

# Feeling Minnesota

It's been a quiet summer here in 'Lake Wobegon.' And that's kind of a problem.

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Garrison Keillor writes the fictional equivalent of your mom's meatloaf — comforting, familiar and dependable, and also indefensible from a culinary and dietary perspective. It's definitely not something you'd want every day for lunch, but, somewhat shamefully, you like it.

Keillor's great gift — whether writing for his long-running and rigidly formatted public radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion," or in book form — is allowing himself and his audience to sentimentalize characters while simultaneously feeling superior to them. Under the guise of romanticizing bucolic, bygone life in rural Minnesota, Keillor commits cold satire. There's a palpable, metallic anger that sometimes emerges from Keillor's writing when it's presented on the page rather than read in his mellifluous tones, especially when the author's fictional stand-in is a 14-year-old boy named Gary, who narrates "Lake Wobegon Summer 1956."

The son of Sanctified Brethren parents (an evangelical sect that believes anything vaguely pleasurable must be a sin), Gary is sure of two things: He is going to hell on an express train for thinking impure thoughts about girls, specifically his wild, worldly older cousin, Kate; and before that he is going to be a Writer. He's going to escape the small minds around him. He's going to write for *The New Yorker*. He's going to grow out of his crippling adolescent geekiness and become an assured man whose charms are apparent to everyone, especially hot babes, who meets him. Until then he's going to hang out, mow the lawn and furtively read a borrowed copy of "High School Orgies" tucked inside "Foxxy's Book of Martyrs" for cover.

The voice suits Keillor's purposes perfectly, because what 14-year-old doesn't feel bottomless contempt for the entirety of humanity? Gary is surrounded by a pious, sanctimonious older sister and a father who lives to brood — the old man won't attend Fourth of July fireworks for fear that an errant rocket will land on the roof of the house and burn the place down. Mom is a conciliator. There's an aunt out on the farm who charmed him as a boy, but as the boy grows into a man he realizes the woman is simply off her nut. Teachers at school wear unpuckerable faces. "You could snap someone with a towel — for fun — and injure him so that he will never be able to have children," the principal, Mr. Halvorson, tells students.

The only one who gets him, not to mention stokes his adolescent passions and breaks his heart, is kissing cousin Kate, who spends the summer steaming up the windows of a Pontiac with a ne'er-do-well local baseball pitcher until she is knocked up and hastily married, her doom to a life without escape from behind the provincial curtain assured.

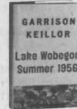
In fact, Gary has a dual motivation for keeping Kate away from the pitcher: His uncle, Kate's father, bribes him with the gift of an Underwood typewriter as payment for keeping an eye on her. Gary puts it to use writing pornographic stories featuring him and Kate, as well as lots of tales involving talking dogs. "I wish you people could know how you smell to me," one says.

The comic touch is assured and the details evocative as the smell of cut grass, but from a plotting perspective there's a problem: Nothing ever happens in Lake Wobegon, especially in the summer. This is fine if you're visiting for a few minutes to one of Keillor's radio monologues, or in the episodic and endearingly discursive "Lake Wobegon Days," but a reader needs to be rewarded for parting the pages of a novel. So Gary gets a typewriter. Gets a job covering ball games for the local paper. Listens to rock 'n' roll on the radio. Rebels mildly against teachers. Fails to prevent tarty cousin from getting pregnant. The end. This is not enough plot to craft a lasting work of literary humor, which is Keillor's plain aim every time he steps into the box.

Because there's a 14-year-old boy with a chip on his shoulder rattling around Keillor still. He's going to grow up and show up the yokels — maybe even star in his own novel.

You'll wish you'd skipped the comfort food and had a salad.

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Lake Wobegon Summer 1956  
By Garrison Keillor  
Viking, \$24.95