Tasting and Testing Books: Good Housekeeping’s Literary Canon for the 1920s and 1930s

Amy Blair

Marquette University, amy.blair@marquette.edu

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In its February 1926 issue, Good Housekeeping magazine introduced a “new service” for its approximately one million readers: a books column, “Tasting and Testing Books.” Beloved by its audience as a magazine supporting homemaking through rigorous consumer protections like the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval and the Good Housekeeping Research Institute, which comprised the Model Kitchen, Testing Station for Household Devices, and Domestic Science Laboratory, Good Housekeeping would now bring its expertise to bear in assisting readers with the difficult process of choosing which books to read, which books to buy, and which books to avoid. The column’s author, Emily Newell Blair, would go on to produce nearly eighty reading advice columns for the magazine between 1926 and 1933, a period which coincided with Good Housekeeping’s intensive promotion of its “guarantee” of advertised products and its increase in circulation to over 2 million copies. Given this confluence, we can approach Blair’s columns as artifacts at the crossroads of a number of different cultural dynamics in the United States in the 1920s and early 1930s: the rise of a consumerist orientation with regard to both material and cultural “goods”; the “revolt” of some self-proclaimed intellectuals and the self-conscious cultural outreach projects of others; and the waxing and waning fortunes of the American economy, culminating of course with the crash of the stock market in 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression into the 1930s. I believe that Blair’s columns must be read in the frame of the “money-back guarantee” mindset that the magazine attempted to inculcate in its readers, and that this consumer-first philosophy aided Blair in rejecting the canons of proper reading that were promulgated by vocal intellectuals and cultural arbiters, and that weighed on both Blair and her readers. Blair’s distinctively non-academic criteria force us to re-evaluate the amount of influence we have attributed to both academic and quasi-academic literary gatekeepers on the reading practices of “non-professional” readers— or even the degree to which such readers cared about whether or not their

reading practices could be considered "unsophisticated" by the mid-1920s. And finally, I read Blair’s pragmatic embrace of individual vagaries of taste as a part and parcel of the culture of the middlebrow as it emerged during the Progressive Era. In this way, Blair works to make her readers meet what Jaime Harker has described as a “progressive strand of women’s middlebrow authorship” in which authors offered “narratives that would help [readers] to understand modern life.” The middlebrow was useful culture, and that utility could be parsed as pleasure, profit, cultural or social capital, or what you will. Even a degree of excess – of pleasure, of pain, of pleasurable pain – could be limned under the auspices of utility, if the indulgence in excess was a cathartic departure that “refreshed” one for the return to a more moderate mode of being.

The anecdote Blair offers in her inaugural column introduces the impetus and plan for the series, beginning with a description of recent events in her local Joplin, Missouri woman’s study club:

Last spring, at the final meeting of our Study club, each member was asked to suggest something that might improve our club, make it more helpful and more pleasurable [...]. In fact, only one suggestion for any improvement was made. That came from Charlotte Lennon. ‘Our current events,’ she said, ‘have been so interesting this year that I’m wondering if we cannot add something to our program that will give us the same information about books – stimulate our curiosity, you know, so that we’ll want to read something besides the Best Sellers; help us to pick the best books out of the yearly output that so overwhelms me with its quantity that I can’t find quality – not just fiction or books at the Carnegie Library, but the unusual ones, the more worth while and less popular. I try to keep up with at least one review, but it is not very satisfactory, for I don’t know the reviewers and whether we like the same things. I’m often disappointed in the books it recommends.’ ‘What you need is a taster,’ I interrupted, laughing. ‘That’s it exactly,’ she answered, ‘and you, Emily, ought to be our taster. You’re always reading. Think up some way you can tell us the books we’ll like, the books we ought to read, and what we ought to know about the new books.’

Thus Blair’s charge: to tell her readers first, what they’ll like; second, what they ought to read; and third, what they ought to know about the new books. These three questions delineate nicely the dilemmas presumably facing readers at this moment, which also marked the beginning of the era of academic literary study. How was one to enjoy books, to read the “right” books, and to understand them properly? And exactly how essential was it to be able to do the last two – the notion of “best” books to read and best ways to read them being predicated on the presence, somewhere out there, of professional readers who passed judgment on the reading practices of others. Blair’s answers to these questions over the seven years of her service in Good Housekeeping are at times iconoclastic, are not at all cowed by “intellectual” condemnation of popular reading, and offer a glimpse into the popular reading that was

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3 Emily Newell Blair, “Tasting and Testing Books” (*Good Housekeeping* February 1926), 45. Cited from here on as *GH* Month/Year, Page number.
going on behind the backs of realists and academic literati. It also suggests that as much as the critics were unimpressed with the tastes and abilities of "everyday" readers, so were those readers unimpressed by those would-be cultural gurus – even the popularizers at the Book-of-the-Month-Club could not escape Blair's disparagement. Blair's columns rendered the production of books and the performance of criticism likewise consumer service professions; she "outed" professional critics as people primarily concerned with job security, and punctured the inflated notions of "right" reading that underwrote both "highbrow" reviews and middle-class cultural mediators alike.

