upon this stuff. And I was like wait a minute - that actually is uncanny how it, well, my first thought is wow this reverses 50 Shades of grey, yeah, perfectly. It's a perfect inversion of the model we're given by that super bestseller. But also, it really kind of gets at least that element of Amazon in its relation to us. As

dependent consumers who, you know, sit immobilized as stuff is delivered to us, basically.

Elizabeth Ferry: And all of our needs are met before.

Mark McGurl: All of our needs are met in that.

John Plotz: Yeah, OK, so the so I'll just ask a tiny follow up on that before the much more interesting question of like you know talking to people versus reading books.

Mark McGurl: In that way.

John Plotz: So is it, do you do you feel like, is your insight that once you've understood this system, it's possible to go in and find, you know, the moments that resonate, the kind of fractals that, embody the system as a whole? Or is the argument a little more agential than that, that you see people kind of working out the logic of the system that they are operating within by way of the stories they are telling?

Mark McGurl: Telling, Oh well, God probably not consciously.

John Plotz: OK.

Mark McGurl: No. That seems farfetched. Yeah, spontaneously reproducing the way we all do. We're all spontaneous reproducers of ideologies and ideologimes, and I think that that's what one is discovering in this space. I have not been able to stop my own methodological commitments from being a creative right, so that sort of multiplicity of approaches that you sense there. Partly that's an artifact of the, of my having, wanting to sort of like, add up all of the things you can do to sort of read literary history rather than sort of purify them in favor of One Direction or another. So that's and then I mean a more positive account would be that because of certain kinds of theoretical models that fascinate me, complexity models where you, where you're sort of taught to think about things at different scales

and the way they relate to each other. The way the world is sometimes fractal in the sense that it's scale free. That's something that something really is a perfect miniature of something larger.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right, right?

Mark McGurl: But then in the social, that's not always the case, sometimes differences in scale produce real differences. Differences in quantity produce differences in income inequality, and so you know it's like a group of five people is not just a miniature version of 1,000,000 people, right?

John Plotz: And that's why our desire to have Jacinda Ardern as President of the United States is probably not going to work out very well, much as I want the world to be New Zealand, it's.

Mark McGurl: Right, that would yes.

John Plotz: Not going to be so.

Mark McGurl: Yeah, exactly, and so in a lot of ways what I'm doing in this book and also my previous couple books also, I think to some degree is manifesting that fact of trying to perform multi scalar analysis of things.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right, yeah, I mean I, it's I, I read it as sort of like, and that the term *fractal* is also coming up in my brain, right? But in this sort of like let us posit this as an example of that, or let us posit this as caused by that or sort of as a in a synecdochic relationship with that right and sort of, but I like your word "accreted" because it definitely, you know, it feels like this, sort of like from this angle, and then from this angle and yeah.

Mark McGurl: Well, I mean. That goes back to the very initial gesture of the

book, which wants the reader you know to get interested in Amazon as a literary historical phenomenon. And goes with that. You know what I mean for 200 plus pages, right? But which never, at least I'd like to think, never tries to pretend that there's something exclusive about this context that you know what I mean. It was, it's really like, I think in terms of like, of it being a big thought experiment. OK, let's put Amazon at the center of things. And then what follows from that as an interpretive lens without ever sort of, It's so implausible to sort of say that there are not other profoundly important sort of ways to look at, ways to look at contemporary literary culture. There obviously are and, and so it's, you know, it tries to be forthrightly constructivist in that sense, it's like yes. I mean, I do want to claim that you know it's not crazy to say that Amazon is the most interesting thing that's happened materially to literary history in the past 20 years. The gauntlet I throw down in the book is to say can you point to something that's happened inside a novel since 2007 that is as consequential as the arrival of the Kindle in 2007.

John Plotz: So that sounds like a great time to loop back to our historical context, and I think each of you guys chose a book that looks at the book trade at an earlier moment and I don't know Mark since yours historically is a little bit earlier, do you want to start off with the Morley book?

