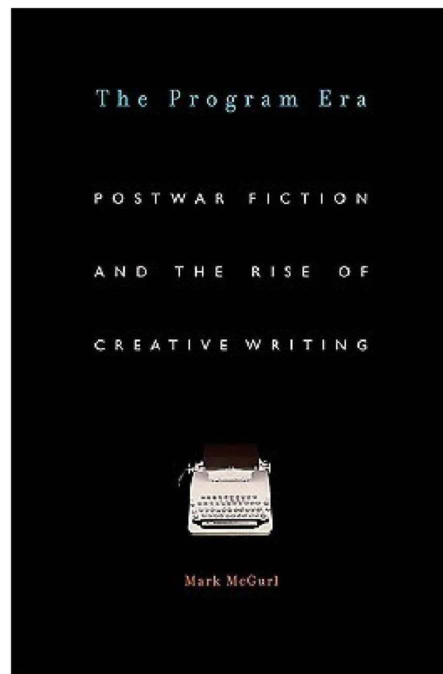

The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing

Mark McGurl

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The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing Mark McGurl
In "The Program Era, " Mark McGurl offers a fundamental reinterpretation of postwar American fiction, asserting that it can be properly understood only in relation to the rise of mass higher education and the creative writing program. McGurl asks both how the patronage of the university has reorganized American literature and even more important how the increasing intimacy of writing and schooling can be brought to bear on a reading of this literature.

McGurl argues that far from occasioning a decline in the quality or interest of American writing, the rise of the creative writing program has instead generated a complex and evolving constellation of aesthetic problems that have been explored with energy and at times brilliance by authors ranging from Flannery O Connor to Vladimir Nabokov, Philip Roth, Raymond Carver, Joyce Carol Oates, and Toni Morrison.

Through transformative readings of these and many other writers, "The Program Era" becomes a meditation on systematic creativity an idea that until recently would have seemed a contradiction in terms, but which in our time has become central to cultural production both within and beyond the university.

An engaging and stylishly written examination of an era we thought we knew, "The Program Era" will be at the center of debates about postwar literature and culture for years to come.

The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing Details

Date	: Published April 1st 2009 by Harvard University Press
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From Reader Review The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing for online ebook

Douglas Penick says

This book is far more favorable than many might be to the results of the uniform application of fairly standardized teaching methods to literature. Nonetheless, Mr. McGurl makes clear how the writing program approach has come to dominate writing, editing and general literary standards in the US.

For instance, readers may find it illuminating to discover that the trinity of nostrums: 'Write what you know' ; 'Find your voice'; and 'Show don't tell' are the watchwords of writing program tutelage.

Those who admire Karl Popper's admonition that any proposition whose contradictory is meaningless is itself meaningless (as happens when framing the opposite of the above 3.), may be happy to be back at the brighter and fresher air of square one.

Greg Brown says

An awesome book if you're already interested in the premise: exploring most of 20th century American literature through the lens of the creative writing program, and how many can be easily and beneficially understood as reactions to that program. However, it's a rough ask if you aren't, since the chapters are incredibly long—up to 70 pages in length—and constitute a free-flowing narrative on the different elements of creative writing programs and how they're instantiated in up to a dozen cases each chapter. If you think you might be interested, I'd first recommend reading the unexpectedly-large amount of reaction commentary in "mainstream" lit journals: n+1, London Review of Books, and even the New Yorker.

A pretty rad book all told, but not quite rad enough or well-constructed enough to recommend to a general audience.

