

# Keillor pens tribute to Midwest liberalism

By MARY ANN GROSSMANN  
Knight Ridder Newspapers  
"Homegrown Democrat" by Garrison Keillor; Viking (\$19.95)

**G**arrison Keillor doesn't beat about the Bush when he explains why he wrote "Homegrown Democrat."

"I want to strengthen and encourage my fellow Democrats because I think they have been so extensively beaten up on, especially on radio, with Rush Limbaugh and 10,000 imitators," Keillor said in an interview before he left town for season-ending performances of his "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show.

"There are people in this country who cannot comprehend why anyone would vote for a candidate other than George W. Bush. My book is addressed to that. This is an intuitive book, not a closely reasoned book. It's a sort of stream-of-consciousness political autobiography."

Keillor, who has written 10 novels as well as opinion pieces for newspapers and magazines, has never hidden his liberal political beliefs.

He hit a firestorm when he wrote two denunciations of Norm Coleman for Salon.com after Coleman won the late Sen. Paul Wellstone's seat in the U.S. Senate. The Guardian, a liberal British publication widely read in Europe, calls Keillor, Garry Trudeau, Al Franken and Michael Moore "the high command of the American satiric opposition" to the Bush administration.

With publication this week of "Homegrown Democrat," Keillor puts in book form his thoughts on why Democrats are the party of compassion and what scares him about "Pithecanthropus Republicanii."

He says he wrote the book "in a big hurry" when he had some free time this spring.

"I did it because I wanted to put my oar in the water. I had been expressing myself in the most elliptical way on the radio show, which drew volleys — that's a word I learned in my newspaper days — volleys of angry letters from Republicans."

"So, I thought that rather than snipe by way of fictional characters in the show... I would simply write a book. I mentioned this to my publisher, and their first reaction was 'Please don't.' I was so emboldened by that I put down 25,000 words and sent them in."

"Homegrown Democrat" is part political commentary, part tribute to liberal Midwestern values that Keillor says come from our "German and Scandinavian forebears, people of the bund, people



KRT FILE ILLUSTRATION

"There are people in this country who cannot comprehend why anyone would vote for a candidate other than George W. Bush. My book is addressed to that."

who looked out for each other."  
"The logical extension of this spirit," he writes, "is social welfare and the myriad government programs with long dry names all very uninteresting to you until you suddenly need one and then you turn into a Democrat."

Part of Keillor's book is a hymn to the University of Minnesota, where he took his first shaky steps into radio. He says he became a Democrat as he worked in a parking lot shack, earning \$1.48 an hour. He had no money and no bright prospects, but he did have teachers who engaged him with "gravity and fervor."

"I stumbled into the university, a kid from Anoka who didn't have a lot of choices, in the fall of 1960," he recalls. "I paid \$71 plus a few

bucks for books, and I believe that I got an education that was comparable to anything I could have gotten at any college or university. This was all provided by the taxpayers of Minnesota as an article of faith. They really did want to make it possible for any of their children to become writers or plant agronomists or teachers or physicians by getting the best education."

That's not true anymore, Keillor says, because the university has been starved by the legislature.

"The wave of anti-government rhetoric has taken its toll," he says. "People accept the idea of shrinking public services, even though it goes against their own interest, because they have been harangued about public employees and about for-profit institutions being superi-

or in all respects."

Keillor is passionate about liberals' obligation to conserve the middle class, which he sees as being increasingly squeezed by unfair Republican economic policies that promote "the upward migration" of wealth for a few people.

"One of the definitions of 'middle class,' to me, is that people have property and enough resources so that they dare to say what they think. The middle class is the backbone of a democracy, and when that class gets so squeezed, I really think we are in danger of losing our way."

"The top tax rate now is around 35 percent, and the percentage of corporations and individuals who find a way to pay no tax is astonishing. But the middle class's payroll taxes have been jacked up, under the guise of paying for Social Security, whereas the money is simply going into the treasury to cushion the deficits."