


THE INDIANAPOLIS STAR - WWW.INDYSTAR.COM Indiana Living MONDAY, APRIL 18, 2005 E5

Keillor still believes in the power of the printed word



By Steve Courtney
The Hartford Courant

Garrison Keillor has won fame in an electronic medium, but he uses it to snare people into reading. He does it pretty blatantly with literary factoids and poetry in his short public radio station featurettes, "The Writer's Almanac," and more subtly in his 26-year-old radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion."

Electronic media are supposed to be the death of reading, but "A Prairie Home Companion" evokes the impossibly ancient days of radio, when families sat in the living room, letting the sound, story and song flow in. His shows are meant to be listened to with focused attention,

not the way radio, TV and computers are usually listened to, watched or surfed. "A Prairie Home Companion" is meant to absorb you as a book does.

A longtime writer

In fact, Keillor wrote (for *The New Yorker*) for years before the radio show was dreamt of, and continues to turn out books — novels, collections of Lake Wobegon sketches and recently an anthology of poetry ("Good Poems," Viking, \$25.95) and a political book ("Home-grown Democrat," Viking, \$9.95). Asked about a 2004 National Endowment for the Arts survey that says "literary reading" — novels,

short stories, plays and poetry — as a leisure activity is in decline, he says he hasn't noticed it.

"But I travel in a cocoon populated by readers," says Keillor.

"My wife reads, and my 7-year-old girl is an avid reader," he says, "and when I get out and travel around and get to see people, I'm usually going to a coffeehouse that I like in my neighborhood, and it is full of readers — but most of them are students, so I suppose they're reading things that they've been told to read."

On airplanes, he says, "there are still people who console themselves in the face of death by opening a book — usually a book in which

death features prominently, a murder mystery or thriller."

Whatever the NEA report says — "Maybe cell phones are taking the place of the portable book," he suggests — Keillor has what some might consider a dumbly optimistic view of the future of the classics vs. the future of, say, David Letterman. But it's a firmly held view.

No "Idol" chatter

"In the course of doing 'A Prairie Home Companion,' we try to avoid pop-culture references," he says. "We don't refer to things like 'American Idol' — we wouldn't do jokes about it because you can no longer assume that the majority of

people have seen this or know what you're talking about. The entire world of popular entertainment has become so fragmented that there are no longer unifying figures."

"But we've always made reference to books, especially to the classics, as a kind of normal part of life, and nothing hoity-toity about it — we would think nothing of referring to Shakespeare or doing a parody of Shakespeare and other well-known authors who are in the canon..."

Keillor enjoys discovering new works in his neighborhood bookstore. "... I walk around and look at the new things, and I find three or four and I pick them up and I start in on them."

Garrison Keillor's "Rhubarb Tour" plays the Indiana State Fair Aug. 17. Tickets are \$25 and \$30.