Jeff says

As a critic, McGurl widens (and narrows, for he is an inveterate psychologizer, a modulator) our sense of the context for fifty to a hundred American fictive texts, none of which is he trying to *rank*. As a scholar, he travels amid the discursive formations these widely-ranging fictions have attracted, and offers a map of the field that emboldens me to read further in it. As a theorist, his maps are lovingly dialectical, they keep synthesizing and re-emerging in their differences, in their capacity to read *more*, and to see in American writing *abundance*. As a literary history the narrative is not quite satisfying, of course, but then the difficulty of the historian's task precisely results in the scarcity of endeavor, which lures us into regarding McGurl as a historian at all. He'll make no friends among the cosmopolitan anti-pastoralists, for his is a defense of the workshop system. Apparently if you are Elif Batuman then twenty-three year olds should be as well read as you are. That is, she criticizes as *a social formation* authors whose work emerges from a set of texts she considers to be *the wrong* texts, wrong because a-canonical. But as a work, *The Program Era* hangs together at least as well as its crucial pre-cursor text, Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1962).

Joe Amato says

Mark McGurl must be from outer space.

I'll come back to that.

Restart.

Mark McGurl's *The Program Era* might be as important for what it gets right as for what it occasionally gets wrong.

Restart.

Mark McGurl's *The Program Era* is perhaps the most important book of The Program Era, an essential text in the newly energized field we might call "creative writing studies," after Graeme Harper and Jeri Kroll's *Creative Writing Studies: Practice, Research, and Pedagogy* (Multilingual Matters, 2007). And written by a litcritter, no less.

Good. Now: McGurl begins his critique of Robert Olen Butler's *Mr. Spaceman* with the following: "Let us imagine the creative writing workshop as seen from outer space" (385). McGurl will go on to show how this conceit, albeit not taken by Butler quite far enough to be self-consciously figurative, informs this novel of a fancifully close encounter between alien subjectivity and expressive human bipeds, and how positioning the workshop itself in outer space will help us to get the appropriate handle -- distance necessary here, and alienation, as in, *We should view the workshop through the lens of un/alienated labor* -- on an unavoidable aspect of Butler's figuration. Like every novelist whom McGurl examines, Butler is shown to be writing what amounts to an analog (parable and allegory generally being too strong) of mass higher education, and of the creative writing workshop in particular. And this encounter of the third kind turns out to represent, paradoxically (because ostensibly "alien"), a sort of final phase in the gradual merging of the authorial ego with the institution that nurtures it.

The reading is brilliantly innovative, and innovatively subversive (of Butler's intentions, one would imagine), as are nearly all of McGurl's readings. And while it's patently absurd to begin a review (though not really a review) of a book of this conceptual heft -- a 400+-page, self-avowed contribution to "influence studies" (321) that is all but guaranteed to influence critical and creative practice for years to come -- by focusing on a small segment that comes late in the proceedings, this is precisely the point in McGurl's argument at which he identifies what he takes to be the ultimate inculcation of the author function by mass higher education.

Before we go any further:

Yes, as has been noted in review after review, McGurl uses diagrams. Me, I like diagrams, and to be candid, I could have used one more: an overlay of his minimalism/maximalism/miniaturism diagram on p. 377 with his summary diagram on p. 409. This might have required three dimensions (note how the spatial is everywhere at stake in this rendering), but what the hell—I'm sure Harvard UP could have figured *something* out.

Yes, largely thanks to his commanding grasp of social-historical-disciplinary developments, McGurl's book

should disabuse all but the most knuckleheaded reader of those "naturalizing" impulses of creative writing instruction wherein phrases such as "find your voice" and "show don't tell" are offered up as received wisdom. (McGurl should know, too, even from teaching his budding litcrit students, that these and other formulations might suit a given writer at a given moment. They're provisionally useful, at best.)

And yes, if McGurl's book doesn't bring to a crashing halt the agonizingly recursive debates stemming from the presumed divide between literary postmodernism (McGurl favors the term "technomodernism") and realism (a term whose practical utility varies inversely with proximity), then I don't know from squat. If McGurl is right, then the rise of creative writing workshops has everything to do with the many and variegated fictions we have presently on our shelves and screens, and this includes many of those fictions that operate under the sign of the avant. They all owe *something* to workshop culture -- and more than we might imagine -- much as they all owe something to US culture (which McGurl understands through the lens of "reflexive modernity," a term he borrows from others, meant to point to the increasingly reflexive volition on the part of citizen-agents to see themselves and their "choices" in narrativizing, "life story" terms, which terms coincide with the very structures that give rise to them).

