

Reading life: Great books

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 4, 2010](#) issue

I ordered Garrison Keillor's *Life among the Lutherans* as soon as I heard about it. Who could resist a title like that? Besides, in a way, it is a description of my life. Lutherans consistently have been important in my life. In my days in Columbus, Ohio, Walter Bouman, professor at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, was a friend and teacher, as was Harvey Stegemoeller and Howard Wilson of Capital University. The divinity school professor who immediately captivated me with his imaginative lectures laced with references to music and literature was the Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler. (He paid me the supreme compliment of preaching when I was installed at my church in Chicago.) The list of important Lutherans in my life includes Martin Marty, whose books and understanding of church and culture have nurtured me; Peter Marty, chair of the Christian Century's board of trustees; and Richard Lischer, who teaches and writes so compellingly about ministry.

At the top of the list of important Lutherans for me, however, is the one I am married to.

At first I was disappointed to find that *Life among the Lutherans* contains so much material familiar to those who listen to Keillor's monologues on *Prairie Home Companion*. But I appreciate having all this whimsical material—about “gospel birds,” the Lutheran Summer Vacation and the Young Lutheran's Guide to the Orchestra—in print.

In the introduction, Keillor explains that he didn't know much about Lutherans while growing up. They appeared to be “a jovial band of large people who made too much of Christmas and took too much pride in their damn choirs, more a social club like the Elks than a gathering of the devout.” Lutherans keep inviting Keillor to speak to them and giving him honorary degrees. “A man read a citation that made me weep for shame, it was such a bundle of lies.” Keillor clearly loves the Lutherans of Lake Wobegon: “They gather together to give alms to the poor; they sing ‘Lift every voice and sing till earth and heaven ring’ so that tears come to your eyes; and they pray to God: ‘create in me a clean heart’ . . . And they go home and put on their work

clothes and tend their flower beds.”

Reading Keillor’s book I found myself slowing down, rationing it out day by day, so as to prolong the pleasure. That is also what I did with Hilary Mantel’s novel *Wolf Hall*, which won the 2009 Man Booker Prize for Fiction, and for which she has done exquisite research about Henry VIII and his wives, Thomas More and the remarkable Thomas Cromwell.

Wolf Hall is set at the time when King Henry was increasingly desperate for a male heir and exercising his famously robust appetites. He and Anne Boleyn fall passionately in love while he is still married to Katherine, whom he divorces in defiance of the Roman Church, making the break with Rome. Students of church history know that story, but Mantel’s characters are so richly human and her research so detailed that I found myself gaining a whole new sense of the Reformation era.

I confess that my knowledge of Thomas More was heretofore confined to what I learned from Robert Bolt’s play *A Man for All Seasons* and the motion picture based on the play, which portrays More as a person of integrity and unbending conviction. Mantel presents him as fanatical, snobbish, cruel toward heretics and unfeeling toward his wife and children.

The book is so good and so full of complex plots and fascinating characters that I am already planning to read it again.