

Garrison Keillor's guys are an odd bunch

Meet Zeus the Lutheran, Buddy the Leper and Earl Grey

The Book of Guys

By Garrison Keillor
Viking, 340 pp, \$27.99

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Garrison Keillor knows how to tell a story, but with *The Book of Guys* the reader may frequently be left wondering: why on Earth did he tell these stories?

Meet Earl Grey, who flies into San Francisco for a tea symposium, scalds himself in his hotel shower and lands in hospital in bed next to a kid who's swallowed an orange. Whole.

The incident's of a piece with the rest of Earl's life, because Earl is the middle child of five in his family, and, Keillor tells us, is thus prone to accident and being overlooked.

For instance, Earl's mother has no recollection of his existence.

At dinner one evening, his mother chides him kindly: "It's suppertime, Timmy. Time for you to get home. Your mother is probably worried sick, wondering where you are."

Earl, bemused, replies: "You are my mother, Mom, and you're not worried about me at all. You don't even know I exist."

If there had been any doubt in Earl's mind on the matter, it's later dispelled when the family moves to California, unannounced and without him.

Keillor's whimsy ranges far, wide and long.

Elsewhere, in *Zeus the Lutheran*, we find the master of Olympus diddling Diane, bored wife of the rector

of Zion Lutheran Church in Odense, Pa. The good reverend has been sidelined by Zeus transforming him into a dog and is quite content with the transformation. So should be the reader.

The news isn't all bad, and perhaps the best item out of the 22 stories on offer is, *mirabile dictu*, Buddy the Leper.

Buddy, the son of missionary parents, contracts leprosy in the wilds of Africa. While Buddy adapts to his malady well enough, all things considered, his mother's response places her in the pantheon of Pollyannas: "I think humor is so very important, Buddy," Mom told me. "It's so crucial to be lighthearted. Don't let this get you down. I'd like to hear you laugh more."



Keillor

Words of advice from a schoolmate, Skip, are more to the point:

"Kids treat you like s—, I'll bet," said Skip.

"I said, 'You're not kidding.'

"'You know what might be a good idea for you?' he said. 'Take a shotgun and blow away a couple of them. You're 14. You'd be sent to a reform school for a few years, get a

good vo-tech education, it might be a good experience for you.'"

You get the picture.

In concept, these stories sound better than they actually are. A few actually are entertaining, but as a book the whole is less than the sum of its parts.

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