And so when McGurl ends his rereading and rewriting of disciplinary influence with an ironic challenge -- "What kind of traitor to the mission of mass higher education would you have to be to think otherwise?" -- i.e., "what kind of traitor" would you have to be to reject the notion that there is "more excellent fiction being produced now than anyone has time to read" (410) -- one -- especially the academic ones who serve as the primary readership for a book like this -- is tempted to throw up one's hands and acknowledge, begrudgingly, one's fealty to, if not complicity in, the cosmically influential educational sphere.

Begrudgingly, because nobody, least of all creative writers, entirely enjoys the paradoxical prospect of creativity itself understood as an attribute that can be programmatically and systematically created. (Deep down inside, we really do want to believe, all of us, in liberation from the all-seeing I/eye.) McGurl is entirely sensible to suggest as much, and we would do well to listen. But at this point, for all of his talk of literary scale, his elegant defense of the local not as against, but in conjunction with more fashionably transnational interpretive modes -- and correlatively, one would imagine, modes of poiesis -- McGurl would seem to leverage the claim of *relational* (as he argues, helpfully correcting Bill Readings) "excellence" of all of this excellent fiction primarily on the basis of its rehabilitation by the leveling effect of his critical…leverage. Which would, among other good things, restore credibility to those many artifacts (of "lower-middle-class modernism" in particular) cast out of the House of Reputable Literary Fiction, a veritable House of Frankenstein.

But is that it? Is this what constitutes relational excellence? -- seeing all works as shot through with the educational circumstances of their production?

Curiously, on p. 338 of my copy of *The Program Era*, in the upper-left-hand margin, you'll find "Finally!" scrawled in pencil, in response to McGurl posing the following question:

"How does one write good fiction?"

I felt here, for the first time, that McGurl had fully entered -- as his question intends to do -- the institutional circumstance of the creative writing instructor, or student. And I wanted to ask McGurl -- or at least I want now to ask McGurl:

"How does one write good scholarship?"

Some of the answers to these questions are implied in, and indeed demonstrated by, McGurl's sweeping rapprochement (with creative writing), indictment (of criticism and theory), explication (of fiction). But they're such basic questions, are they not? In fact perhaps too basic to be labeled fully aesthetic questions, if aesthetics is understood as something more than merely window dressing. McGurl is, clearly, one of the most clear-eyed critics we have working today -- his handling of that fraught term, *diversity*, suggests as much -- and he exhibits a refreshing willingness to contend both with composition theory (someone like Bishop) and with experimental fiction (someone like Sukenick). But then, why did I feel compelled to jot "Finally!" in the margin of p. 338?

Wait -- is this about McGurl, or about me?

Right: restart. Sorta.

In his reading of Robert Olen Butler's fiction, Mark McGurl notes that Butler's work "frequently takes the form of a more or less virtuosic ventriloquism enacted on the computer screen in his office" (388). OK then. Compare the latter with the following: "If the anxiety of influence is what prevails in the individual ego of the poet struggling with predecessors, the new trauma is collective identity, laboring under the anxiety of confluence, worried whether the voice that is great within us has gotten *into* us by ventriloquial misadventure" (27).

The source here is Jed Rasula's *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940-1990*, published by NCTE in 1996. (I reviewed this work some years ago, at some length, for *Postmodern Culture* .)

Wait -- poetry? Well, let's see. McGurl eliminates poetry from his purview early on -- in his second paragraph in fact: "Postwar American literature has indeed been a huge and hugely various endeavor, and my strategic decision to concentrate on fiction to the exclusion of poetry and other genres makes it no less so. And yet one of the most valuable lessons taught by postwar fiction is that the limitations of a given point of view are enabling" (x). Poetry and other genres. Limitations of a given point of view. Well, yes and no. This strikes me, for one, as confusing an aesthetic virtue with a "strategic" critical ~~vice~~ approach. And it isn't long before McGurl's use of "literature" and its cognates starts to operate relatively free from that important qualifier, fiction.

