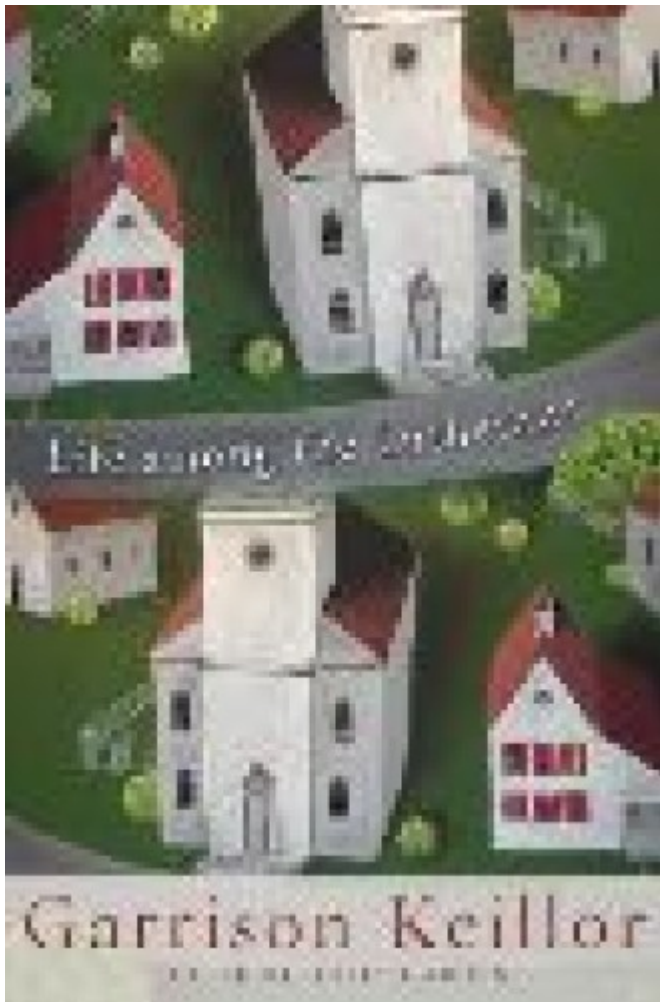


Life Among the Lutherans

reviewed by [Nadia Bolz-Weber](#) in the [December 1, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Life Among the Lutherans

Garrison Keillor
Augsburg Fortress

When I meet strangers and am asked what I do, and I say I'm a Lutheran pastor, there are exactly two possible reactions. Either my new acquaintances look at my

fully tattooed arms and my nose ring and say nothing while their faces ask, “Are you joking? Or lying?” Or they say, “Oh, the only thing I know about Lutherans comes from Garrison Keillor”—and then I groan.

It’s not easy having the entirety of one’s religious tradition known to millions of people only through public-radio monologues about fictitious people in Minnesota. I couldn’t be more Lutheran. And I couldn’t be less Pastor Inqvist.

Inqvist is the fictional pastor of Keillor’s fictional Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church. The pastor and the town share certain traits: they are mild, apologetic and slightly depressive. Inqvist is the perfect character study for what Keillor mistakenly labels Lutheran: “Lutherans are a calm, stoical, modest people, haunted by guilt, fearful of looking ridiculous, so they feel more secure if they are surrounded by people who are dressed like them and who are doing the same thing they are, and this leads many Lutherans to consider a career in the orchestra.” This description begins a chapter titled “The Young Lutheran’s Guide to the Orchestra,” which, if you are a musician of any sort or even a high school marching band alum, may be worth the cover price. Keillor is brilliant with his generalizations: “Cellists are such pleasant people. The way they sit with their arms around their instruments, they look like parents at the day care center zipping up little snowsuits.”

But his generalizations about religion are troubling; the book has absolutely nothing to do with my religious tradition. Lutheran is not an ethnicity. Keillor’s conflation of Scandinavian-American Midwestern small-town ethnicity with Lutheranism makes me want to become a Methodist, and we all know what that means. No beer.

My tradition of Lutheranism includes people like theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, actor William H. Macy and, perhaps most important, Dan Meyer—a sword swallower and former executive director of the Sword Swallowers Association International. The Lutheran tradition is founded on the belief that God’s grace is a gift freely given, that each of us is simultaneously a sinner and a saint, and that we all stand at the foot of the cross. It includes Africans, Native Americans, people from Brooklyn, nice Minnesotans and me, a tattooed former drunk stand-up comic who ministers to artists, academics, punks and urban queers.

Keillor has spent decades telling his *Prairie Home Companion* radio audience the “News from Lake Wobegon”—a weekly update on the characters and happenings in a fictional small Minnesota town. Keillor is a master storyteller, but don’t mistake

him for being simply a humorist. While he's certainly funny (he describes parishioners walking up to church in their enormous down parkas as "a parade of dirigibles"), Keillor's stories are often weighty, even dark. The book ends with a chapter titled "The Ninety-five Theses," a young man's complaint against his Lake Wobegon upbringing, written after he has moved away to Boston and married a city girl. It's angry and sharp and left me a bit embarrassed, as if I'd watched a raw emotional moment not meant to be shared.

But the bulk of these radio-monologues-turned-chapters have to do with the everyday moments of the Lake Wobegonians. The earnestness with which Keillor describes the complex lives of simple people is touching—as though he cares enough about his characters to tell the truth about them. Ultimately these vignettes are about how savoring the quotidian details of daily life draws people into the depths of human joy and pain—so that even so-called Lutherans, a people known for restraint, can't help feeling something.

I felt something. But that's because I'm not what he calls a Lutheran. Even though I am.