

## Keillor shares his standards for "Good Poems"

By CHARLES GUENTHER  
*Special to the Post-Dispatch*

What makes a "good" poem? Some critics say "thought and form" (Emerson) or sound and sense. But these are just elements of an elusive impact on the reader.

One of Walt Whitman's finest short poems, seldom quoted, is about a "learn'd astronomer" lecturing, with charts and figures, in a crowded, stuffy room. The bored poet feels compelled to walk out by himself in the "mystical moist night-air" where he "Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars."

Whitman, represented by two passages, is one of more than 100 poets in an anthology of "Good Poems" chosen by the noted tale-spinner of North

woods humor, Garrison Keillor. The host of two public radio programs and author of nine books, Keillor is as witty, informal and opinionated (yet engaging) as ever. "Good Poems" contains 287 poems read on his show called "The Writer's Almanac."

Keillor's test of a good poem is "stickiness" and memorability. In a radio audience "People listen to poems while they're frying eggs and sausage and reasoning with their offspring," he writes. "I read a truckload of poems to find the few thousand I've read on the radio." Yet, while observing that a "narrative line" makes a poem memorable, many of his choices are simply lyrical. And while many of his poets are new or unknown, most of the

names, from Shakespeare to Marge Piercy and Dana Gioia, are quite familiar.

Keillor skillfully classifies his choices under 19 simple headings — music, scenes, lovers, language, beasts, snow, trips, lives, failure and so on — all appealing to a wide audience. If these themes seem simple, the poems (of many forms and styles) are generally good. A few, to some readers, may seem bad (downright awful), but these are outnumbered by superb lines by W.B. Yeats, Emily Dickinson, Seamus Heaney and others.

Several things make this anthology unique and quite appealing. One is his unusual selections (some little read or known) by well-known poets. The other is Keillor's own hon-

est, uninhibited stamp on the project. His introduction is especially candid and engaging. He scorns terms like "confessional" and "regional" in poetry, and calls "women's lit" one of the "great dumb ideas" to come out of his generation.

Yet his assessment of poets and poetry is right on the mark. "Howard Nemerov seems larger and larger to me with each rereading, a kindly giant of great courage and elegance," he notes. And Robert Bly, writing at top form at 75, "gives hope to the rest of us." And though he "once cocked a snoot" at Raymond Carver, Keillor admits he was "dead wrong" and has high praise for that poet.

Altogether, "Good Poems," despite its unconventional

choices and incomplete "bio notes," can take its place beside any new or recent anthology of poetry in our language. It has pure entertainment as well.

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### "Good Poems"

Selected by Garrison Keillor  
Published by Viking,  
476 pages, \$25.95