

INTERVIEW

GROWING UP
IN HIS OWN
CREATION

GARRISON KEILLOR'S
WOBEGON YOUTH

By PAUL WILSON

Garrison Keillor — writer, broadcaster, retired advice columnist — emerges from an elevator in the Park Hyatt hotel, ducking his head slightly the way very tall people do when negotiating doorways. He's in Toronto to promote his new book, a memoir-cum-novel called *Lake Wobegon Summer 1956*. He's wearing a dark, rumpled suit and bright red socks, and wields a handkerchief. He is witty, despite a nasty cough.

As we walk toward the express elevator that will take us to the Rooftop Lounge, he comments on the name of the bar. "Sounds like the right kind of place for Guy Noir to hang out in," he says. *Guy Noir, Private Eye*, is one of the characters Keillor has created for his immensely popular, long-running radio variety show, *The Prairie Home Companion*. Each week, in addition to improvising a tale from Lake Wobegon, Keillor presents a new *Guy Noir* episode, a nostalgic parody of 1950s radio detective serials, complete with cheesy sound effects and breezy dialogue. Each episode begins: "A dark night in a city that keeps its secrets, but high above the empty streets ... one man is still trying to find the answers to life's persistent questions."

Garrison Keillor is one of the few writers I know who can make people laugh out loud in spite of themselves, and he can do it in just about every known literary and sub-literary genre. His hu-

mour manages to stay light while running deep and, like life itself, there is mystery at the heart of it.

One of his most recent forays into a popular genre was as an advice columnist for *Salon*, the online magazine. I expected "Dear Mr. Blue" to be another Keillor parody, a kind of Ann Landers for guys, but no, his answers to questions such as "How can I get the exciting man I married to stop talking about multi-protocol networking?" and "If love's not there to begin with, is it ever gonna be?" were sensitive, compassionate, practical and often very funny. I wondered which brilliant editor had offered him that gig.

"It was my idea," he said. "I hired myself. I was a self-motivated giver of advice."

The motivation? "Curiosity, I guess. I was interested in writing a column and the thought of making it all up from scratch

WHY DID HE
QUIT HIS
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every week seemed to me to be a terrible. I've read columns by people of my age, and they really get a little thin. You know, you're not bumping around as much as you used to, and you wind up exploiting your wife and your children a great deal more than you want to. So here was a brilliant idea for getting readers to write at least half of my column, and to inspire the other half. I mean, a writer just can't do any better than that."

So why did he quit, as he did a few months ago? "I ran out of answers," he replies.

Keillor started out as a writer in the late Sixties, composing occasional pieces for *The New Yorker*. In 1975, he began to fashion the Lake Wobegon tales that would establish his reputation. In the early Seventies, he moved home



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS BULIN / NATIONAL POST

to rural Minnesota with his young family, longing to reconnect with the people of the region. But they didn't respond to his attempts at friendliness. So he started writing stories about an imaginary town where, as he says, the women were strong, the men good-looking and the

children all above average.

"I took the landscape and the furnishings, the buildings and the physical reality of these towns," he says, "and I populated them with people I had grown up with, relatives of mine, and people I had met, and I worked them up into characters. But the

thing that stimulated the creation of this literary landscape was loneliness and the feeling of being disconnected from the surroundings.

"I would think that that's maybe the inspiration for a great deal of writing, the writer having to make up friends for himself — perfectly reasonable, it seems to me."

Keillor's new novel is a testament to how real Lake Wobegon has become, even to its creator: He's chosen it as the fictional

GARY'S ON THE CUSP
OF ADOLESCENCE,
STILL FASCINATED BY
BOOGER JOKES AND
PULP PORNOGRAPHY

setting for a vivid memoir of his own youth. Young Gary, the 14-year-old narrator, sees himself as a tree toad who was changed into a boy — "but not completely."

He's on the cusp of adolescence, still fascinated by booger jokes and pulp pornography, yet reaching out for more adult pleasures and responsibilities. He's drawn to his cousin Kate, who reads *The New Yorker*, smokes, and is dating the pitcher on the local ball team.

Most of all, though, Gary is discovering the power of the written and spoken word to annoy his sister, placate bullies, impress

teachers, create local heroes and, above all, make people laugh.

The narrator feels out of place in his fundamentalist family until, one day, he has an epiphany not unlike that of Stephen Daedalus in Joyce's classic fictional memoir — except Gary's insight isn't about forging a new national consciousness in the smyth of his soul, but about understanding his family.

"Right there," the narrator says in the middle of a family crisis, "Daddy opens to me like a book. All his grumbling and grouching, his crotchets and glooms and snits and stews, are mere camouflage for a sensitive heart, and I, a writer, am afforded this slight insight, and it is my sacred duty to look upon the heart, as God does, and reveal it."

"It's not a serious book about somebody wanting to become a serious writer," Keillor says now. "It's a lighthearted book about my quest for my life back when I was 14. And that's how I view it, at least from this perspective: as a piece of comedy. I think that comedy is the basic truth of life."

Keillor glances at the wall of the Rooftop Lounge, where there is a gallery of caricatures of famous writers who, presumably, once drank here. One of them is Margaret Atwood.

"It was Margaret Atwood," he continues, "who said that, in this century, people expect — people suspect — that all memoirs are fiction and all fiction is autobiographical. I think this is a pretty truthful memoir."

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