Blair, Amy L. *Reading Up: Middle-Class Readers and the Culture of Success in the Early Twentieth-Century United States*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2012. ix, 250 pp. Cloth $76.50. Paper $28.95.

Students of reception prize new data sets. But since they value even higher the rare project that demonstrates how to mine such lodes thoroughly, all the more estimable is a project that manages both feats with dexterity. In *Reading Up*, Amy Blair probes a books-and-reading advice column the *Ladies' Home Journal* featured between 1902 and 1912. It may seem that the advice she probes would recover the reading experiences of striving women only. Yet the advice from Hamilton Wright Mabie's column reached further when it guided mothers who chose books for their families, belles who shared his counsel with their beaus, and teachers who directed their students' reading according to what "Mr. Mabie" taught monthly for ten years. Though prominent in his day, and friendly with critics as canonical as William Dean Howells, Mabie is best known now as a stick-in-the-mud who disparaged literary realism, and Howells with it, in the 1880s. His career lasted much longer than that, however, and included a public *volte-face* about Howells specifically and literary realism more generally. *Reading Up* explains with force and wit why specialists in reception, but also literature scholars and social historians, should return to Mabie with an eye for what his advice can disclose about what Leah Price calls "the conditions of our own reading." Blair's findings recover a missing arc of the genealogy Joan Shelley Rubin indicated in *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (1992) that links twentieth-century U.S. literary democratizers to cultivators at the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Century Illustrated* in the Gilded Age. Methodological gains are vibrant, too, as Blair derives insights grounded in Mabie's columns but enriched by investigation of what Howells, Henry James, Edith Wharton and the once-popular Francis Marion Crawford chose to say in print about their readerships and about readerships they found wanting.

Backing up all this is Blair's attention to fiction and fiction reading, under the rubric of a culture of success--which implies a shadow culture of failure. "Reading up," she explains, is the act of engaging print in the service of self-advancement. Its "tacit promise is that some texts, like some mysterious alchemical lore, can make the reader wealthier" in more than a metaphorical sense: "by demonstrating knowledge of these texts, one can trade on that knowledge to achieve wealth and elevated status" (2). Blair delineates with marked originality how Mabie negotiated this sense of reading among story-lovers who would not have selected for themselves fiction as anti-romantic as *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and *Roderick Hudson*. The analyses she bases on Mabie's advice are plausible and cogent, as are her claims concerning the identifications reading-up readers might make as they engaged plots and characters crafted by authors who strove to ward off identitarian sympathy. The readers in question were not dull or slack, but based on their education, to the point at which they picked up Mabie's columns, they found realist fiction strange, off-putting, and "difficult." After a decade of reading scholarship that has stressed the active, confident, and even insouciant reader, *Reading Up* is a major contribution of considerable nuance. Giving Blair's findings, additional weight is in reckoning how many *Ladies' Home Journal* readers were nurturing other readers in ways that kept Mabie's advice in play well past 1912. Worth remembering, too, is the possibility of seepage from his advice about novels to the ways in which his readers engaged non-fiction, as well as drama and film.

Literary historians have long known that the realists, whom Mabie urged on his readers and who have been recognized as artists in their own day and in ours, made a point of writing anti-romantically. Recognized, too, is how hard some of them struggled with the lure of being widely read and with vexations of being read wrongly. To this scholarship, which can be emblematized by Wharton's disdain for the "mechanical reader," Blair contributes her gift for reconstructing the "interpretive gymnastics" (11) to which "literary novices" (4) could resort as

they tried to "assimilate" a work of high-culture fiction to their "own motivation for reading it" (11). The results will chime for all who teach *The Rise of Silas Lapham*; *The Grandissimes*; *Deephaven*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Princess Casamassima*, and more. Blair holds in tensile balance her sense of advice that "renders more likely a number of strong misreadings" (102) and the extent to which Mabie gave the "literarily uninitiated" chances to develop a more probing sense of a novel's ability to offer social critique (5). Provision of chances like this can be a thankless task. Certainly Mabie ended up disappointed, as Blair shows. But Mabie is not the star of *Reading Up*; rather, he is the vehicle by which she reconstructs misreadings she parses in terms of Michel de Certeau's concept of "poaching" and Tony Bennett's work on variants. That so many of her reconstructions concern romantic and/or sentimental expectations is a function of the period in which Mabie wrote. That these expectations linger is the acute point of Blair's contention that study of his columns illuminates conditions of reading in our day, too.

Reception scholars will admire Blair's lucid and well-substantiated reconstructions of the plots and characters desired (and thus, we can be sure, often found) by readers whose resorts to print are extremely hard to track by means such as diaries. The reason is less that none kept records of their reading experiences, though that is possible, than that their diaries are not the sort usually archived. Supple in this respect is Blair's notice of potential slippage between people who read the *Ladies' Home Journal* and the way in which this magazine framed them as literary strivers. She elaborates on this textured insight in an epilogue that delves the e-fracas over Oprah Winfrey's book club selection, then affronted rejection, of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), as its after-effects played out when Winfrey chose another Franzen book nine years later. This part of *Reading Up* characterizes, inferentially, the sort of striver who might have consulted Mabie. The fact that Blair finds dissent among members of Oprah's Book Club--indicated by statements of grievance from some, superiority from others, and dismayed confusion from others still--is so suggestive that it can and should circle researchers back to the start of *Reading Up* to reconsider its introductory arguments. This noted, the bulk of Blair's well-conceptualized inquiry recovers an important slice of the conditions of U.S. reading in the early 1900s by drawing on popular novels, non-fiction, letters and memoirs, and input as high-cultured as James's introductions to his New York Editions. Lively too are her analyses of the novels Mabie recommended repeatedly, illustrations for a James short story, Howells's *My Literary Passions*, and the debate about *The House of Mirth* in the *New York Times Saturday Book Review*.

Reading Up makes a powerful contribution to existing knowledge of a "messy fracturing of the literary landscape at a very early point in the 1890s and 1900s" that reminds analysts to "picture literary history not as linearity but as simultaneity" (172). Obviously, several books of that era offered advice that "facilitates a range of possible reader responses that might seem unintuitive, even philistine" to literary historians (102). Blair is right, though, to point out that "[r]eading advice in popular magazines . . . was somewhat different from that published in book form, primarily because the mass-market periodical was much more highly mediated by the consumer culture of success" (7). Her evidence that Mabie ended up feeling unsuccessful helps explain the faint praise accorded his long and prolific career by middlebrow critics who thought their efforts bolder, hence finer. Some researchers may see macho posturing here that rates teaching below criticism. But all will agree that *Reading Up* retrieves a neglected dimension of U.S. social, reading, literary, cultural, and intellectual history.

Rounding out Blair's project is her refusal to heroize Mabie. She is clear about how his advice "champions a realistic writing practice but validates romantic and sentimental responses" to it (47). She shoots from the hip about his deliberate "vagueness, his convoluted diction, and his conflation of seemingly rigorous technical terminology" in support of "his project of rendering certain works, or certain authors, of high-capital 'realism' palatable for his mass audience" (170). So consistent was Mabie in column after column that some may wonder how

much he was, in fact, articulating his own reading practice. Certain, nonetheless, is how meticulously, yet imaginatively, Blair tracks the advice he gave while critics such as James and Howells pictured America's reading public as a checkerboard. *Reading Up*'s account of an advisor whose target audience took him seriously adds formidably to existing knowledge of that checkerboard's squares that were populated densely but left few records of their print engagements.

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