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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### **The woman behind book club culture as we know it today**

New York, NY—In February 1926, Emily Newell Blair began writing the column “Tasting and Testing Books” for *Good Housekeeping* magazine, catering to a wide range of women’s preferences to promote interest in reading. Now, nearly a century later, author Amy L. Blair sifts through the columnist’s ninety-one advice pieces to better understand their impact on book culture then and today in her new book, *Tasting and Testing Books* (University of Massachusetts Press, December 2024).

According to author Amy Blair, “[Emily Newell Blair] built her columns around personalities—her own and those of her friends.” Just as in popular book clubs today, Blair recommended books based on her own preferences and the preferences of those around her, welcoming others with similar tastes. Not only did this go against the exclusionary, highbrow reviewers of the time, but it made the columnist more relatable and invited readers to share in her enjoyment of reading.

The author adds that “long-time readers of Blair columns would feel like they got to know these friends and became a part of this friendship circle. This is a lot like the celebrity friendships we think we know about today—Taylor Swift and Selena Gomez, for example—or the influencer friend circles that circulate on TikTok and Instagram.”

Her separation from the popular practices of these literary studies and subsequent divergence toward building a reading community leave scholars of book history like Cecilia Konchar Farr wondering “how such a fascinating and important ‘influencer’ has been lost to our literary-historical records.”

Emily Newell Blair also shared a unique sense of trust with her readers. She was confident in her readers’ ability to read at any level, only worried about recommending books suited for their individual tastes. Comparatively, author Amy Blair shows that readers trusted that Blair would continue to honor “a women’s way of reading” as she “celebrated women writers like Rebecca West, Willa Cather, and Virginia Woolf” over the male writers too often highlighted by influential book reviewers.

“I see Blair as a precursor,” Amy Blair says, “to book club doyennes like Jenna Bush Hagar and Reese Witherspoon. She presents herself as an everywoman.” During the rise of literary study and male critics, Blair offered women a space to enjoy reading that carried on to celebrity and influencer book clubs prominent today.

To request a review copy or an interview with the author, please contact Chelsey Harris, University of Massachusetts Press Marketing and Sales Manager, at [chelsey.harris@umass.edu](mailto:chelsey.harris@umass.edu).

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