



A road leading into the village of St. Anthony, one of many Minnesota communities featured in "In Search of Lake Wobegon."

Photos by Richard Olmsted

FICTION AND NONFICTION

Lake Wobegon again

2 new books expand our knowledge and understanding of Garrison Keillor's fictional Midwestern town and its inhabitants

By Keith Taylor

Lake Wobegon is real. Well, it's at least as real as Paul Bunyan's Yolkopitahaska County, Twain's Hannibal (not the tourist town that occupies the same space now) and some of the Chicago neighborhoods in Dreiser, Wright or Bellows that have changed so completely we can say that they exist only in books and in the imaginations of their readers.

Garrison Keillor has been creating his comically isolated Midwestern town building by building, street by street and character by character for more than 25 years. He has a working grasp of its history, geography, climate, economy and collective psychology. Keillor can usually make most of us laugh, and that is a large gift. But it doesn't seem quite right that his novels and stories are often found in the humor sections of the larger bookstores. Keillor's Lake Wobegon is not just funny. It can be sad, too, and poignant, and very real. His understanding of the place gets deeper and more detailed as he gives another episode every week on NPR's "Prairie Home Companion" or writes another book about another character or another of Lake Wobegon's streets.

In Search of Lake Wobegon
by Garrison Keillor
photos by Richard Olmsted
Many Worlds, 128 pages, \$23.95

Lake Wobegon Summer 1956
by Garrison Keillor
Many Worlds, 111 pages, \$20.95

These two books together do history, who shape their worlds—if not their entire weeks—around Keillor's monologues, know that his town is real. They are not fooled by the little note on the jacket of his new book, "Lake Wobegon Summer 1956," that calls it "a novel." They aren't faced at all by the beginning of the essay in "In Search of Lake Wobegon," the new "nonfiction" book with the exquisite black and white photographs by Richard Olmsted—in which Keillor writes:

"People have asked me if it's a real town, and if it is, then where is it?"

"I used to tell them that it's fiction. 'Oh,' they said. 'Sure. But they were disappointed. So I started telling people that the town is in central Minnesota, near Stevens County, up around Holdrege."

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infused. But for these times that's just their friend Garrison trying to blow a little smoke to hide the source of his inspiration. His best and best-loved over morning coffee voice is perhaps one of the most trusted voices in their lives. It is certainly one of the most recognizable. They don't need to be convinced that he walks that delicate line between genuine sentiment and the merely sentimental more adroitly than any contemporary writer or popular entertainer. These are the people who still, after 25 years, smile warmly when they hear "Lake Wobegon, where the women are strong, the men are good looking, and all the children are above average." Sometimes they still laugh out loud when, but in passing, Keillor mentions "the statue of the Unknown Norwegian."

They recognize that there are people out there who don't believe in Lake Wobegon, who have never laughed at Keillor's tales, and who find him maudlin and cheaply sentimental. Those people, his fans think, are to be pitied. "But we don't know them personally." They might say. Besides, they all live far away, not by some corner or the other but most of Keillor's readers are probably between those two extremes. We listen to his monologues when we're coming home from a few days up north or while napping on an evening train. He makes us laugh even if he doesn't compel us to tune in next week. We read his stories in The New Yorker when we're flying on business or vacation. When we read one of his books, we must be convinced by that book alone, even if like "Lake Wobegon Summer 1956," it adds significantly to the map of its imagined town.

In this new book, Keillor has written a quiet, greatly praised novel about a teenager who comes to a larger understanding of his place in his family and in his town. Gary is 14 and probably not much more troubled than most kids his age, although his anguish assumes its own form. He and his family are members of the Sacred-Fid Believers, a fundamentalist Christian sect with a severe theology. They consider themselves "the Chosen Remnant of Saints Gathered to the Lord's Supper and Pledging to the Lord's Supper." He and his family are members of the Sacred-Fid Believers, a fundamentalist Christian sect with a severe theology. They consider themselves "the Chosen Remnant of Saints Gathered to the Lord's Supper and Pledging to the Lord's Supper." He and his family are members of the Sacred-Fid Believers, a fundamentalist Christian sect with a severe theology. They consider themselves "the Chosen Remnant of Saints Gathered to the Lord's Supper and Pledging to the Lord's Supper."

At this point the novel sounds as if it might be Keillor's monologues, but then that has always been the strength of his monologues and his stories. His audiences always feel they are getting something close to the home, even though they know they are being artfully entertained. If this new novel doesn't have the feel of Keillor's stories making a new world out of what's out there, the tone that made his earlier "Lake Wobegon Days" such a remarkable book—does have the precise and passionate feel of one of his more elaborate and detailed monologues or short stories. That is not a small achievement.



Fishing on a creek north of the town of Aum.

In the lunchroom. Knowing that he risks eternal damnation, or—at least it seems—the pious wrath of his family, Gary is almost fearless in his teenage obsession.

He is physically awkward and describes himself as "the Great Tree Trunk," a name his exacting older sister finds entirely appropriate. Nonetheless, and as we would expect, Gary is in love. His rebellious older cousin Kate fills his erotic imagination and offers a way to reject the constraints of their shared religious upbringing. Despite her sophistication and her longing for a new life—or perhaps because of them—she ends up pregnant, married and ready to be a part of Lake Wobegon's future.

By the end of this coming-of-age novel, Gary is getting paid to write overly alliterative newspaper articles about the local football team. And he realizes he has a bigger mission as a writer: "I will sit at the table with my family and write down their sighs, their little pleasures, their kind hearts, their foolishness." He recognizes their virtues even while he learns to make fun of them without belittling them.

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"In Search of Lake Wobegon," Keillor's second new book of the season, gets rid of the veneer of fiction entirely and gives his devoted readers the clues they have always wanted. Even if "Lake Wobegon" isn't exactly real, it is certainly somewhere close to Gary Keillor, Norway, Aum, Preppert, St. Rosa, Pilsen Lake or one of the other Minnesota towns Richard Olmsted has photographed. This is an expanded version of an essay on the small towns and farms of Stevens County that Keillor wrote for National Geographic a few years ago. The essay is a bit longer here, and quite a few more of Olmsted's distinctive photographs have been added. The book ends with a new Keillor short story, "October." Keillor has always been most moved by autumn, by "the delicious sadness of a fall day." This story's mix of humor and sadness, of photo and of character, is as moving as any Keillor has written.

For every a casual reader or radio listener, though, the real pleasure of this book is in the photos. Now we can finally see what Lake Wobegon and its inhabitants look like. In its land, crops, its dirt roads, its farms, at the school prom, in church, or at the local diner, it looks surprisingly like we thought it would. In one of Olmsted's photos, with the caption "Children observing the business end of a cow," a farmer on the left side of the picture seems to be disappearing into the business end of a cow. On the other side stand six children, either fascinated or bored. It seems there's a shot of light streams in through a small window, illuminating the milking shed. It is a photograph much like the best of Garrison Keillor's prose: humorous, nostalgic, real, occasionally heart-breaking and touched with the sublime.