Mark McGurl: Sure. Well, there's this book. First, I want to give a sort of shout out to a graduate student in my department named Jessica Jordan who's working on this genre which, books about books, which turns out to be much larger than you might have imagined. I knew about this book from researching my first book, which is about the turn of the century. Literary professionalism, but she reminded me of it working with her so but it's called *Parnassus On Wheels*, it's by Christopher Morley and it's just, I won't, I'm not going to make a case for it as a great novel, in some ways it's quite slight, but pretty entertaining and sort of drops you in. And I think that our next novel

does the same, sort of drops you into a moment of true book-oriented literary idealism. The idea, so the plot is that a woman is living with her older brother on a farm, and then he happens to become weirdly becomes a famous writer by writing essays on the joys of living on a farm. And she's, you know, happy for him. But she's really, really bored. And then she gets this opportunity to buy a mobile book wagon, a little mobile bookstore, which she then rides around the countryside. And then the substance of the novel, or the adventure or the picaresque adventure she has as a bookseller, as a bookseller woman, this is another sort of through line that we could look at so, finds her way into the book business in this way. And it's an opportunity for her, but it always goes hand in hand with the sort of opportunities to bring enlightenment to the countryside of America. It's sort of an interesting sort of moment. In a, you know, a representation of bookselling, as you know, it's pre-Amazonian in the sense that books are being brought to you, so it has that delivery of books aspect. On the other hand, they're being delivered by horse and wagon. So it's a little bit different, but nonetheless has this, you know, deep, humanist, enlightenment, faith, and interesting.

John Plotz: Actually, Mark can I ask you more in terms of the humanist enlightenment? Can I pick up a really awesome point you made that I didn't want to get lost, which had to do with the ISBN number system? And I guess it's the way I'm going to frame it, Elizabeth, you might have a different, way in is, that is, to think about historically the different models we have for commodities, and you know, I wrote a book about portable property in which the default commodity.

Mark McGurl: Oh right, of course, yes.

John Plotz: Yeah, not in which I did think about books as commodities, but I thought about fungibility. And obviously, if you're selling flour, there's not a lot of, I never really thought about this with Amazon, but there's no real advantage to my buying flour from, like somebody who's got 1000

warehouses because you don't need 9,000,000 ISBN numbers. For flour you just need flour and books are particularized commodities. Right? So, in other words, that doesn't make them not commodities. But an aspect of their commodification is that each one has this particularity like that's what these invaluable commodities. Do you want to say more about that?

Mark McGurl: That no, I mean, it's just an interesting fact about the book as commodity. In a sense, there's a radical similarity of one book to another, physically, I mean, for all we know, there's, obviously there's variety in the physical shape of books, but like, you know, there's also a radical similarity of the codex form from one you know, from one version to another, and then any given title. Of course, all of those books, at least in the same edition, will be completely similar.

John Plotz: Right?

Mark McGurl: Right, but then books, the book market as a whole is characterized by, you know, being occupied by I don't know what 5,000,000 different things.

John Plotz: There's something specifically, I don't know, Humanized, about the commodity because the commodity is a book, you know that as this special *je ne sais quoi*, because every book is different from every other in a way that somebody selling he doesn't have that.

Mark McGurl: No, absolutely and sure. And as you can learn from Laura Miller and other historians of the book trade, yeah, it's remarkable how, how long a kind of pride in it being a bad business lasted. Yeah, it really took the beginnings of corporatization in the 60s and 70s and 80s for that mentality to sort of drain away, it was a, I mean, the sort of New York City version of it was that it was a gentlemanly business, right? Very much removed from the rough and tumble of other sectors of the market because imbued with

this seriousness of purpose, and that sort of you know, back country version of that is reflected in the Morley novel.

John Plotz: Yeah, that's great. So, Elizabeth do you want to connect that to Penelope Fitzgerald?