Well that's being a little too picky, I agree.

(Here I'd like to nod to Brian Lennon's strikingly nuanced, theoretically rich review essay on *The Program Era* and David Golumbia's *The Cultural Logic of Computation*, recently published in *electronic book review*. Lennon: "And the project of extending McGurl's cardinally novelistic analysis to the other major genres offers, as McGurl concedes with unfeigned charity, work yet to be done." And note the verb animating this sentence from late in Lennon's essay: "McGurl's readings of Morrison's *Beloved* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* tend to ventriloquize, from the more or less squeamish equivocation inlaid in their journeys 'outside,' the verdict required by the System: that no viable politics of liberation can entirely renounce the school, or that Program Era modernity, 'especially for women... presents an array of possibilities for individual self-development unthinkable in a traditional society' (383-84)."

At any rate, how is it possible that Rasula's sweeping work -- the last book I read that struck me as having as much import for the study of English as McGurl's (and at least as hefty, weighing in, with appendices, at 637 pp) -- is nowhere cited in McGurl's text, not even in his rather extensive notes?

And what's more: in Louis Menand's otherwise perceptive review of McGurl's work in *The New Yorker*

("Show or Tell"), the otherwise perceptive Menand lapses in his final few columns into a reverie about his halcyon days: "I wrote poetry in college, and I was in a lot of workshops." Uh-huh. Exactly.

I know -- this feels like something of a "gotcha" moment to me too. But bracketing genres as McGurl does -- bracketing poetry in particular -- might be especially revealing. Permit me to explain.

In detailing the rise of English studies against the postwar backdrop, Rasula surfaces the discomfiting fact that, while English programs as we know them bear the lineal traces of their poet-critic grandfathers, the study of modern and contemporary poetry has, by and large, dropped off the map of programs today. (Rasula's *today* is some years ago, but the situation hasn't changed much since.) He shows this to be owing both to the principle of New Critical close reading applied (too) strenuously to correlative poems, poems in which " the lyrical ego condemns itself to a prison of its own making" (329); and to the countervailing tendency of so much free verse to compete with, most notably, TV. This argument is advanced via considerable discussion of the social sphere proper, and how that sphere produces expressive bodies -- variously educated bodies, sure -- through which it gives voice to, or *ventriloquizes*, its social strictures. Later in his book, Rasula configures these voice-prone bodies -- let's call them poets -- in terms of their dispersion across poetry anthologies, and for Rasula, anthologies (like wax museums) embody varying degrees of resistance to or assimilation by institutional consolidations and affiliations -- the entire sweep of social-scientized postindustrial culture.

Simply on the surface of things, we might conclude that McGurl's decision to explain fiction, and fiction alone, as workshop practice is already testament to the disciplinary bias -- against poetry -- to which Rasula's efforts to identify and elucidate (and evaluate) bear witness. So poetry will be excluded from McGurl's discussion of fictive and educational collusion -- and at that key point in the discussion (of *Mr. Spaceman*) to which I have finally

here

returned, we learn that Butler's "virtuosic ventriloquism" of character marks a profound absence of "tension" between the "literary artist and the institution" (388). The educational institution provides Butler with the imprimatur to improvise his ventriloquisms -- to create fictive dummies to fulfill an endless array of characterological ends, the process by which author-subjects are so enabled itself thrown into reflexive relief. But by refiguring Butler/alien's labor as thus un-alienated, McGurl's reading might portend Butler's *alienated* labor. And while he doesn't seem to be too happy with Butler's ventriloquial (let's call it) byproduct -- if I read him aright -- neither is McGurl too worked up about it, not least because it can only be part and parcel of an outer space which is, it would seem, circumscribed by educational motives and anxieties, and from which McGurl himself, like Butler, like yours truly, draws his intellectual and professional sustenance.