Recall that Blair is first asked to write about "What books we'll like." The "We" is at first her friends in Joplin Missouri, but becomes by extension her Good Housekeeping audience. This request suggests that Blair's taste might be identical to that of her readers. It also validates the already-formed tastes of her readers – no anxiety about "acquired tastes" here. The "we" suggests that Blair's readers share a group identity – they are a "reading formation," in Tony Bennett and Janet Wollacott's sense, in which a reading formation is the product of definite social and ideological relations of reading composed, in the main, of those apparatuses – schools, the press, critical reviews, fanzines within and between which the socially dominant forms for the superintendence of meaning are both constructed and contested.4

This definition of reading formation is particularly resonant in this context because it acknowledges the superintending function of a range of contextual influences – the institutional, as in schools and press, and the purportedly counter-institutional, or populist, such as fanzines. In the case of Good Housekeeping, the magazine's attempt to position itself as both sympathetic peer and expert echoes Blair's position as the expert voice within the group. Her repeated use of "we" groups Blair with her readers, or at least indicates that if she is not identical to them, she will know what they like – better than critics who her study group friend Charlotte Lennon does not know. Blair was a little like her readers – we think we can know this because she was presumably a member of a study club located in a town in the geographic center-South of the United States – but she was also quite a bit unlike them. For one thing, she had a bully pulpit in one of the largest-circulation women's monthlies of the time, though her autobiography mentions the magazine only once in passing, and never mentions the books columns. The autobiography focuses largely on Blair's political ventures, and is written in the vein of "Mrs. Blair Goes to Washington." In discussing her methods for getting women interested in working for the Democratic Party, in the early days of her first involvement with them, Blair writes:

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4 Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott, Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987), 64-5.
Little I might know about national politics, but I knew a lot about women, and one thing I knew was that women might follow men directly, but they were not going to be delivered as so many bobheads by an agent of the men. But if I could make them see me as one who could lead them according to tactics they were familiar with, they might treat me as their leader.  

Blair leads by being like the people she wants to follow her—very much like the editors of Good Housekeeping magazine, who pride themselves on having gained the “faith” of their readers through their Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. As an advertisement spread over two full pages of the New York Times claimed in September, 1927, the magazine had “developed that essential of a great publication—character.” This character would lead to consumer faith, as “Faith in buying is based on the fact that most of us have a distinct sense of confidence in familiar things—things we are used to.” Women were used to Good Housekeeping, and Blair’s female audiences were used to her tactics, both in party organizing and in book recommendations.

Blair was a relative unknown, though the daughter of a prominent Missouri family, when she earned a certain notoriety as the author of the short story “Letters from a Contented Wife” in the December, 1910 issue of Cosmopolitan magazine, a general-interest periodical that targeted a largely male (and largely urbane, bachelor) audience. This piece, which to the 21st-century reader seems facetiously titled, is written as a series of letters from a wife to her absent husband. Letters date from the honeymoon phase, the moment of new motherhood, the 10-year anniversary, and the 20-year anniversary. Most of the passages sound too self-abnegating to be read as earnest from the woman who was to become a major Democratic party operative, as does this opening from the letter dated six months after marriage:

I have been quite busy since you left, making a catalogue list of our library. I am so proud of our books, as well as of the excellent taste displayed in their selection. I have catalogued all your marked articles on political subjects, too, so you can find them readily. And to think that I shall always be doing such things for you! That we are to have a whole life long of it—I discovering all these little things that mean completeness, you doing all the big things that really count—always together, you and I?

This letter reads like it could be a letter from George Eliot’s Dorothea Brooke to her ill-matched spouse Edward Causabon—and all well-read audiences would know how that particular pairing turned out. But Blair apparently did not mean her title of “contented wife” ironically, if one is to believe her account in her autobiography. Rather than an indictment of a husband who subordinates his wife’s talents to his own pedantry, Blair apparently meant this account as a corrective to what she saw as an unfortunate trend towards pieces about unhappy and unequal unions:

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I had been reading an article in the Cosmopolitan called "Confessions of a Rebellious Wife." "I'm tired of reading about these unhappy wives," I said to my husband. "Why doesn't someone write about the contented ones?"

"Why don't you?"

"Nonsense, I can't write."

"But you could. Your letters show it."

I laughed. "Every husband thinks that about his wife."

"No," he insisted. "The last time I was in New York I read an extract from one of your letters to clinch some point in the conversation, and everyone commented on the way you put it. We can be discussing something, you and I, for hours. I go away and your first letter puts it more clearly than all our conversations made it. You could do it if you tried."

