

# Keillor's tall tales not short on humor

By RON HAYES  
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

**THE BOOK OF GUYS**, by Garrison Keillor; Viking; 340 pages; \$22.

When you're as tall as Garrison Keillor, who's been known to advertise himself as "America's tallest radio humorist," and a writer to boot, I suppose it's practically a job requirement that sooner or later you publish a collection of tall tales.

According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (not a very concise title), a tall tale is "a humorously exaggerated story of impossible feats."

Most science fiction, you might say, is just a tall tale without the laughs; but then I don't suppose intergalactic warfare lends itself to the lighthearted touch.

The other thing about tall tales is that they're just so darned hard to describe. They start out this way, then dart that way, then squiggle way over this way a while; and the truth is, they're never really about much of



anything, except the pure joy of being silly — and silliness is an underrated

virtue these days.

*The Book Of Guys* opens with a make-believe after-dinner speech in which Keillor gets himself all worked up about the current state of guyness, tall tongue in cheek. Everyone of these 19 stories and two poems is about a guy, but that's just Keillor's way of making this bunch of gloriously varied and wildly imaginative yarns look like a cohesive literary endeavor, which it's not, thank God.

Here's an opening line:

*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.*

Being a newspaper man, I don't know much about really good writing, but I do know this: If you read that sentence, you're going to read the one that comes next, just to find out more about "Buddy The Leper." After you stop laughing, I mean.

And then there's "Zeus The Lutheran," in which the Greek God of

Gods takes over the soul of a vacationing Lutheran pastor from Pennsylvania.

In "George Bush," the former president goes fishing on the Potomac with his good buddy, Willie Horton, while Huns and Barbarians invade the U.S.

"Omoo The Wolf Boy" teaches his fellow wolves to howl Broadway show tunes, and *Oh, What A Beautiful Morning* becomes a favorite of the pack.

As I say, tall tales are hard to describe, but the main thing is, they're supposed to be funny.

Is *The Book Of Guys* funny? Yes, it is. There's a real laugh every four pages or so, and on the pages without a real laugh, there's almost always the kind of real smile that makes you shake your head and go, "Boy, he's clever!"

Here in America, Mark Twain — who was not tall, to be nice about it — remains the greatest of our tall-tale tellers.

If Garrison Keillor can't stoop quite low enough to reach that great man's level of genius, *The Book Of Guys* is still a towering feat — tall-talewise.