To put it another way, there *is* no outer space as such in McGurl's account, if by that trope is meant something like the space beyond lived institutional space, and so McGurl, against my earlier provocation, must not be from outer space. I mean, you can't live in outer space anyway, right? -- at least, not without life support.

Aren't you relieved?

In Rasula's telling, however, what is being ventriloquized is *the author himself*, his so-called subject position. It is not merely that the author is creating institutionally-sanctioned "characters" -- and here we might note how even avant poetry often portends the collapse of author into the poem's "speaker" -- but that, at the dystopic extremity of institutional assimilation, the author has become a dummy through which disciplinary

society -- including the educational institution, sure -- enunciates its presence. This…embodiment is a good deal more pessimistic, at first glance, than McGurl's rosier appreciation for fictional "excellence." And indeed, Rasula sees the "poetry workshop" as participating in "market autoregulation" via the cultivation of self-expression (424-5). As Rasula has it, "The purpose of the workshops, all along, has not been to produce poetry but to produce poets" (426), and this puts it perfectly in line with such a social program. McGurl, on the weighty evidence of *The Program Era*, would likely concur.

(Clearly, these two texts may be brought into much more productive conflict than I'm managing in this gloss.)

Yet Rasula's point is that poetry -- or at least, the discourse and practices of poetry and poetics and poets, to which Rasula's book makes such an exemplary contribution -- brings with it the possibility for recuperation, not of excellence and the like (see his remarks on Whitman, p. 476), but of the noisy surpluses of language itself, which the narratives of fiction are so frequently, though not always, put to the task of squelching. (In part such recuperation is a function of a particular kind of poetry, as understood against a particular context for reception, but in theory it's not exclusively so.) Thus is a liminal space opened, in Rasula's account, for resistance to the encroachments of the institution, educational or otherwise: "In the entropic densities of our cultural centers, it makes perfect sense to think of poetry marginalized. Poetry can -- and *should* -- be our term for a language in crisis, driven to the outskirts to hear itself speak" (482). Poetry becomes, for Rasula, nearly synonymous with the perturbations inherent in language itself, which from a purely linguistic point of view, might position the utterance as prior to the scene of diegesis.

It's not that poetry can't be disciplined, as it were, by theory's discontents. But we might note that, empirically speaking, so many poets have taken the matter (of theory, as of poiesis) into their own hands, and here it becomes clear that Rasula's (and my) preference would be for those tribes who would do so without qualms, or would at least be without qualms to see someone else do so. Until relatively recently, to be a poet of the "postmodern" variety -- "raw," reflexive, difficult, untidy, and never unabashedly lyrical -- was, with a few notable exceptions, to be excluded from popular purview, from serious critical study, and -- and here is the rub -- from acknowledgment by something like Official Verse Culture (which, if the term has any validity, is -- or was -- *official*). The same might be said of experimental fiction writers, but these scribes were, with a few notable exceptions, as often as not resistant to theory. In any case, for McGurl to attempt a reconciliation of the skirmishing camps of critical study and workshop practice through preemptive attention to fiction is, at one level, to exacerbate a long-standing neglect.

(It might be worth noting, too, that ventriloquy, understood originally as a "rumbling sort of internal speech," was thought to be a sign of demonic possession. This might be a productively antithetical way of understanding Spicerian "dictation" or Weinerian "clairvoyance" -- both, to borrow from Robin Blaser, possible "practices of outside." For the etymology, click here. Lennon devotes tidy theoretical energy to unpacking McGurl's sober and considered, if ultimately muted, response to an outside as such.)