Blair's conversational habits with her husband clearly form the template for her contented wife's letters. She writes out the complex negotiations that her narrator must undertake to remain contented, and models a kind of cognitive behavioral therapeutics of marital relationships. When discussing a fight during year six of the marriage, the wife writes, "We are each trying to make the other happy in our own peculiar way. I try to make you happy by doing to you as I would like to be done by, and you do the same to me. You let me alone when I'm worried because you prefer to be let alone yourself. Well, I don't, but now that I've learned your intentions I am perfectly satisfied. At least if I'm not I will learn to be - so there." The contented wife insists that her husband refrains from buying furs for her so they can save the money to spend on their house, or just to have as a financial cushion: "Possessions have no charm as compared with the power of money. The ability capital well invested gives to hold a position in the community, to control circumstances, and to shape affairs is so much more than the ability to buy." This contented wife, unlike the "rebellious wife" of the initial piece, has an opportunity to travel without her children, and appreciates them all the more for having had a break from motherhood. She also engages in prolonged political conversation with her husband via her letters (as in a long meditation on the relative risks and benefits of "class legislation" in a letter from the midpoint of the piece). Directly after such a disquisition, though, the contented wife has this to say about the long marriage versus the new engagement:

Of course my [newly-engaged young friend] thinks that they will never find less to say to each other. If we find less to say to each other she supposes that we find each other dull and that we are tired of each other. She grasps nothing of the heights and depths and breadths of marriage that have nothing to do with talk or opinions.

The contented wife is a corrective to the rebellious wife who laments the passing of the first flames of passion and the period of marriage in which spouses are the center of each others' lives, the wife who resents being set

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8 Blair, Bridging Two Eras, 140.
10 Ibid., 135.
11 Ibid., 137.
aside has her new husband goes abroad to pursue his business ventures. One could indeed imagine this contented wife with Emily Newell Blair's political career in some sequel, as she stumbles upon political prominence by being the most inoffensive woman in the right place at the right time. After writing about the "contented wife," Blair became a sought-after writer in general-interest magazines. She then became the editor of the suffrage movement journal, *The Missouri Woman*, in 1913.

In the mid-1910s Blair organized more than 2,000 Democratic Women's Clubs around the country to encouraging newly-enfranchised women to vote in significant, game-changing blocs (instead of as second-votes for their husbands' preferred candidates), and built regional training programs for women party workers. She first served as secretary (1922–1926) and then later as president (1928–1929) of the Woman's National Democratic Club, and was the club's principal founder. She was the first woman to attain a prominent position in Democratic party politics, serving as the national vice chairperson of the Democratic Party, first elected in 1922 then reelected from 1924 to 1928. She was active in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 1932 Presidential campaign, helping secure him his party's nomination, and during the campaign she was one of four women sent by the DNC on speaking tours across the country.

While Blair's roles were in every way exceptional, she made a career out of being *relatable* - being able to understand and translate the desires and attitudes of middle-class American women. Again, she was able to lead because of her simultaneous exceptionalism and typicality.

I saw that I had an opportunity - it was nothing more than that - to show eligibility for leadership. But the women must know me, they must have evidence of my ability to accomplish things. To show them such evidence, I discovered, was like raising myself by my own bootstraps.12

In the Good *Housekeeping* columns, Blair often concedes and alludes to her own exceptionalism - her secretary and her assistant make frequent cameo appearances, and Blair mentions her speaking tours with some regularity. Blair worked around any difficulties posed by this gap by insisting in nearly every column that the individual preferences of each reader were the sole determining factors in whether a book recommendation would be successful. A common opening gambit is for her to identify a particular person, to describe that person and their request to her, and to then tailor her advice to that "type." She then assiduously cautions her readers not to read against type, or at least not to complain about dissatisfaction with their reading if they do. After a lengthy summary description of Rosamond Lehmann's *Dusty Answer*, for example, she writes:

Now, having heard what the story is about and what it means, the question is up to the reader, 'Is it your book?' Do you want to know what Judith wanted from the world and see her disillusionment? Do you enjoy the companionship of young and innocent and slightly stupid girls? Will the pleasure of viewing her child

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world through rose-colored glasses make up to you for the pain of seeing her break them and throw them away? Will you endure the murkiness produced by these implications for the sake of the beauty unobscured? If you cannot answer these questions in the affirmative, then the book is not for you. If you can, it will probably give you, as it did to the critics, extraordinary pleasure. But I beg of you, do not answer these questions ‘No,’ then read it and complain because you do. Or worse, never answer these questions at all, read it, and feel that a ‘bad book’ was imposed on you.\footnote{GH January 1928, 138.}

Not a single column fails to mention the \textit{individual} nature of tastes and reception, and the imperative that each of Blair’s readers takes into account his or her own personality when choosing to begin a book. Sometimes she even goes so far as to undermine her recommendations, particularly when they have been predicated largely on her own responses to texts:

\begin{quote}
After all, the reader – and here is the rub – must bring himself as well as the writer to his reading of the book. Here I have introduced these books as this one reader found them. But my readers, all too unfortunately, I do not know. What they make of these acquaintances, if they follow them up, rests with them. How I wish I could know not only how many like what I like, and hate what I hate, but also – and this knowledge would be equally valuable – how many hate what I like and like what I hate! Please, some of you, write and tell me.\footnote{GH January 1928, 141} (GH January 1928, 141)
\end{quote}

