

## James Ley on fiction in the age of Amazon

When Jeff Bezos launched Amazon in 1994, few imagined that eighteen years later the company's skyrocketing profits would launch him into space. What started out as a virtual bookstore run out of Bezos' garage would turn into an e-commerce giant, forever changing the culture and economics of bookselling.

In his essay–review for the April issue of *ABR*, James Ley assesses the arguments put forward by Mark McGurl in his new study, *Everything and Less: The novel in the age of Amazon*. Where McGurl sees Amazon's 'attempt to reforge literary life as an adjunct to online retail' as refreshingly iconoclastic, Ley is more sceptical of what he interprets to be its 'radical experiment in literary populism'. For Ley, Amazon's governing principle of customer satisfaction is precisely what gets in the way of its ability to deliver not just any kind of good, but one which should return us to a more imaginative and less acquisitive version of ourselves.

### Extracts from James Ley's article

'Amazon doesn't care about the content or the quality of the books it sells; it just wants to shift as many units as possible. As far as Amazon is concerned, differences between books are of interest only insofar as they reflect consumer preferences.'

'I take this to be McGurl's point, at least in part ... Your fancy ideas about artistic integrity and the life of the mind are of no consequence; in the end, a book is just a product and you are just a customer like everybody else.'

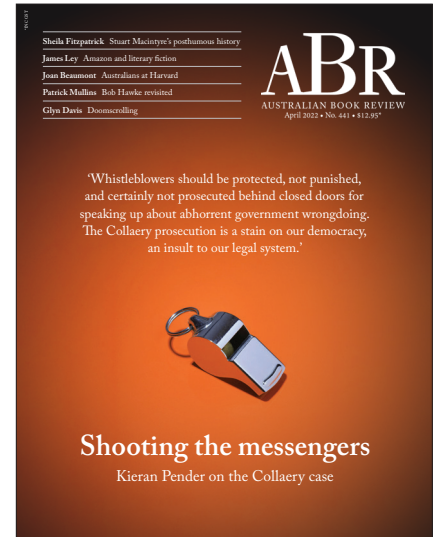
'What seems indisputable may well seem absurd later. Ideologies are powerful, but they are never unassailable; sometimes they can have a surprisingly short shelf life. Novels, if they are good enough, tend to last a little longer.'

### About James Ley

James Ley is an essayist and literary critic who lives in Melbourne. A former Editor of *Sydney Review of Books*, he has been a regular contributor to *ABR* since 2003. He is currently Deputy Editor of Books and Ideas at *The Conversation*.

### Interviews

James Ley is available for interview. Please direct requests to Peter Rose at [editor@australianbookreview.com.au](mailto:editor@australianbookreview.com.au) | (03) 9699 8822



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