But if poetry should, as Rasula suggests, be figured as marginalized, maybe we ought likewise to be relieved that the textual space McGurl is busy plotting is devoid of poetry save at *its* margins: the titular nod to Kenner, one Walcott epigraph, a dozen or so references to Pound and Eliot and several others. I'm not so sure about that, or about Rasula's almost counterintuitive sense of symbolic possibility. But in fact the academic marginalization of poetry's unruly plenitude -- a plenitude itself marked by the ventriloquizing of imperatives from some imagined, and no less for that real, beyond -- might explain McGurl's decision to conclude on such a cheery note, to see the Big Tent of MFA-driven -- pedigreed, endowed -- fiction as so abundantly "excellent." And it would seem, perhaps unsurprisingly, that his readings are subversive, as I earlier suggested, not only of authorial intention, but precisely to the extent that they subvert the presumption -- so

commonplace among denizens of creative writing as to pass unnoticed -- of an outside. Indeed, to see poetry at all is to begin to fathom how postsecondary education, through symptomatic and constitutive critique, has been learning to do without it, and unless one can subscribe to Rasula's measured appraisal of poetry's marginal, if irrepressible, utility, treason is -- and should be -- in the offing.

Zach says

Stuff on Cuckoo's Nest and Ken Kesey is great. A bit too "scholarly" for my taste. But well done. Took me almost five years to read the whole thing. Not a criticism. Just the truth.

Sean says

a great example of all that an academic book can be- funny, well-written, sophisticated and expansive in themes and subject matter. anyone who has a humanities degree from a college or university should read it. I will be interested to talk to some people who have read a lot of the scholarship on post-war american fiction and see what they think about it.

E. C. Koch says

The pat story we all got from our lit. survey courses (probably from the Norton anthologies) explaining the transition from the Modern to the Postmodern period had to do with the conclusion of World War II and the change in attitudes this had on the American population generally, which was captured by the literature and called postmodern. While no one is seriously arguing that the postmodern period isn't real anymore (as was still the case even ten years ago) scholars are now attending to the transitionary narrative bridging the two modernities. Here McGurl offers a brilliant new explanation for this evolution by siting the historical event marking the beginning of postmodernism not in the end of WWII (or, alternatively, the beginning of the Cold War) but in the advent of the MFA program in the United States, which explanation is far superior to the stale answers espoused by organs like the Norton. This reconfiguration is so much better because it provides a rationale for the various movements within postmodern literature, which without McGurl's theorization are unsatisfactorily explained away as the vicissitudes of taste (or, more commonly, just ignored). Intra-postmodern movements didn't/don't just happen (which we all intuitively already knew) but are, McGurl convincingly articulates, motivated by the changing generations of MFA writer-professors who train their own generation of future MFA writer-professors whose stylistic variations produce new intra-postmodern movements. McGurl makes his argument by fluidly transitioning between close-readings of various paradigmatic authors and texts and informed argument about how the gradual evolution of literary aesthetics has been, for the last eighty years, influenced by MFA programs. Of particular interest to me was McGurl's discussion of Carverian minimalism and its eventual equilibrating counterpart maximalism (about which discussion Ercolino seems totally ignorant in The Maximalist Novel. I think McGurl's section on this topic is

more helpful than Ercolino's whole book, actually). McGurl, of course, can't write about every MFA-holding author, so while I selfishly wanted to read his thoughts about Wallace (and his (Wallace's) combative relation to pomo lit.) as well as anything about non-MFA-holding authors of the last eighty years who have nonetheless achieved literary acclaim in America (e.g., William Gaddis, J. D. Salinger, Hunter Thompson), I understand their absence. Still and all, this is a must read for any scholar who, after the inevitable dissatisfaction with the Norton's half-baked story, wants to understand post-1945 American lit.