This focus on individual tastes notwithstanding, Blair frequently tended to make her representative advisee an attractive, aspirational “type.” Good \textit{Housekeeping} is filled, after all, with aspirational ideals in its omnipresent advertising copy; it would be easy for such readerly expectations to color reception of the editorial copy. In June 1928, for example, Blair introduces us to her friend Minnie Fisher Cunningham, who is working to be nominated to the U. S. Senate from Texas. First Blair cites a letter from Cunningham: “Being a candidate, I find, means being a very busy woman. I’ll not have much time for reading while I’m campaigning about my big state of Texas, so that everything I read must count. Tell me what to carry with me in my little car as I go from speech to speech and county to county.”\footnote{GH June 1928, 51.} Blair’s description of Cunningham, her “courageous” friend, is inspiring. She is “an executor and administrator of high order,” who wants everything she reads and does to “increase her value.” But she is not narrow-minded; she is, rather, “A brilliant student of politics,” “witty as well as wise,” “sweet and tender-hearted,” “honest and clear-minded.” “She knows that it is not only knowledge of facts that increases value, but also understanding and sympathy, so that a book which increases her stock of one or exercise of the other may be said, in her definition, to ‘count.’” A probable description? No, of course not, but an ideal one – and one that fits the aspirational profile of Good \textit{Housekeeping} readers, who are coached by the advertisements in the column’s margins to want to be witty, wise, honest, brilliant, and effortless homemakers. Anyone who
wants to see herself as the spiritual equivalent to Minnie Cunningham could read the books earmarked for that inspiring woman, and feel both identified and improved.

A description that is more likely to already fit a larger number of the Good Housekeeping audience comes the next month, in the form of the reader letter that Blair uses to frame her July column. Blair identifies a correspondent who was writing in response to her column from February of that year, on “Books of Escape,” in which she had validated detective fiction, adventure stories, and romances as books that could be read to “escape from a number of things, the drudgery of the daily grind, the tediousness of familiar things, the borsomeness of the intimate – even the irksomeness of landscape and the thrust of our own desires and repressions.” In this February column, Blair had argued that adventure books, in particular, helped one escape the quotidian but also rendered one more satisfied with a more mundane existence than the adventurers: “[The books do] this by painting for us the opposite of all these things, all these conditions, and painting them in such a way that while we are amused, entertained, we never once desire to discover these opposites for ourselves. We return to the old things refreshed, satisfied, and content.”

Blair validated this kind of reading over and against “the intellectuals:” “And how the intellectuals groan, how they scorn this Babbitsy! ‘After all,’ said one of them to me, ‘it is the ones who never have any trouble who talk that way. Those who do, want to study about it, think about it, come to some conclusion.’ Be that as it may, there is much to be said for these books that make the reader forget – books in which he can lose himself. Some people may always want this kind. It is a certainty there are times when everyone does.”

Blair closed her February column by reiterating the importance of an individual’s eclectic taste, and encouraged her readers, as she did every month, to write to her and tell her what kinds of escape worked for them.

In response, Blair received a letter that turned her notion of “escape” on its head. “Not to escape life but to extend life, that is why I read. I want books to take me places and give me experiences that I can never hope to enjoy.”

The reader describes her domestic situation:

I live on a ranch in Oklahoma in an ugly, tiny, four-room house. I look out upon acres of plowed dirt or unshaded grain. My life is narrow. My day’s a routine. Love has never come to me. I am just a plain old woman. But let me find the right book and I become a fairy princess, a queen of this world, or a woman longed for and lost, living in palaces, sailing the seas, or heaven knows what.

Blair validates this reader’s desires for escape and for identification – she identifies herself as a fellow “make-believer” who loves “books of identification, books in which I can live scenes and feel emotions that I never shall experience in life.” Blair’s recommendations, though, veer far from the “fairy princess” desires expressed by her correspondent. She writes at length about

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16 GH February 1928, 201.  
17 Ibid.  
18 GH July 1928, 102.  
19 Ibid.
a biography of Henry Hudson that found her so identifying with Hudson that she "recoiled" from the acquittal of the mutineers on his ship. She recommends a highly-wrought fictionalized biography of the Haitian revolutionary Jean-Christophe, because while "there may be readers who will shrink from Black Majesty because of its subject...among them will not be my correspondent, searching for a broader outlook on life."\(^{20}\) Blair recommends a novel of a love triangle surrounding an American-born French widow in France (The French Wife by Dorothy Graham); she recommends a romance about the Crusades; she recommends two books she actually found to be "disappointing" but not without the capacity to "widen horizons"\(^ {21}\) (one about a New York family that falls out of prominence and enters the working round - Blair finds the characters more like "prototypes" than legitimate personalities - another that fails not in terms of characterization, but in terms of plot: "why create a mermaid from fairyland and sacrifice her to the gods of this world?");\(^ {22}\) Blair recommends a book with a series of micro-biographies in a psychoanalytic strain, and, finally, a nonfiction essay that glorifies the business world (with which she disagrees, but which she thinks raises an interesting topic).

