

GARRISON KEILLOR

Teen misery, 'Prairie Home'-style

There's worse than woe in Lake Wobegon

BY DAVID HINCKLEY


Many of us remember that it was awful to be 14 years old. Garrison Keillor remembers why. Mercilessly exhuming terrible details that the rest of us prefer to leave in the lime pit, Keillor calmly mixes them together into "Summer 1956," his latest snapshot of the Lake Wobegon you don't hear about on his "Prairie Home Companion" radio show. Thoughts that are charmingly self-effacing, amusingly suggestive or mildly quirky on the radio become more lethal in print, where our 14-year-old protagonist, Gary, commutes between miserable self-doubt and unpleasant arrogance while dabbling in obscenity, pornography and fantasies of incest. Nor can he keep this all a secret, which ensures ongoing conflict with the Sanctified Brethren of the Lutheran Church, who include his annoying father, frustratingly introverted mother and insufferable older sister. In the book as on the radio, humorless

Lutherans form an accommodating backdrop for Keillor's dry satire. But what Keillor finds liberating about print — the ability to use a four-letter word or accurately report the 14-year-old perspective on bodily functions — also darkens the sky over Lake Wobegon. What comes across on the radio as affectionate bemusement hovers here between irritation and repulsion. The narrator doesn't like these people much, so we don't either, even when we know 14-year-olds generally just don't like the world. That said, "Summer 1956" gives Keillor fans full value in laughs and knowing nods. His prose can hum along on the page like a '56 Chevy or be savored at the deliberate pace of words read aloud. The detail is superb, whether it's an at-bat for the Minneapolis Millers' Wayne Terwilliger or the mock-grownup remarks of Gary's adored cousin Kate, the one who ends up creating an unholy mess. Kate's dilemma is in fact handy, because

little else happens in Lake Wobegon. For all the weighty matters with which Gary flirts, his real-life action is tending the lawn and getting his first break as a writer, covering the Wobegon Whippets with grievously overwritten prose. He also must deal with all the other Lake Wobegon people, who seem a few degrees off-center until we realize, hey, we all are. The world is a behavioral experiment with no control group. Keillor has said that for years. The difference here is more frost on the looking glass, because 14-year-olds who don't like themselves — "I am a toad," says Gary — tend to take it out on the world, both those who deserve it and those who don't. "Summer 1956" doesn't really have a beginning or end, but it does suggest a question: How much did Keillor excavate for this book and how much has he dragged around for 45 years? ♦
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