Bill says

A history of creative writing programs offered by American colleges and universities since the 1940's. Sounds pretty dry, doesn't it? The Program Era turns out to be both a closely studied cultural history and a witty account of the tensions to be found in the relationships of writers and teachers. The background is set with an interesting account of Thomas Wolfe as a precursor who taught early programs. The book posits the University of Iowa as the first true university program as we know them today, with heavy emphasis on workshopping and peer critiques. From there we go to Stanford and a funny account of Wallace Stegner's encounter with Ken Kesey, who submitted each chapter of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest for workshop review. Stegner found Kesey too bohemian. McGurl's thesis is that these programs have resulted in a sort of golden age of literary excellence. In my view, the jury is still out on that question. However I used to take a dismissive attitude toward what I thought was a paint by numbers kind of literature. Taking the output of literary fiction in the last 50 years in this country as a whole, I am forced to concede that it embodies a wide range of creative output. Most of this output has its origins in this vast enterprise of university workshops.

Anne says

very thought-provoking. argument on postwar american lit has replaced a sense of historical textuality (if there was one, that is, which is not clear, given the postwar nature of the materials) with the aura of the "encounter with the living writer." i'm not convinced that I agree with McCurl's criteria for the "best" literary fiction, but he does account for the obsession with writerliness at the expense of reading in a convincing way. i wish he had a third thing: NOT 1) the "influence" paradigm, and 2) NOT the democratized "aura" of the writer in the weird democracy that is the university writing program, but 3) an account of SOME writers that read other prior texts and plunder/work/inspire from them. Diaz? Butler (alluded to once or twice)? non-US varieties of pomo? Inquiring minds want to know...also, poetry is missing. Is narrative so narrow is doesn't notice even other literary genres?

Geoff Wyss says

I wanted this one to be better. When McGurl is actually performing readings of novels and stories, he's good. (He 'reads' some of the major 20th Century American writers, and thus their work, as products of the workshop system.) But too much of the book reads like a repurposed dissertation: Larded down with critical scaffolding that is, by turns, irrelevant, show-offy, unreadably gnarled, and repetitive. The theory makes McGurl timid; its hair-splitting teaches him that the thing to be most feared is a judgment. For writers who might want to read it, I suggest skipping right to those chunks where he digs into specific works. He's pretty interesting on Roth, Morrison, Carver, Mukerjhee, R.O. Butler.

Moira Russell says

The Ponzi Workshop

Bookforum

Show or Tell

Chronicle profile (paywall)

LRB ("McGurl appears to believe that 'point of view' was somehow invented by Henry James.")

Critical Flame (not sure if this is journal or website)

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sheila says

By Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Irish Examiner:
"There's much food for thought in what McGurl has to say about literary trends. Most, interesting, though, is his sensitive exploration of the interplay between individual writers and the Creative Writing programs...Opinionated and lively...He delivers a cornucopia of exciting new ideas and insights in a work which will be indispensable reading for teachers and students of creative writing, and for anyone interested in modern fiction...[A:] complex, energetic and fascinating book."

Wm says

Much more literary analysis and theory and much less history than I expected. McGurl achieves what one should in the post-po-mo domain of literary studies and does it with clarity and flair.

Nora says

I kind of can't believe I read this whole thing. I think there's some interesting stuff in here but it's too dense for the layperson to get much out of it. Pretty much it went over my head and I'm no dummy!

Jim O'Loughlin says

The is a brilliant book that will change the way I teach about contemporary American fiction. It is a welcome corrective to the all-too-common knee jerk condemnation of all work related to creative writing programs. This book tries to take seriously what it means when academic experience comes to dominate literary fiction.

This book is authoritative and wide ranging (though the cost of that is a book that's longer than is necessary). What I liked most about it were the many moments when McGurl offered readings that teased out the impact of academic experience on unlikely works like One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and Beloved.

Recommended to anyone teaching contemporary literature and to creative writers interested in literary criticism.

Eric says

A compelling argument that places the creative writing program at the center of postwar fiction. It's a premise that makes so much sense and an argument so persuasive that in retrospect I can't believe someone hasn't carried out this analysis already. It's also extremely readable. My only major complaint is that the book doesn't need to be as long as it is.