In other words, Blair reveals a pretty tin ear when it comes to understanding her correspondent's needs. Why tell someone who wants to imagine herself as a "fairy princess" that she might want to read a novel with a disappointing ending, in which a figural "mermaid" is destroyed, even with the rationale that it is yet "a book to widen horizons, if only those of understanding of human limitations."\(^ {23}\) I doubt not that the isolated Oklahoma correspondent is well aware of human limitations - she wants to try to reach her experience beyond thinking about human limitations and, presumably, to transcendence, to idealism. The most hamfisted recommendation in the column is of a domestic novel about a family from Iowa, The Bonney Family - which Blair acknowledges is not far from Oklahoma but contends nevertheless that "identification with them would for [the Oklahoma rancher] - as for me, I doubt not - widen horizons, for to live deeply, intensely in a family circle, to suffer for and with them, to share and to demand, renounce and claim, is to know the whole scheme of life in a microcosm; and to know this whole scheme, even from a replica, a model, surely widens the horizon for one who has been looking at only one spot on it."\(^ {24}\) Well, perhaps. But even if this is a beautifully-rendered story of a family in the middle of cornfields, it is still a story about a family living in the middle of cornfields. The urbane, if middle-western, Emily Blair might be interested in reading about them as she takes trains that fly through the long stretches of prairie and field on her way to retreats in the east or the mid-Atlantic, but the Oklahoma rancher?

\(^ {20}\) Ibid.
\(^ {21}\) Ibid.
\(^ {22}\) Ibid.
\(^ {23}\) Ibid., 172.
\(^ {24}\) Ibid., 168.
What is she to get from “every-day people doing every-day things?” And then, Blair offers a particularly tone-deaf justification for the recommendation: “Mrs. Bonney is the loveliest mother I have ever found in fiction, loving with the wisdom and wise with the love that too many mothers vainly long to have, and yet not too good to be true. How identification with her would enrich the life of my childless correspondent!”

Perhaps, and perhaps not. This correspondent does not seem to want to spend her imaginative life as an unassuming minister’s wife in farm country, even one full of homespun wisdom and preternatural maternal grace. She wants to imagine herself a queen. She wants to live in mental palaces. She wants to spend her escapist literary moments being fought over by knights. Is Blair simply ignoring these desires for escapist flight? Or, does her cluster of recommendations here belie a discomfort with certain forms of individual tastes despite the rhetoric of ecumenicalism she employs elsewhere in the columns? Is Blair actually uncomfortable with her Oklahoma correspondent’s desires for fantastical identification, for a pursuit of fantasy that is more than just escape, is “extension” – but not in the sense of “horizon-widening,” but rather self-insertion? Is this a moment where Blair is working to re-educate her readers in more appropriate “horizon-enlarging” reading practices? The books she advocates – for Henry Hudson, for Jean-Christophe, for a sophisticated expatriate, for a Crusader – are educational, but they are also books that allow entrée into emotional identifications. Indeed, it is this element of many of these books that made other more “intellectual” or professional critics scorn them. These not-so-rigorous dramatic biographies are perfect for Blair’s purposes, if not for the intellectual critics, or for her Oklahoma reader.

This is but one example of a consistent middle ground achieved in Blair’s columns between her reader’s needs for particular forms of pleasure and the sense she has – while not aligned with academic readers, still well-defined and idiosyncratic – of the types of reading her audience should, or probably would like to, pursue. And this observation leads us back to the inaugural column’s tripartite charge to Blair, the second part of which specifies that Blair should tell her readers “What books we ought to read.” This suggests that there are books out there that need to be read by Blair’s readers, perhaps but not necessarily regardless of personal preference, because they hold some cultural importance. Such a request supposes that there can be some sort of imperative to reading books – what is it? Is it social? The previously-invoked Study Club setting, with its “good fellowship,” seems to suggest that there is an element of desirable social capital in reading books. In her January 1928 column, Blair acknowledges again this impetus to reading – to validate it in some and to discourage it in others. She acknowledges that there are two types of readers; the kinds who love to read and the kinds who feel overwhelmed by the task of reading.

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25 Ibid.
For this first group I have my little list, a short one but, I hope, a good one, for it is the fruitage of much reading of many volumes, much selection, and much elimination. And for this second group I have a bit of advice: ‘Don’t. Don’t keep up.’ Pick out just one or two of these books as they appeal to you. Read them as slowly as you will or lay them down unfinished. For as one who loves reading I simply can not bear that, even in order to ‘keep up,’ it shall become a burden, that, even in order to take part in tea-table conversation, one should be wearied in the endeavor.26

Blair wants you to feel good about reading, however much you are able to read, and she repeatedly discourages any of her readers from feeling the external pressures to "keep up."

