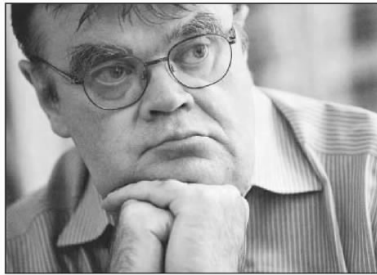


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Stormi Greener/Star Tribune file

Garrison Keillor will sign copies of "Good Poems," which he edited, at 2 p.m. today at the Barnes & Noble in Edina.

Garrison Keillor finds a few 'Good Poems'

By Chris Waddington
Star Tribune Books Editor

Few Americans expect to hear poems at the gas pump or the office water cooler, but thanks to Garrison Keillor, verse has found a home on the 314 public-radio stations that carry "The Writer's Almanac." Broadcast daily since 1994, Keillor's five-minute show always ends with a poem.

Now Keillor has gathered the best of those selections — and a few other favorites — in "Good Poems," (Viking, \$25.95) an anthology that sets classics by Shakespeare and Emily Dickinson alongside contemporary works, including some by Minnesotans such as Robert Bly, Bill Holm and Joyce Sutphen.

The first printing of 75,000 — ambitious for a poetry collection — hit stores on Sept. 30. And while sales figures aren't available, Keillor notes that crowds of about 1,000 turned out for readings during the first swing of his publicity tour.

(Keillor will sign books at 2 p.m. today, Barnes & Noble Galleria, 3225 W. 69th St., Edina.)

Keillor said he selected only poems that "I could read aloud to another person — and feel sure that they would get the essence in one hearing even with other things going on. With radio there's no chance to look things up. I didn't want to mystify people. I didn't want to make myself look smart — I knew how to do that as a college sophomore. That's no trick."

Keillor's interest in poetry dates to his boyhood, when he "fell in love with language by way of the King James Bible" and was encouraged to memorize poems in school. But Keil-

lor doesn't recall any poetic epiphanies: "I'm from Anoka," he said. "I didn't have illuminating moments."

Even so, Keillor said, good poems affect readers in ways that prose rarely does.

"Poetry is ritualistic," Keillor said. "It is meant for ceremonies — most poems are ceremonies themselves. They are heightened speech for sorrowful or joyful occasions."

But Keillor doesn't hold back between weddings and funerals, often reciting memorized verse to himself. "It's like telling a joke — you don't need to wait for an occasion," he said. Such recitations are "a basic, sensual verbal pleasure" — a pleasure Keillor kept in mind when editing "Good Poems."

"Read a poem out loud and you may enjoy the feeling of words in your mouth even if you feel somewhat mystified by it," Keillor said. "You don't need to know the score of a football game to enjoy the beautiful, scary feeling you get when you stand in the end zone watching the players gallop."

Verbal music isn't the only criterion for a good poem, however.

"Some narrative sense is crucial in poetry; otherwise it is simply a play of words — and this is not particularly memorable," Keillor said. "Memorability is a key indicator of whether a poem will last. If you close the book and run into somebody, can you tell them what you were reading? Can you summarize it? If you can't, there's a problem."

— Chris Waddington is at cwaddington@startribune.com.