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GARRISON
KEILLOR

Lake Wobegon
Summer 1956



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Keillor's easygoing new novel shows how he wishes how his summer as a 14-year-old ... *might have been*

"Lake Wobegon Summer 1956" by Garrison Keillor (Viking, \$24.95)

BY ELIZABETH MAUPH
Orlando Sentinel

The world is full of people with a secret past they wish they had had. That's the appeal of Lake Wobegon, the little town that time forgot, the town of Norwegian bachelor farmers and Lutheran potlucks and homespun Minnesota-bred tales that always sound a little too good to be true.

And that's the appeal of Garrison Keillor's new novel, "Lake Wobegon Summer 1956," in which a 14-year-old boy named Gary lives the kind of summer every former 14-year-old would love to have lived.

If you know that in 1956 Keillor himself was a 14-year-old Minnesotan named Gary — just before he decided that high-toned magazines like *The New Yorker* would prefer a writer named Garrison — you may choose to believe that "Lake Wobegon Summer 1956" is a stand-in for the kind of boyhood Keillor wishes he had.

In this tale by the puckish host of radio's *A Prairie Home Companion*, Gary is a small-town boy torn between a borrowed copy of a magazine called *High School Orgies* and the prospect of his grandfather up in heaven with Jesus, frowning down at just about everything he does.

A true misfit in small-town Minnesota, Gary likens himself to a tree toad, and he imagines himself the son of a couple of glamorous New York actors, carried as a baby to Lake Wobegon on the crest of a freak tornado but awaiting the day his true parents come to Minnesota and claim him as their own.

In reality, Gary is the youngest in a mostly disapproving family of Sanctified Brethren, a religious sect far more conservative than the town's conservative Lutherans and Catholics. He's a boy like most boys, obsessed with breasts and bodily functions, and chafing against a home life where he's subject to the put-downs

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of a goody-goody older sister to whom he imperiously refuses to give a name.

The summer of 1956 is about as eventful as most adolescent summers: Gary contributes flacid baseball coverage to the *Lake Wobegon Herald Star*; he writes short stories peopled by talking dogs; and he follows the continuing adventures of Ricky and Dede, teenage outlaws who have fled Lake Wobegon for a world that doesn't enfold them in its arms.

Keillor's recent novels (1994's *The Books of Guys*, 1997's *Wobegon Boy*) have sounded more and more disgruntled, as if their celebrated author had grown way too irritated with the facts of daily life. But he has abandoned all of that in "Lake Wobegon Summer 1956": His tone is easygoing, peaceful, the tone of a man who has decided to live and let live.

Politics and gender play no role in this newest book, unless you consider the gender of Gary's cousin Kate, for whom he lusts unrequitedly. But Kate is too caught up with bad-boy Roger Guppy, whose father, Alvin, hit 400 one summer for the *Lake Wobegon Whipnets* after being hit in the back of the head with a gin bottle.

"There is such a thing as a good concussion," Gary maintains.

Before the summer is out, Gary has watched Kate confront the realities of adulthood, and he has confronted a few realities himself. And, in fact, maybe it's the last summer of that particular kind for a 14-year-old who is growing past booger jokes and cousin lust and will never be 14 again.

The world is about to intrude on Gary's Lake Wobegon — to change him and maybe even to whisk him away. For one last summer, though, Gary listens to Grandpa talking to Jesus, and he monitors the comings and goings of the untamed Guppy family, and he picks tomatoes with his Aunt Eva, wipes off the dirt and eats them right there in the field.

And for one last summer, "Lake Wobegon Summer 1956" helps you remember the way it might have been.