

It's all about 'Me'

Garrison Keillor takes on rasslin' and politickin' with knockout satire



The Associated Press

Jesse Ventura is living proof that the line between politics and show business has been erased. Above, "The Body" shared a wrestling ring with late-night movie hostess Elvira in 1986. Below, Mr. Ventura, now the governor of Minnesota, visited David Letterman's *Late Show* to recount his implausible journey.



BY ROBERT SCHMUHL
Knight Ridder News Service

At a time when anything goes and absurdity is ascendant, the marriage of politics and pro wrestling assumes a certain harmonic logic.

Nowadays, both callings require asbestos-lined egos, savvy handlers, the stomach to take a punch, a flair for the dramatic and carefully scripted conduct. Winning and losing take a back seat to the continuing show and how it plays with the crowd watching.

The election in November of Jesse (The Body) Ventura as Minnesota's governor consummated the union of politickin' and rasslin' with a force that's kept the body politic in that state and elsewhere reeling. What does the future hold, and (more grippingly) which hold will the governor affect to achieve results?

With such local color in profusion, to expect Minnesota's best-known humorist, Garrison Keillor, to remain silent would be as foolish as thinking Bill Clinton will ever unburden his soul with a tell-all autobiography.

In *Me: By Jimmy (Big Boy) Valente as told to Garrison Keillor*, Mr. Ventura's life (Navy SEAL, wrestler, rock-group bodyguard, radio host, mayor and governor) serves as the inspiration for a slight yet side-splitting satire that skewers not only its self-absorbed subject but everything else it singles out for sarcasm.

Mr. Keillor makes himself the butt of several jokes in this scattershot send-up, having Valente at one point describe him as "a tired old hack with a gecko face and thinning hair and a body like a 6-foot stack of marshmallows."

Although billed on its cover as "a political satire," *Me* is more of a mock memoir.

After scandal-hungry political reporters unearth the new governor's illegitimate birth and subsequent adoption, he decides to tell his story. Predictably, he overcomes youthful hardships as picked-on weakling Clifford

Oxnard. The high school student responds to a body-building ad.

Within a few months, he has a new body: "From dork to hunk." Physically and psychologically reborn, he changes his name to Jimmy Valente and enlists in the Navy to become a WALRUS (Water Air Land Rising Up Suddenly).

Derring-do in Vietnam whets his appetite for action, leading to a career in pro wrestling. The rest, of course, is history for "Big Boy" — and his real-life model.

Mr. Keillor devotes page after page to the melodramatic mayhem of a "sport" that is more accurately understood as steroid-enhanced stunt acting with attitude.

Some readers who are not aficionados of this form of choreography may question Mr. Keillor's artisan-like devotion to describing it in exacting detail. But the raucous spectacle allows the dry, understated humorist of *Lake Wobegon Days* and the radio program *A Prairie Home Companion* to shift to tall-tale mode in chronicling Big Boy's ring adventures.

As Big Boy ages, suffers from "a nasty case of testosterone poisoning" and starts to get "numb above the neck," he listens to the entreaties of Earl Woolner, chairman of the Ethical Party in Minnesota, about running for governor — and wins in a cakewalk.

The new governor's first order of business? To set his sights on the presidency in 2000 by telling Vice President Al Gore: "You're obsolete, Al. The fringe is the center now. TV has made a joke of politics and a joker like me can beat a stuffed owl like you."

Some might say that making fun of pro wrestling, politics and someone with a foot in both rings requires neither heavy lifting nor undue mental exertion. And, yes, *Me* has about it the aroma of a quick-buck instant book. But beyond the broad-shouldered bravado and buffoonery of this satire a clefturks commentary about contemporary America with a deceptively clever punch.



REVIEW

► **ME, BY JIMMY (BIG BOY) VALENTE AS TOLD TO GARRISON KEILLOR**
Viking; \$15.95; 152 pages.