

## Garrison Keillor looks at guys with wit, wisdom, wistfulness

By Tim Warren  
Book Editor

Title: "The Book of Guys"  
Author: Garrison Keillor  
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Garrison Keillor looks around him and sees his brothers hurting. Men who carry the wounds of being a male in the late 20th century, with sex roles all confused and no one sure how to act. Men who aren't allowed to watch NFL games all Sunday, but must instead take the kids to the Discovery Zone during an afternoon of perfect football weather. Men who feel they can no longer scratch and spit and swear. Men who, Mr. Keillor maintains, cannot be men anymore.

"Years ago," he writes in the introduction to this collection of 21 essays, "manhood was an opportunity for achievement, and now it is a problem to be overcome. Plato, St. Francis, Michelangelo, Mozart, Leonardo da Vinci, Vince Lombardi, Van Gogh — you don't find guys of that caliber today, and if there are any, they are not painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or composing "Don Giovanni." They are trying to be Mr. O.K. All-Rite, the man who can bake a cherry pie, go play basketball, come home, make melon balls and whip up a great soufflé, converse easily about intimate matters, participate in recreational weeping, laugh, hug, be vulnerable, be passionate in a skilful way, and the next day go off and lift them bales into that barge and tote it. A guy who women consider Acceptable."

As the title of this book indicates, being a guy in '90s America is the overriding theme. Not a man, you understand, or an inner child, or — heaven forbid — a warrior. Mr. Keillor's guys wouldn't mind making spears or drumming, but they wouldn't do so because they were trying to bond with other males at a "wildman weekend." No, a guy would make spears to throw at groundhogs out in the neighboring cornfield. Guys like being around other guys, he says, but let's not get slobbery about it.

As for women, his attitude approximates that of a preadolescent male. That is, women probably gotta be around, but they're always there to crimp your style, make you clean the bathtub when you'd rather be sitting in a tree, firing at passing cars with a bean shooter. "Guys know that we ought to get together with other guys and drink whiskey with our arms draped around each other and sing 'Old Paint,' and tell our ripe rich jokes," Mr. Keillor writes. Then he adds, rather sadly: "But we keep coming back to women."

A few pieces in "The Book of Guys" are markedly forced, particularly "Don Giovanni," a retelling of the story set in contemporary times that loses its bite about halfway through. But on the whole, it's a witty and wise book.

But though there are plenty of funny moments in "The Book of Guys," at heart it's a wistful, almost sad, book. It's also more mordant than his Lake Wobegon books, which tend to be so finely wrought that his dark side seldom comes out — a pity, since Mr. Keillor deserves to be known as more than an avuncular storyteller. His black humor can be outrageous, as shown by the first sentence in one essay here: "My mother believed that if you go out of your way to be friendly to people,

they will take a liking to you, but this philosophy did not work for me, because I was a leper." So begins "Buddy the Leper," an unlikely but moving parable about acceptance.

Mostly, though, in these essays Mr. Keillor seems to sense that a rapprochement between men and women can go but so far, because the two sides want such widely varying things from each other. Women want men to grow up and be responsible. But if a guy grows up, he'll never feel he can still send away 10 bubble-gum wrappers to get a free booklet on how to throw your voice. This is a serious quandary.

Mr. Keillor has frequently acknowledged his debt as a humorous essayist to E. B. White, but it is another New Yorker writer whose whimsical, often melancholic, musings about men and women are evoked in "The Book of Guys." About half of his essays are straight out of Thurber Country — women who want to dominate men who act like children, and men who act like children because they know it's more fun that way (if not for the people around them). Aggressive women, passive-aggressive and persecuted men: These essays draw directly from such James Thurber works as "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty."

In that category I would put "The Mid-Life Crisis of Dionysus," "Roy Bradley, Broadcast Boy" (reminiscent of "W.L.T.," his last novel) and the acid-dipped, extremely funny "Marooned." In that piece, a guy — what else — named Danny watches in disbelief as Dave, his no-good brother-in-law, becomes a famous self-help writer (his books include "Never Buy a Bottle of Rat Poison That Comes With Coupons" and "How to Find Your Rear End Without Using Both Hands"). At the same time, Danny loses his job, and his marriage with Julie — Dave's sister — is falling apart because Danny Won't Talk About Their Relationship. So they take a week off to go to the Caribbean to put their marriage back together. They end up being marooned on a deserted island when Rusty, their nitwit captain, can't distinguish a ballast from a boom, but Julie doesn't mind because he's a New Age Man. Danny can't stand him, of course.

*We sat under the palm tree as the sun went down, and Julie and Rusty talked about the American novel, how they didn't care for Uptdike, who had never written strong women characters and was hung up on male menopause and had no ear for dialogue.*

"No ear for dialogue?" I cried.  
"No ear for dialogue," she said.  
"John Uptdike? No ear for dialogue? Are you kidding me? Uptdike? That's what you said, right? Uptdike? His dialogue? No ear?"

"He has none," she said.  
It's good to see Mr. Keillor moving away from the safe and bloodless cracker-barrel witticisms of his Lake Wobegon books and back to his excursions into the macabre and absurd. When you're writing about the sexes, sometimes no other approach seems appropriate.