Is that "ought" indicative of some quest for cultural capital, then? In my book Reading Up, which takes a similar look at ten years of reading advice columns in the Ladies’ Home Journal magazine, I answer this question with a definite yes. In those columns, Hamilton Wright Mabie offered his readers a strategy for reading works of high literary realism, by Howells, James, Wharton, and others, as if they were the comfortable but less culturally-elite works of literary romance and sentiment that he presumed they preferred to read (and that he sometimes confessed to preferring as well). Mabie encouraged his Ladies’ Home Journal readers from 1902-1912 to embrace works of high realism alongside the more genteel, "Romantic" offerings of the day, who validated their desires to read as a means of upward social and economic mobility, and who ultimately acted as a guide to class "passing" – but with the caveat that one really should read the books! Mabie made "high realism" palatable for a mass audience – in the 1920s and 1930s, would Blair attempt the same for literary modernism?

Blair does occasionally refer to "the critics" and their literary preferences, but she does so not with an air of deference (either grudging or sincere); she is rather scornful of the critics, and their motives for preferring certain texts and styles over others. In the midst of a column recommending books for her sophisticated friend, Good Housekeeping contributing author, and political spouse Frances Parkinson Keyes, Blair mentions Rebecca West’s book of essays, The Strange Necessity, which Blair describes as a window-shopping trip through literature. "Miss West wanders out of a little bookshop in Paris up and down, one might say, the street of literature, stopping for a little time here before Marcel Proust and there before James Joyce, those two incomprehensible whom the literary critics tell us to our utter scorn and abhorrence are the greatest writers of our time; scorn, because we do not understand them; and abhorrence, because they so greatly shock us in our tenderest sensibilities."27 West is, for Blair, a flaneur on the one hand, and on the other (remember the Good Housekeeping test kitchen!) a scientific investigator of the world of high criticism, analyzing both texts and critical biases while keeping her own critical distance. The takeaway for the general reader may not be a detailed exegesis of any particular text, or the ability or desire to

26 GH January 1928, 51.
27 GH May 1929, 176.
perform such exegesis for his or herself, but will be rather "certain ideas" against which "when one mentions, for instance, sentimentality or art," one might "measure" one's own response. Or, not. Because even Blair admits that "it is not an easy book, nor one for everyone to read...But Mrs. Keyes, I know, will want to read and ponder it." 

Blair's critique of academic literary culture continues as she acknowledg-es that Keyes will want to read Virginia Woolf's Orlando, not just because Hugh Walpole called Woolf the "co-queen of British Letters" along with Rebecca West, but also because Woolf is the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, whose writings are "beloved of club-paper writers." In other words, she has middlebrow aspirational roots. But Woolf's stylistic experiments make her works challenging to those same club ladies, even as they make her "beloved of critics, since she furnished them their 'racket,' the material for their jobs." Blair continues, casting serious aspersions as she goes:

Not that any critic ever condescends to inform his reader authoritatively just what it is all about. But each has his own opinion of Orlando. Professor Canby says it is the esthetic history of English belles-lettres, showing the literary mind of England in all its modes from the time of Elizabeth until today. Rebecca West says it is an 'account of human experience during that period which historians call modern history: the last few hundred years, which are near enough for us to recognize their parentage of us.' My own guess is that Mrs. Woolf has imagined in Orlando a human being independent of time in order to show that in each indivi-dual there are a number of selves all built up, 'one on top of another, as plates are piled up in a waiter's hand,' all of these selves handed down to the individual biologically through the germ plasm which contains all the grandparents to the uttermost generations.

Blair goes on to explain "just what it's all about" through a pretty thorough plot summary that lists all of Orlando's manifestations. By offering a variety of interpretive glosses on the novel, and then terming her own take on it a "guess," Blair underscores the spirit behind her reading – that no reader should feel absolutely beholden to any one "expert opinion" on the meaning of this modernist text. Each individual reader's imagination is brought into play, individually, when thinking about Orlando – and this dynamic is not at all unlike the kind of reader-author interaction that occurs in any other book, which some may like and others may dislike, despite the reverence with which critics like Canby treat this particular text. Notice too that the critical take Blair cites as Canby's is indulgently metafictional – Orlando is about esthetic history? What use is that to her audience, who views Canby and his ilk as simply trumpeting books that will "furnish[] them their 'racket,' the material for their jobs."

I'm less interested for my purposes in arguing with Blair's assessment of "the intellectuals" than in noting that sometimes it seems to match up with our 21st century take on who would comprise such a group and how they "actually" felt about lay readers, and sometimes diverges wildly. Chip

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28 Ibid.
29 GH May 1929, 178.
Rhodes has argued in *Structures of the Jazz Age*, “[Harold] Stearns and the intellectuals for whom he spoke were suspicious of an intellectual who sub-limited himself or herself with public engagement.” Thomas Bender describes modernist intellectual discourse in the 1920s as hermetic, a closed loop among intellectuals that never worked its way out into the public discourse. “Disciplinary peers, not a diverse urban public, became the only legitimate evaluators of intellectual work” in the twenties, Bender writes. It is a general critical consensus that Canby’s role was as a popularizer of reading, attempting outreach (problematic as that notion is) through his various book recommendation projects. But Blair lumps Canby in with the lot when she evokes him as one of those trying to “keep up the racket.” Blair’s discussion of *Orlando* works to empower her readers to pick up the novel, to interpret it on their own (because if there is no critical consensus, by extension, there must not be a “right” or a “wrong” answer to the meaning of the text), or to choose not to read it if it, like any of the other books Blair has discussed, does not seem like the type of text she would be interested in. The reader might also find she does not like *Orlando* – and that is a completely acceptable response. The perspective afforded by Blair’s comment that professional criticism is not mystical, but is simply labor – the intellectual’s need to keep up the “racket” – brings intellectual work to the level of any other manual or mental labor, which is undertaken, after all, for financial gain.