Lee says

This is a big and important (and, fortunately, very well written) book about the influence of creative writing instruction on postwar literary production. It's frankly a scandal that this book wasn't written long ago -- there have been histories of creative writing, like D.G. Myer's The Elephants Teach, but not as far as I know a literature-focused history that systematically studies how creative writing pedagogy shapes literature -- but we're lucky to have such a surefooted guide through this territory.

MJ Nicholls says

McGurl is firing too many pistons at once, obscuring this otherwise interesting part-history, part-critical probing into CW culture in cacademic verbiage, veering into random critical opinions on various writers that interest him (Roth, Larsen, Thomas Woolf), and no one else, and nailing them to the thread of his discourse with bent nails and limp twine. I pressed on to p.240 for reasons that seem inexplicable to me now, and will remain so.

Marco Kaye says

I've never read literary theory before “The Program Era,” which I became interested in after reading Charles McGrath's article in the New York Times (http://nyti.ms/PonziWorkshop) and in Louis Menand's piece in the New Yorker (http://bit.ly/ProgramMenand).

I got about a hundred pages in before someone else at the Mutlnomah County Library put it on hold. Then I put it on hold, and this unknown reader and I would volley it back and fourth over the space of a few months before I finally finished it. I'm imagining it's another guy, though different from me in appearance if not sensibility, with glasses and a beard. Typical Portlander, but a scholarly one.

I would love to have a conversation with him (or, I’ll concede, her) about this book. Mark McGurl presents

an exciting account of the formation of creative writing programs, with appearances by Thomas Wolfe, Flannery O'Connor, and Paul Engle. He details categories of postwar American fiction. He gets behind the history of "show, don't tell" and "find your voice." But the book for me was so mired in –isms and overwrought sentences. My fiancé would ask me a question about a dentist appointment and I would say, "I can't answer you now, I am in the middle of this sentence: 'Just as bourgois modernism was an anti-bourgeous enterprise, lower-middle-class modernism defines itself largely against the cultural forms actually consumed by the lower middle class from whom it struggles to separate itself…"

I must end there. I can't go on because the sentence goes on for another three lines and the book is due again tonight and the library is closing in ten minutes.

Maybe I'll be smart enough for this book if I go back to school to get my MFA.

Elisabeth Stevens says

After reading a belated review in The New York Review of Books of Mark McGurl's The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing of 2009, I ordered the 466-page study, read it immediately, and found it fascinating and timely.

McGurl, an English professor at Stamford University, focuses on the Post-World-War-II rise of "creative writing" as a serious academic subject. He chronicles favorite writers such as Raymond Carver, Flannery O'Connor and others who were trained at the ground-breaking Iowa Writers Workshop in the 1960's as well as those trained in subsequent programs at Stamford and elsewhere.

Setting up the prolix Thomas Wolfe as a whipping boy for the perceived excesses of earlier American novelists, McGurl argues for the new programs which have promulgated dictums such as: "show don't tell," "write what you know," and "find your voice." Creative writing, as now taught, he believes, has produced "a surfeit of literary excellence" and "more excellent fiction . . .than anyone has time to read."

The picture of an ever-increasing number of would-be writers participating in an ever-increasing number of academic writing programs, and then, in many instances, graduating to become teacher in similar programs, is seemingly a happy one. Creative writing has, indeed, become a self-perpetuating cottage (should one say college?) industry to the benefit of many.

If anything is lacking in McGurl's discussion of this seemingly-beneficial phenomenon it is, perhaps, an examination of the long-term effects of programs in which the main focus is not on past literary masterworks but on works written by the students themselves. If "writing what you know" seldom involves knowledge of Greek, Latin, Renaissance of other works once considered a prerequisite for a "Classical" education—does it matter?
Of course, much has changed in America since the very early days in which, as Henry James recalled, many believed "the old superstition about fiction being wicked." Still, it might be instructive to examine what was taught in English courses once called Rhetoric and how Nineteenth Century American writers such as Melville, Thoreau, Emerson, James and others learned to write so well.