

Tell me the truth about middle-aged love

Whoa back there, Mr Keillor. Easy on the heartstrings. He dedicates the book to his dead first wife, "a friend to the helpless", bit of a tearjerker that, even if there have been two subsequent Mrs Keillors. Then he bungs on an epilogue that has the narrator, in this heavily autobiographical novel, get some god-awful disease that's the equivalent of having Dr Alzheimer and his team move in and shred all found documents. Are we to gather that Mr Keillor is having his marbles taken from him?

You know what a reader wants from a book? Reading. Not a wet shoulder. Just reading. This picket fence of woe at the back and the front of the book puts me in mind of that bit of Lifemanship advice from the father of sports psychology, Stephen Potter: dedicate your book "To Phyllis, in the hope

SUSAN JEFFREYS

Love Me

By Garrison Keillor

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that God's glorious gift of sight may be restored to her" and you'll not get one bad review.

Not that I would want to give this latest from Mr Keillor a bad review. There are precious few good funny writers out there these days, and Garrison is still on form, spinning fancy from truth, shifting everything slightly left of normal and writing stuff that is both funny and beautiful.

Larry Wyler is a Minnesota writer who hits the big time. He goes on a whirlwind tour of book



Garrison Keillor: funny, but too familiar Geraint Lewis

signings, readings and lunches, but when he gets back to his humble Minnesota home it all looks very small and drab. Wyler heads off to Manhattan,

rents a fancy apartment and takes the subway to his new office at the *New Yorker* magazine. He's hit the big time, except that the *New Yorker*

proves to be a sleepy hollow, where writers could let decades go past without producing one printable piece.

This *New Yorker* isn't quite the real one: this one is in the hands of the Mafia. One of the Crossandotti family won it in a poker game back in the days when Harold Ross was Harold Rossi. On his first day at the office, Wyler is shown his desk. It has a gun in the drawer. One day Wyler will be called upon to empty its magazine to save the magazine. There's great stuff here, as Keillor fuses the world of gangsters and literati. It seems it's good to get the boy out of Minnesota.

Like Keillor, Wyler gets a job as an agony uncle and, like Keillor, writes under the name of Mr Blue. Chunks of the novel are letters from the broken-hearted who spill their hearts out to Mr Blue, and Mr Blue's

replies: "Dear Suspicious, Who cares about your stupid cat? Not me. I've got real problems. Go soak your head."

Having left his wife back in Minnesota, Wyler plays the field, but finds he misses the homely charms, not to mention the gangster-free environment, of the Midwest. He longs for choral evenings, the slow-talking men, the wholesome women, so he returns and woos his wife back with some middle-aged romancing. All this allows Keillor to go back to the security blanket of the places and people that inspired the *Lake Wobegon* series.

I've been as happy as anyone to tramp around in the snow following Keillor's large footprints as he ambles through his home state, but I have to say, plucked heart strings or not, the view is getting pretty familiar by now.