The explicit consumerist message of *Good Housekeeping* thus bleeds into Blair’s columns not only in the attitude towards books as commodities that might suit or disappoint depending on consumer’s needs, but also in the way that Blair throws back the veil on the intellectual labor of classifying and analyzing books. Her original interlocutors in her Joplin book club were already unimpressed by the intellectual approach to books; if we conjecture that Charlotte Lennon’s frustration with reviews refers to the champions of high modernism, like the critics at the *Little Review* (which was famously subtitled, “making no compromise with the public taste”) or the *Transatlantic Review*, we need hardly be surprised at her reluctance. But she even says that she wants to stay away from “Best Sellers” on one hand, and the “Carnegie Library” books on the other. It seems that none of these possible literary canons – not the radical modernist, not the highbrow academic canon, and not the popular bestseller list – is suitable for this reader. In his recent revisioning of the literary landscape of the 1920s, ’30s, and ’40s, Gordon Hutner explains that the now-canonical vision of the 1920s and 1930s as the ferment of literary modernism is far from the actual, lived literary life of the 1920s and 1930s in America. He looks at the bestseller lists to offer an alternate canon of novelists such as Booth Tarkington, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Joseph Hergesheimer, and Zona Gale, among others, reading these writers as continuing the tradition of Howellsian realism into the 1920s and 1930s. These

texts were the darlings of the newly-codified and credentialed phalanx of Ivy League literary critic-celebrities like Columbia’s Carl Van Doren and Yale’s Henry Seidel Canby and the popular canonizers at the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Literary Guild, whose selections frequently became best-sellers and whose word about middle-class tastes we have come to take for granted; not just Hutner, but Joan Shelley Rubin, Janice Radway, and many others including myself have thought them the closely-followed purveyors of fiction for the middle-class reader. But in looking at Emily Blair’s columns I am finding that even this group was, to her mind, frequently unresponsive to the needs of her audience; she would group them with even the most dismissive of “intellectual” critics. In her August 1928 column, Blair looks for something to recommend out of the category of “books which have brought pleasure to the critics, books of the Literary Guild or of the Book-of-the-Month Club, but which may not fill my needs.” I’ll cite at length her process, as she narrates it for the column:

Into [this group], on this occasion, went Thomas Beer’s *The Road to Heaven*, so admired by the sophisticates but which would, my reading disclosed, in spite of its undeniable art, seem to the respectable frank to the point of brutality; Howard W. Odom’s *Rainbow Round My Shoulder*, an undeniable document of negro life, absolutely hypnotic in its power to convince and hold, but repulsive in the savagery it records; Princess Marthe Bibesco’s *Catherine-Paris*, Balzackian in its scope and thoroughness, exquisite in its irony, charming in its characterization, altogether a beautiful book, yet depicting manners and situations shocking to the sensibilities of the Anglo-Saxon; and finally Rose Macaulay’s *Daisy and Daphne*, which will be a veritable joy to those who can laugh at themselves.32

Blair critiques the critics here — and it is this second order of evaluation and gatekeeping that perhaps most intrigues me about her columns. Blair finds the Book-of-the-Month Club too abstruse — too edgy — too far out there for particular portions of the audience of *Good Housekeeping*. Given the significant circulation of this magazine, Blair’s influence in critiquing the club’s choices cannot be ignored. At the very least we must concede that there was considerable conflict between different ranks of cultural gatekeepers; Canby and the Book-of-the-Month Club were not as “popular,” perhaps, as we have all thought.

This may be because of these critics’ rhetorics of improvement. Improvement was an acknowledged goal of Blair’s columns, but it was far from the most important goal. Recall the third charge from the inaugural column: Blair is to tell her readers “what we ought to know about the new books.”33 This request implies that there is information about new books which is valuable whether or not Blair’s readers actually read said books. What Blair seems to be performing for her readers in this August column — a process she will repeat regularly throughout her tenure at *Good Housekeeping* — is just what Charlotte asked for — she is telling them what they ought to know about these new books. They don’t need to have read the books, but

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32 GH August 1928, 181
33 Ibid.
with this helpful overview, they will be able to participate, perhaps, in social conversation about these books, will be able to talk about why they have not in fact chosen to read them. Blair insists that among the books celebrated by critics - or that “gave critics pleasure” - there are books, “some of them good books, perhaps great literature, but not for popular taste or consumption.”