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, and I was just going to say that, I mean, that that sort of idea of bookselling as a terrible business is related to the notion that it's sort of an anti-market. You know it's sort of the sphere that is supposed to be free from the market, right?

Mark McGurl: Right.

Elizabeth Ferry: Therefore, which also relates to this question, I mean, a lot of the commodities that we think of as being these sort of commodities that are based on distinctiveness rather than similarity or fungibility also kind of play with that idea, right, yeah, sort of notion that they're, you know, a work of art or whatever looks like somehow not against the market. So anyways, yeah, so I mean, why not a few things of what you said about the Morley could be described about *The Bookshop* and it's, you know, it's sort of, you know, a lady bookseller who's kind of going into this sort of hostile environment. It's not sort of travelling in, you know, mobile by mobile bookshop, but it's sort of in this, you know, English kind of small town and we had a discussion offline about kind of what our, whether we thought it was one of the better Fitzgerald books. And I don't think it is, but I do like it a lot and I like, it's kind of like, its non-triumphal quality, yes, like it is not about conquering the minds of rural Britain in order to get them to appreciate her.

Mark McGurl: Right.

Elizabeth Ferry: You know, stick-to-it-iveness or whatever, right?

Mark McGurl: She loses, right?

Elizabeth Ferry: She loses yeah.

Mark McGurl: It's all a big failure, yeah?

Elizabeth Ferry: And that's that seems very Fitzgerald, in a way, it's kind of like, very sort of, you know, humorously unforgiving.

John Plotz: As a massive fan of Fitzgerald, can I just put a plug in here that it's 1978? I think it's her second novel, and in 1977 she published her book *The Knox Brothers*. Do you guys know that it was just like, the portrait of her four great uncles I suppose, and one of them was the editor of *Punch*. So, I actually think there's an older literary historical tradition that she's part of, like, in other words, she is very much in the family business of, you know, buying newsprint at two cents a pound and selling it at \$0.05 a pound. I mean, like, she's thought about different modes of dissemination and of course she has this wonderful book about the BBC *Human Voices*, which is again about medium specificity.

Elizabeth Ferry: *Human Voices*, yeah.

Mark McGurl: Yeah, yeah, another possibly important detail is that is that the book shop, is a historical novel, I mean not at great distance. It takes place in the late 50s, but it's a '78 novel and so that so the book is, is one, is very charmingly a book about failing, a failed project of enlightenment of the small town, but that sort of success might be added in, as it were historically, from 78 as a clearly much more liberalized moment, looking back –

Elizabeth Ferry: Right, right, there's this whole subplot about Louis that right about the book.

Mark McGurl: From that, looking back on that conservative, yeah.

John Plotz: So, can I turn back, Elizabeth you made a really good point about the kind of not unsalable commodities, but commodities that are saleable precisely because they mark

their distinction from mere commodification. Is there something to be said about the aura or the kind of metonymical association of like, cool prestige objects that get sold in a bookstore and so, Mark I'm sort of thinking about Amazon here like, opening out from its beginnings as a bookstore to so much more, but also Elizabeth just your comment made me think about all those you know hipster T shirts that I have bought for \$28.00 at a bookstore or the like cool Canadian bacon chocolate bar that, do you know what I mean like, there's like a whole set of items. Which I've heard in some bookstores are like the main seller, you know?

Elizabeth Ferry: Or the meditation, the Little Meditation manual that you get.

John Plotz: Like yeah, yeah, totally, but forget the manual.

Speaker 1 Right?

John Plotz: You know, like the little mindfulness token that you can buy at the, so which is, so what is it about those things? Because they are eroticized by being in a book shop and Mark it's so great that you name checked our colleague Laura Miller at Brandeis because I actually don't really know her work on this. I knew that she worked on it, but it I'm going to go check it out now.

Mark McGurl: Well, I mean the book of hers I've read most recently is *Reluctant Capitalists*, so which makes the argument right there?

