

# The news from Lake Wobegon



Garrison Keillor is shown during his radio show "A Prairie Home Companion" in the Wuehlmaeuse Theatre in Berlin. While not a raunchy teen sex comedy, Keillor's new book, "Lake Wobegon Summer 1956" could cause the more genteel fans of his radio show to blush. - Associated Press

## Garrison Keillor's new novel may make 'hometown' blush

By Jeff Baenen  
Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Garrison Keillor has more news from Lake Wobegon, and some of it is pretty titillating.

While not a raunchy teen sex comedy, Keillor's new book, *Lake Wobegon Summer 1956* (Viking), could cause the more genteel fans of his radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion," to blush.

Like many of his other works, Keillor's coming-of-age novel is set in his fictional hometown of Lake Wobegon, The Gateway to Central Minnesota. It tells the story of 14-year-old Gary

— Keillor's real name and his age in 1956 — a gawky kid who resembles "a tree toad who has changed into a boy but not completely."

Gary is obsessed with sex, racy magazines like *High School Orgies*, his sophisticated cousin Kate and writing stories about talking dogs and bodily functions. Much of the novel's humor comes from the conflict between Gary's strict religious upbringing and his pent-up desires. Like Keillor, who grew up in the conservative Plymouth Brethren sect, Gary's family belongs to the Sanctified Brethren, a small evangelical group that frowns on drinking, television, movies and other worldly things.

But Keillor, who lives in St. Paul with his wife and 3-year-old daughter, says no similar struggle shapes his writing.

"My writing is a struggle with the English language itself, not with my religious upbringing, and it is shaped by the 8 1/2-by-11 page and the interior cadence of the para-



Garrison Keillor takes the stage to do his warm-up, before the start of his "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show at Wolf Trap's Filene Center in Vienna, Va. While not a raunchy teen sex comedy, Keillor's new book, "Lake Wobegon Summer 1956" could cause the more genteel fans of his radio show to blush. Like many of his other works, Keillor's coming-of-age novel is set in his fictional hometown of Lake Wobegon, The Gateway to Central Minnesota. - Associated Press

graph." Although he underwent open-heart surgery in July, Keillor still plans to start a new season of "A Prairie Home Companion" on Oct. 6. "I do expect more sketches about surgery this fall, and insomnia, and weird dreams, and hospital life," he says.

Keillor, an admitted shy person, agreed to an interview by e-mail.

**Question:** Were you really geeky as a teenager?

**Keillor:** The novel is fiction, not autobiography, but the geekiness of Gary is based on my own. There are pictures of me from the fifties that make you wonder what sort of weirdo this kid is going to become: high-water pants, downcast eyes, half-rim glasses, soup-bowl hair, skin-

ny wrists and all. I was a freakish kid. Very quiet and polite in a spooky way and obsessed with books and living in my own imagination. Painful to contemplate now. Thus, this book.

**Question:** Gary has an obsession with sex. Was that you growing up? Are you still like that?

**Keillor:** When I was 16, I thought about sex

eight hours a day or more, either wanting to know or see or experience more or feeling I was a monster for being interested. Lust and shame had a good vise-like grip on me. Now that I'm 59, it's lightened up a good deal, thank goodness, and that leaves a man room to have a career and follow the Twins and so forth.

**Question:** Why are

you so protective of your privacy?

**Keillor:** I'm a radio guy because I enjoy invisibility and like to talk without people looking at my mouth to see if there might be shreds of spinach between my teeth. All writers are shy, in the sense that we'd rather observe than be observed. I get to walk around St. Paul and look at things without anybody saying 'boo' and that's a privilege a person doesn't care to lose.

**Question:** How has becoming a father again in midlife changed you?

**Keillor:** It has interrupted my sleep and made me edgy and jittery and paranoid again and saved me from geezerish complacency. And brought nonstop entertainment to my life. My kid is a hoot, she has a big personality, she isn't like me at all.

**Question:** You seem to especially enjoy needing Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura, who was the inspiration for *Me: The Jimmy (Big Boy) Valenz Story*, about a former pro wrestler who becomes governor. Why not cut him some slack?

**Keillor:** I've barely mentioned the governor in the past year or so, but whenever I do, people chortle and guffaw at the thought of him. Everybody does, especially outside Minnesota. The man is a 300-pound joke with big legs. Why would any comedian give up such a laugh? It would be like not milking a cow. You lose the milk and it irritates the cow.

On the Net:  
<http://www.phc.mpr.org>  
or  
<http://www.prairiehome.org>