

Garrison Keillor brings readers back to Lake Wobegon in "Liberty."

By Joseph B. Frazier
The Associated Press

Garrison Keillor's newest look at Lake Wobegon is a bit racier than usual, or perhaps necessary, and chaotic in a beautiful way.

"Liberty" is "pretty good"—high praise indeed in the little town on the edge of the prairie.

This time the old-shoe comfortable July Fourth celebration that anyone could join has lost its zip and celebration chairman Clint Bunsen tries to revive its flashier past. The bickering town committee is on him like piranhas.

Why two drum-and-bugle corps? Why \$1,200 for the Leaping Lutherans Parachute Team? Did we need the Grand Forks Pitchfork Drill Team? The Sons of Knute were banned from marching — too pokey. Old Mr. Detmer, who had read the Declaration of Independence each year for 30-odd years got the boot last year for refusing to delete the complaints against King George, to shorten it, to move things along.

Miffed old Mrs. Detmer drew up her own list and slipped it under windshield wipers.

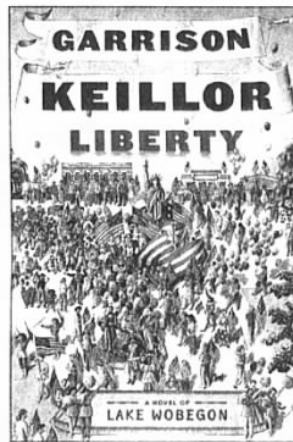
One read, "He (Clint) has endeavored to introduce Outsiders to our Lake Wobegon Independence Day Observance so that it scarcely represents us anymore."

Here, perhaps, is the key to "Liberty." As ever, Lake Wobegon has no public desire to be something it isn't and tends to look askance at those who do. But the ousted Bunsen is in charge of one more celebration, to wrench the town, he hopes, from its hick ways and hearing the same dreary expressions over and over again:

"Looks like rain."

"Yep."

Book Review



Liberty

By Garrison Keillor; Viking (257 pages, \$25.95)

This year, he gets rid of the big Norwegian flag. The Ladies' Sextet (founded 1924) can no longer shriek "It's a Grand Old Flag" from a parade fire engine. Cowpie Bingo is out. Too hick.

Even a CNN crew

He persuaded CNN to send a crew last year. It aired 45 seconds for 57 million viewers without identifying the town. He got them to come again this year.

After last year he was invited to give his speech, "Dare to Make a Difference," far and wide. Well, not too far.

He was very impressive but impolitic in Lake Wobegon, and he might run for Congress to replace an incumbent whose political liabilities call to mind those of an Idaho senator.

Meanwhile, a quack genealogist has convinced Bunsen he is at least half Spanish, which, he assumes, means that in his 60s, he's a snorting, hot-blooded Lothario who now can lose the lutefisk — a traditional Scandinavian fish dish.

Enter Angela Phlame, a steamy little bombshell and psychic who somehow filled in for Miss Liberty in last year's parade and is back for the job usually held by "a stern, top-heavy matron who marched down the street, torch in hand, as if she were on her way to burn down the homes of non-believers."

It is whispered quite loudly that Angela is a stripper from one of the rougher sections of St. Cloud. She and Clint had shared a chat room. They share Room 6 of the Gardens of Avon Motel.

Clint, a mechanic in the family's failing auto dealership, is a frustrated artist in a town where you top out at "pretty good" or go elsewhere to talk about it. He had dreams once, and now does again with sweet Angela. His wife, in whose presence clocks may fail to function, shows up with a pistol.

But despite it all, Keillor writes, Lake Wobegon remains a town of "good, loving people who drive each other crazy." There is comfort in that. The regulars remain in the Chatterbox Cafe and the Sidetrack tap where we saw them last and where we'll find them next time.

We somehow are assured that after the CNN crew leaves (it got there late this year, couldn't find the place on the map) and the governor leaves (he was late too, and stepped on Miss Liberty's gown — she didn't have anything on under it), Lake Wobegon will snap back in shape, caught in amber for the ages.