John Plotz: That's great. I mean, I'm so sorry we didn't have her in this conversation. That would be great. It's see how wonderful.

Mark McGurl: It's a great, it's a. It is, yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry: And you just type in the.

Mark McGurl: Wicked smart really good book.

Elizabeth Ferry: Word the letter says.

John Plotz: Right, yeah?

Elizabeth Ferry: You just taught me the word eroticize.

John Plotz: Eroticized, thank you.

John Plotz: Like owl roll. Yeah, yeah. It's things that make you do fun things with your mouse. Yeah, but that notion right? Reluctant capital, that's a great way of thinking about it. So yeah, Mark, I mean do you have thoughts about that historical, that genealogy of the book trade.

Mark McGurl: Yeah, I mean, I think that to some degree Amazon disconnects from that. Just at least, yeah, in the sense that I mean, except insofar as it's opening physical bookstores of it's own, it's disconnected from that in that, well, feature of especially well, no, not just independent bookstores. All bookstores have lots of tchotchkes. That are marketed to the people who go into bookstores, so there's kind of a class profile in, going on in that stuff to some degree, but then also maybe has something to do with profit margins, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, as you say. Amazon is a little bit different in that, because it's, at least the online part, is virtualized. I don't get that kind of associative, certainly not that you're not, you're not representing yourself and behaving visibly as a certain kind of person with a certain kind of taste profile, so I think Amazon is a little bit more of the massified version of that although, for sure I mean, the funny thing about it is that it just expands the number of commodities that you might buy at the same time that you buy a book.

Elizabeth Ferry: And it presumably has algorithms that are then, you know, pushing up certain things based on them.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah does so does either of you know much about the history of the kind of culture wars around public libraries in America? Mark, I feel like that might be something that's kind of in your bailiwick. No, but I mean just the thing. I was thinking about is, you know, with the rise of the Carnegie system it you know, around 1900 more or less and then the professional librarians that Melville Dewey trained, you get that question of whether the library is going to be a space of massification or a space of cultural prestige. You know, because there was lots of I'm gonna call it yeah, good popular literature that in a library pre-Carnegie the library could just hold that stuff. So, in a way, historically the arrow goes the other way. That 19th century libraries were not ashamed to have the things that people wanted to read, but then the library became in a prestigious, OK eroticized space, and then you had to not have 10 copies of the latest "trash". Instead, you had to have, you know, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Herman Melville, and all those other folks so.

Mark McGurl: Yeah, I don't personally know that history well enough to you know, to comment on it. I mean I, I just cause I'm obsessed with what I am obsessed by. There's the question of eBooks and the library, yeah? Just to go to a highly specific, highly contemporary debate being had about whether you can take out an eBook and what the properties, status of those are going to be at libraries because that is one way to acquire an eBook, is to get it from a library.

John Plotz: So, I actually think this is a good moment for us to turn to the question of recallable books so as loyal listeners know, these are books that if you enjoy the conversation today, and who would not, these are other books you might want to look at that kind of fall into the same bailiwick, so Mark as you as our guest. I'll turn to you first and ask if you have one to suggest.

Mark McGurl: Just sure my recallable book is relatively recent in that it's

40 years old and it's a book by Walter Tevis who also wrote *Queen's Gambit*, which was just made into a, he also wrote *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.

John Plotz: Yeah. Love that book.

Mark McGurl: Yeah, so uh, really sort of super interesting science fiction ish writer with the book I wanted to point at. And it's a truly interesting book. Really, really worth reading, and it's called *Mockingbird*. And it's a post-apocalyptic novel, came out in I think 1980, and in this post-apocalyptic future, it's an illiterate future, and books re-enter the world in a very, very fascinating, fascinating way in this novel. And it, despite its sort of dystopian vibe, which is sort of continuous with *Fahrenheit 451*, the Ray Bradbury sort of dystopia, anti-literary dystopia that people are living in. It's in that sort of sub tradition of the books about books. But it's a really fascinating novel. It's got a small cast of characters, it's very inflected by existentialism. One of the main characters is a humanoid robot. Not who for reasons that are like they asked why this is true, but he's embodied as a African American guy and he's the new Dean of NYU, so all sorts of and he's immortal. And this is a problem for him. This is the existentialist thing, cause he's a robot. And then there's the two other main characters, and one of them is they both rediscover books and what books mean, and that makes it sound a little, way more corny than the book actually is. It's an amazingly well executed novel, and anyone who's interested in this kind of thing, I strongly recommend it.