These are books that will never fit the needs of the Good Housekeeping reader, in the same way that certain products will never fit her needs. But, Blair dutifully summarizes these texts, and discusses on occasion how a reader might deal with reading something that might not usually be her cup of tea, but which is required reading in her study club, or in her social circle.

Longer columns devoted to “serious reading” typically appeared in the winter months, as does the January 1929 column entitled “If you Read to Learn, Emily Newell Blair Suggests Books that will be Useful to You.” Blair opens, as always, by describing the target audiences for her column, as discerned by her from the letters that cross her desk daily. A laundry list of different identifications and differing definitions of “education” naturally lead to different types of recommendations. Blair notes that some want “simple literacy,” and recommends dictionaries, grammars, and composition manuals; some want “to converse interestingly, to understand the references to books and characters in books, to characters and events in history, to pictures, to inventions.” For these readers Blair recommends a course of reading the encyclopedia. Those who want a list of books that will “equal a college education,” Blair directs to Eliot’s Five Foot Shelf of Books and the ALA classics series. She does comment on those that “I should prefer to know how many of those sold had been read. For the trouble with sets of books like this is that it is so much easier to buy them, and even to pay for them, irritating as the monthly payment plan is, than to continue faithfully, day in and day out, to stick to their pages.”

None of these series would satisfy the reader who wanted to have a course of literary appreciation, though, and Blair is ready to offer several titles that will help a reader to a judgment of literature that focuses “not [on] its effect on the reviewer as my reviews in Good Housekeeping are done, but according to the canons of literature, as to whether the author succeeds in doing what he sets out to do, and a criticism of the methods he employs to this end.” The decision to follow a course of study, to enter into the mode of criticism that is author-centric rather than reader-centric, is thus actually presented as a reader-centric choice – a reader may decide that the study of a canon is important, and then may learn how to perform such a thing, may with practice gain the “mastery” that allows one to “think for oneself, to raise standards for oneself.” But Blair distinctly countervenes the notion that one may acquire taste.

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34 Ibid.
35 GH January 1929, 180.
36 Ibid., 183.
[...] so often my correspondents seem to think that culture is something they can don like a garment. They have only to read certain books, see certain pictures, hear certain music, and accept the opinions of others with regard to them, and they will be considered cultured. But culture is not so easily come by. It is true that the reading of books, the seeing of pictures, and the hearing of music may help one to it, but only as they exercise one's thought, one's discrimination, one's tastes. They are to the acquirement of culture what the exercise of the muscles is to the acquirement of a fine physique. Culture is that attitude of mind, that inner sense of rightness, that appreciation of beauty, that sense of values and many more things that may result from the reading and seeing and hearing. But they will result only if and when the reader and the seer and hearer is frank and honest about his own reactions. So long as he is willing to accept the reports of others as to what he should think and feel, he will be merely educated. Only when he is able to report that he actually feels these reactions may he lay claim to culture.  

Blair draws an analogy between acquiring taste and acquiring virtue—saying that she uses the phrase “acquire virtue...in the sense in which the Christian saints did when they ‘acquired’ virtue.” suggesting that the process is mysterious. Of course, she has been asked to offer titles to help in this process, and help she does, with a long list of books like C. Alphonso Smith’s What Can Literature Do For Me, Frank Mott’s Rewards of Reading, Llewelyn Jones’s How to Criticize Books, and British popularizer Arnold Bennett’s Literary Taste and How to Form It. But Blair’s hedging about culture and taste in the midst of these recommendations evacuates the books of some of their efficacy—they will not, from simply being read, produce the enculturation effect—and her reader need not think that reading any of them will result in an appearance of culture. I can think of no better analogy for these texts, as Blair offers them, than the product advertised in the margins of this column: The Battle Creek Health Builder.

Like Charles W. Eliot’s Five Foot Shelf of Books, the “Health Builder” promises benefits—in this case, not erudition but slimness—in fifteen minutes a day. Like Eliot’s shelf, the claims are spurious—and Blair stops well short of promising that the quick fix will help her readers acquire particular tastes. You can buy it, but will you read it? And will reading it actually do any good? Here again, one senses Blair butting up against one of the paradoxes of her columns: the impetus to offer advice, with the inclination to say that advice is really ineffectual if the reader’s individual contribution is not significant. Blair does not guarantee anything to the passive reader, but she also will not condemn that reader’s practice as so many of her contemporaries would because that is not her prerogative as a “taster and tester of books.” If one wishes to learn, Blair will help you. If one does not care about knowing why critics like certain books, or about how to read an aesthetic appreciation of Woolf, or if one simply does not have the chance or inclination to form these habits, if one wishes to be guided, if one is, like Blair’s “childhood ideal” Emily Blakeney (October 1929) a “tired woman” who wants to read something easy, Blair will not judge you. She may not fully cater to your

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37 Ibid., 43.
requests, as was the case with the writer from Oklahoma, but she will offer a curated list of books for your consideration, and will validate your assessment of their utility – be that assessment “cultured” or not.

Works Cited


