

Bad Keys

J. B. Curry

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Sometimes profane and often delightful, this caper finds absurdity even in moments of danger.

In *Bad Keys*, a piano tuner finds romance with a zoo intern who moonlights as a swimsuit model. J. B. Curry's energetic novel is a mash-up—part screwball comedy, part amateur gumshoeing, and part fish-out-of-water mayhem. It reveals an unexpected path toward awakening.

Luke is a straitlaced, divorced midwesterner who doesn't realize his worth. Esmeralda is the bombshell daughter of a wealthy Cuban family in Miami. By all standards, they shouldn't meet, let alone fall in love, but when Luke goes after the treasurer of the Minneapolis Piano Tuners Guild—who's threatened to buy Chinese pianos with real ivory keys—a case of mistaken identity lands him inside the Castillo home. Luke discovers that there's more to the piano sale than he thought, and more to Esmeralda than racy fashion.

The disparity between who the main characters appear to be and who they are provides opportunities for misunderstanding, as well as new discoveries. On occasion, as Luke and Esmeralda work to find the truth behind the piano scheme, they play to type: Luke is the defender of his damsel, Esmeralda is a mercurial Latina. There's also a tendency to objectify Esmeralda. This happens partly to show how upstanding Luke is for treating her differently, and partly to highlight her extreme looks, but the leers and physical threats from unsavory men wear thin. When the pair slide into truer versions of themselves, there's joy to be found in their similarities. Both are driven by passion in different fields, and both believe in righting wrongs.

Sometimes profane and often delightful in its ability to find absurdity even in moments of danger, the novel incorporates everything from an alligator catcher to a falling piano. There's seldom doubt that Luke and Esmeralda will prevail, but their journey is packed with enough twists and gunfire to keep the finale satisfying. Timely recurrences dial up the humor, and Florida's many fringe characters add color and atmosphere, including a club bouncer with Edwardian mannerisms.

Because the exaggerated caper is so strong, the novel's later sections seem out of place. When previously thwarted desire returns in the form of graphic chapter-length encounters, it signals a reprieve in the action sequence involving Luke, Esmeralda, and the culprits, but the writing style is more hard-boiled.

Luke's shift from a man who claims to admire calm to a man who willingly embroils himself in other people's trouble paves over any uneven patches. He's such a well-drawn, unlikely strongman and music lover that it's rewarding to see him warm to adventure.

Bad Keys is an unusual mystery and romance. Beneath its wild chase lies optimistic belief in what people can do when they act with conviction.

KAREN RIGBY (January 8, 2019)

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