John Plotz: OK, that's great. Thanks Mark and thanks for mentioning *Fahrenheit 451* in passing. That's obviously a great one to think about. In fact, Bradbury in general I feel like from the *Illustrated Man* on Martian chronicles, he does have this kind of a love hate relationship with the notion of a kind of prestige cultural Canon embodied in books. You know, even Edgar Allan Poe keeps coming back in Bradbury. So, it's a good way of thinking about it and so I will also, I'll go way back and I'm going to use, I'm going to do what Elizabeth

usually does, which is recommended a Trollope novel and it's *The Warden*, which is, you know, a great Trollope novel in and of itself. But it's also his first novel and it's really interesting because he's definitely still feeling his oats and feeling his way generically into how he identifies the kind of work that he does. So, Mark, one of the reasons I asked you the question about adult baby diaper. No adults, no. Then tell me again adults. ABDL diaper lover yeah. Baby Adult Diaper love fiction is I was interested in that level of generic consciousness and in *The Warden* the generic consciousness is very high, so he situates the novel in opposition to a newspaper called the *Jupiter*, which is the bad version of the *Times* of London. But he also trots out Thomas Carlyle as doctor pessimist anticant who was another example of how not to write fiction and then he also invokes Mr. popular sentiment, who is Charles Dickens, who was another example of how not to do it, so he's locating himself within the triangle of you know bad other iterations of what a realist novel might be.

Mark McGurl: Oh, that's great.

John Plotz: Really, it's not well might be so it it's. I think it's a good one to think with.

Elizabeth Ferry: Most of which are on the grounds of sort of catering too much to the public, right?

John Plotz: Uh, yes and no. Actually, I think that I think his critique of the *Jupiter* is that it treats itself like a God like it is lowest common denominator. It's true, but it also establishes a prestigious distance above its audience, whereas he's saying his kind of novel lives at the same level as yours.

Elizabeth Ferry: Because it's shaping, it's shaping popular opinion. It's sensitive film. Wobbliness is it's. It's sort of like a Twitter of.

John Plotz: Yeah, and pessimist Anti Camp is like you guys are all

doomed anyway, so it's not so much of God as it is like Lucifer or something. Just like I forsake you, yeah. And somehow Trollope is the only one who gets to be with you but nonetheless preserve, I don't know some sort of prestigious intellectual detachment at the same. Time which Mr. Popular sentiment gives up.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right, right? It's the center of honor or something.

John Plotz: Yeah, something like that. That's right, yeah anyway. Cool well thank you Mark. This has been an awesome conversation. We really appreciate your coming and taking the time.

Mark McGurl: It's been really fun.

John Plotz: So, let me just say quickly that recall this book is sponsored by Brandeis and the Mandel Humanities Center. Sound editing is by Naomi Cohen, website design and social media by Miranda Peery of the English Department. Elizabeth and I are very eager to hear your comments, criticisms, and thoughts on today's discussion and on the book trade generally. If you enjoyed today's episode, you'll likely enjoy. I think our earlier related conversations with Martin Puchner, that's RtB 6 and with Leah Price, RtB 46 about the tangled history of books as objects as media and as scalable commodities. So, I think our discussion about scale really will resonate for us. Please write a review and rate us on Apple Podcast or Stitcher or Spotify wherever you get your podcast. So, from all of us here at RtB. Thanks for listening.