

Life, death lessons from Lake Wobegon

A few surprises add to appeal of Keillor's gentle humour, spirited storytelling

Pontoon:
A Novel of Lake Wobegon

Garrison Keillor
Faber and Faber
248 pp., \$26

REVIEW BY BILL SASS

Evelyn Peterson was dead, to begin with.

And like Jacob Marley, who was also dead to begin with, her spirit sticks around a while to change the lives of those left behind. The central character in Garrison Keillor's latest visit to his idyllic Minnesota lakeside town of Wobegon may be gone, but that doesn't mean she's forgotten.

And while dead people tell no tales, they can still have a few surprises up their sleeve, even at age 82.

For instance, Evelyn, 19 years a widow, pillar of the Lutheran church, poet and walker, had a secret life for 12 years. That life involved romantic trips, dancing, a bit of tipping and a lover named Raoul Olson, a faded television personality.

Raoul and Evelyn were smitten back in 1941 but the necessities of war and a

near-death illness conspired to separate the pair. Both spent too many years of their lives with the wrong people, until the stars aligned once again and they found each other.

The burden of putting Evelyn's affairs in order and organizing the disposal of her remains falls to Evelyn's 57-year-old daughter Barbara, who is in no shape to deal with the stress. As it turns out, the mother's death puts the daughter on a journey of self-discovery about Evelyn, her family and herself.

All the weirdness makes perfect sense in the context of Keillor's fictitious town of 900 rock-ribbed Lutherans who frequent Whip-pet baseball games, shop at Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery and gossip at the aptly named Chatterbox Cafe.

The people of Lake Wobegon live in a world of simple humanism woven

by Keillor's gentle, ironic humour of what life might be like in a Norman Rockwell painting — if Rockwell had fallen under the influence of Salvador Dali.

Frailey, courage, naive, family prob-



Humourist Garrison Keillor with a statue of F. Scott Fitzgerald in St. Paul, Minn.

WASHINGTON POST

lems and a smidgen of self-righteous meanness abound in the town where personal secrets pass from ear to ear with the velocity of high-speed Internet.

On a dramatic collision course with Evelyn's funeral (which involves a parasail and a bowling ball) is one Debbie Detmer's "commitment ceremony."

Rebellious Debbie fled Lake Wobegon for Los Angeles years before and eventually made her fortune selling aromatherapy treatments to dogs.

Her yuppie boyfriend is marriage shy and only reluctantly shows up in Wobegon for the ill-fated ceremony. The funeral and the quasi-wedding are set for the same day.

Keillor's perfect storm is only achieved with the arrival of 24 hard-partying, snobbish Danish Lutheran ministers who have lost God and are trying to find Him again

in a tour of U.S. watering holes.

Pastor Ingqvist, the spiritual shepherd of Lake Wobegon, is trying mightily to cope with modern concepts and ideas and slightly balmy people, and wants nothing to do with the fallen flock. He leaves them to their own devices as he goes to attend Evelyn's funeral.

Enter the smelliest dog on the planet, dragging a dead fish. Chaos ensues as funeral meets pontoon boat, hot-air balloon, parasail, giant duck decoys and bowling ball.

Keillor also skilfully weaves catharsis out of chaos, and while the characters don't exactly live happily ever after, they do find new ways of thinking about living.

Jacob Marley and Evelyn Peterson would have been proud.

Bill Sass is The Journal's assistant business editor

