

Keillor returns to Lake Wobegon

By Bob Hoover

Garrison Keillor had heart surgery last summer, and even before the anesthesia wore off, he had written an essay about it.

Thousands have heart surgery every year, but when Keillor has it, the nation must be alerted to his own vital thoughts on what it meant to him in **"Lake Wobegon Summer 1956,"** by Garrison Keillor (Viking, \$24.95)

We can only be grateful he didn't have hemorrhoids.

Twenty-five years of starring in a popular radio show can do that to a person's ego, of course.

"A Prairie Home Companion" is Keillor's personal creation; he writes it, performs in it and conducts its live broadcasts with the control of a Lorin Maazel.

There's no doubt that he's the head "Prairie" dog.

Public radio is in his debt. Although it's one of the most expensive programs to air, "Prairie" makes stations a bundle at fundraising time.

When Keillor rhapsodizes about the universal truths of everyday life in his fictional Lake Wobegon ("The little town that time forgot"), he can hold his listeners with an almost hypnotic power.

Occasionally, these monologues spill over into Keillor's novels — "Wobegon Boy" and "Lake Wobegon Days" — and now this one, a summer in the

life of Gary, a Lake Wobegon teen with a strong resemblance to the author.

This central Minnesota village, with its cast of quirky characters, has more in common with Disneyland than, say, Sinclair Lewis' Sauk Centre. It's constructed mostly from nostalgia, with a little sour milk thrown in for bite.

Wobegon life is gentle, safe, full of only white people, and centered on the home, church and tavern.

Keillor's fictional Gary is a bright and horny 14-year-old struggling with the constraints of a Christian fundamentalist family in a conservative town in the conservative decade of the 1950s.

Inspired by a cheap sex magazine, "High School Orgies," Gary works at being a writer, using his family for his primary material. In true coming-of-age tradition, he succeeds.

This simple little tale is embroidered with the Keillor touch — naive raunchiness, hayseed antics and plenty of well-worn Lake Wobegon references, including someone who can rattle off all 87 counties of Minnesota.

He does come up with a new list — 10 kinds of flatulence, which Keillor's biggest fans will probably commit to memory. The rest of us will skip that assignment.

— Scripps Howard News Service