



History Through Fiction

Editorial Review

Title: *The Luckiest Fool on Earth: The Twisted Yarn of America's Greatest Flagpole Sitter*, Alvin "Shipwreck" Kelly

Author: Phillip S. Roberts

Release Date: October 1, 2025

Publisher: Zazel Publishing

Rating: 4.5 Stars ★★★★★

Review by Peggy Kurkowski

The life and times of America's greatest flagpole sitter comes to vivid and loquacious life in *The Luckiest Fool on Earth* by Phillip S. Roberts.

In this effervescent and endearing novel, the endurance adventures of a sailor named Alvin "Shipwreck" Kelly throughout the first half of the twentieth century shed light on a peculiar period in American history—the age of "unrestrained diversion" that catapulted fame-seekers to new heights, quite literally. It is the story of Alvin, but also co-equally about his promotional manager, Joseph Emmerling, a journalist and wire service proprietor always on the make for the next big byline. Creating the third hypotenuse of this unusual triangle is Vivian, Alvin's wife, a con woman with her own motives for tying her star to a man named "Shipwreck."

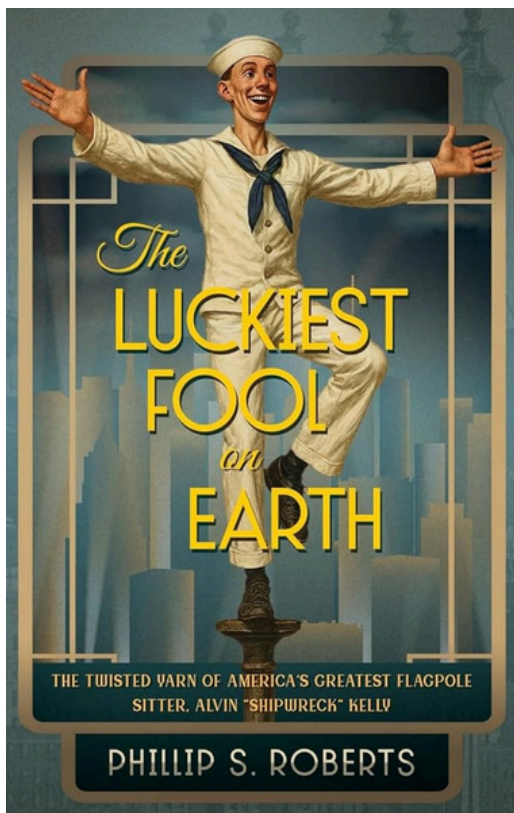
When Emmerling sets his gaze on Alvin, a sailor who pulled Titanic survivors aboard the *RMS Carpathia*, he sees the perfect man to create the sensational headlines he plans to write (and profit from). Thus begins the long and eventful partnership between promoter and endurance competitor, and Roberts's tale takes readers on a whirligig tour of America's "barnstorming" days of daredevils, stunt men and women, aviation firsts, and yes, flagpole sitting competitions. Of which, of course, Alvin becomes the best, eventually setting a world record of 49 days atop his perch, where "peace and quiet is his hermitage—alone in the hinterlands, dueling the savage, untamed universe." [125]

Written in a present tense style that evokes an urgent, ticker-tape news report, the story is a delightful and lighthearted gambol across the nation, following the ups and downs (pun intended)

of Alvin, his fiery spouse, Vivian, and the grandiloquent promoter who may or may not be taking advantage of his liege man for financial gain. Along the way, Roberts seasons the story with a veritable who's who of the era, which ranges from the pre-World War I, the Jazz Age, the Depression Era, World War II, and beyond.

Roberts's prose is magnetic, humorous, and skillfully attuned to the huckster-ish lexicon of the times. Indeed, readers would be well-served to keep a dictionary handy as they reference the countless arcane five-dollar words that Joseph employs at every turn. Roberts moves through the decades of Alvin's chaotic life at an energetic trot, but Alvin himself remains a cipher of sorts. Internal thoughts are rendered in italic and do not delve far below the surface of Alvin's immediate reactions to money problems, Vivian's antics, or the quest to be the best. It makes for a jolly fast read, but not a two-dimensional one if readers want to understand who Alvin really is (or, for that matter, Vivian).

The Luckiest Fool on Earth is an amusing, clever, and well-researched novel about the quest for fame and money in the heyday of American diversionary competitions.



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