



Above average — and then some

Garrison Keillor, the edge-of-the-prairie prophet, on his new anthology

BY KEVIN HANCOCK ■ PHOTO BY MICHAEL TERCHAK

Given that each broadcast of Garrison Keillor's long-running radio show, "Prairie Home Companion," is itself a kind of anthology — a grab bag of music, comedy skits and a cornucopia of mini-episodes, "The News From Lake Wobegon" — it seems appropriate, if not inevitable, that there would one day be "The Keillor Reader." ■ The book is a compendium of the Minnesota hamlet's Lake Wobegon tales, short stories, essays and excerpts from his novels, most in the wry, wistful, nostalgic voice that Keillor has perfected on the radio and on the page over the past half-century. By turns cheerful and facetious, homages and satiric, "The Keillor Reader" is a survey of the author's past work accompanied by a few new pieces, including a fresh introduction and, closing out the volume, "Cheerfulness" a tribute to his late, beloved mother.

Q: *Pratt & Whitney* caught up with Keillor, 73, for a phone interview from his apartment in New York, where he and his wife live part-time and where he was about to host a new episode of "Prairie Home Companion" celebrating its 40th anniversary this July. (The above interview has been featured in *Highland Park* on June 21.) How's an edited retrospective of your chat.

Q: *Whose idea was it to have a "reader" anthology of your work? I think of that as something that comes out posthumously, or in some cases when a writer's reputation is in decline.*

A: *My mom, Will, it's an old tradition, and I think my publisher, I think did come out the early reader, which I loved when I was in high school. They were called "The Portable Shakespeare," "The Portable Faulkner," "The Portable Hemingway." I particularly loved "The Portable Shakespeare." I think one in the volume, and I hope you look back at all of his stuff — "The Red Pony," "The Grapes of Wrath."*

Q: *So it's an occasion for self-empowerment.*

A: *Yes, it is. A painful occasion, in some ways. But I was able to talk something like "The Reader," which was about "The Reader" and "The Reader" and "The Reader." I've taken it from a novel into a fairly compact novel, which is essentially the form in which it first appeared, as a 90-minute read-up magazine that I did in front of audiences. I have some memories of it, and it's still in my head. I could still do it, if I wanted to. And there's "The Book of Days," which I think I did, but which I only pulled three or four.*

Q: *So it's an occasion for self-empowerment.*

A: *Yes, it is. A painful occasion, in some ways. But I was able to talk something like "The Reader," which was about "The Reader" and "The Reader" and "The Reader." I've taken it from a novel into a fairly compact novel, which is essentially the form in which it first appeared, as a 90-minute read-up magazine that I did in front of audiences. I have some memories of it, and it's still in my head. I could still do it, if I wanted to. And there's "The Book of Days," which I think I did, but which I only pulled three or four.*

**KEILLOR
READER**

The Keillor Reader
By Garrison Keillor, Viking, \$19.95
Stores will appear at 7am, May 6 at
Minn. State
Hill, 7000 Cent
East Campus, 15
Hennepin Ave.
Hennepin Ave. Call
800-555-0665

12 PRATT & WHITNEY | 4.27.14

4.27.14 | prattandwhitney.com 13

Kellor: *Continued from Page 13*

four stories from. And so forth. But doing this book also gave me a chance to write a bunch of new material, most of it memoiristic: the introduction, and the essay written in memory of my mother, called "Cheerfulness." There's also a new piece called "Home," about the geography of St. Paul-Minneapolis.

Q: The idea, presumably, is that someone will pick up "The Kellor Reader," which provides these easy-to-digest, multiple points of entry through which the person will then investigate your full body of work.

A: Well, it depends on their digestive system. I think it's a book you find in a bookstore, and you open it up as you stand there, and browse through. Whether you want to buy it or not is, you know, a very personal decision. I'm not really trying to sell it. But it's a way to take a look at 50 years of a man's work, sitting alone in small dim rooms, and see what you think.

Q: The New Yorker magazine looms large in the book in various connections, including the story of how you were given an assignment to write about the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, which became the seed of "A Prairie Home Companion."

A: That's right. I had written short humorous pieces — "casuals," they called them at The New Yorker — and very much wanted to write a fact piece, to do something different. I had made a couple of trips down to Nashville to see the Opry, which I had heard of and then in Minnesota. In the winter, when it got really cold, you could pick up WSM-650. So the magazine said to go ahead and write the piece, and I was surprised at how open people at the Opry were, how ready they were to talk. I hadn't done much reporting in a while; I had started out writing at a newspaper in St. Paul, but I was so terribly self-conscious and shy. It was so painful for me to interview people, in fact, that I didn't even notice how the subjects felt about it. But I was surprised by how easygoing they were at the Opry and how much fun they were having onstage. I stood off to the side of the stage, an old tabernacle, the Ryman Auditorium.

Q: I've been there many times. Wonderful place.

A: We'll be doing "Prairie Home Companion" there at the Ryman in May. Anyway, they were having a terrific time, not only onstage but also off in the wings, giving each other a hard time; it was like a family reunion. Minnie Pearl was there, and Stonewall Jackson, and Dolly Parton. There were commercials, including one for Beech-Nut chewing tobacco. I was really taken with this whole scene, and thought about starting something like it back in Minnesota. Of course, I had no experience performing, so this was an entirely naive decision. It was a literary creation, created by a man sitting down to write about a show in his imagination. And we weren't smart enough to know, in the beginning, how bad it was at first. So we were unstoppable — beyond discouragement, really. It grew an audience, so we figured we must be doing something right, and by then it was too late to stop.

Q: How did "A Prairie Home Companion" change your writing?

A: I think it was liberating to write for radio. It brought me back to my own speech, and to the speech of people I had grown up with. I think I struggled, trying to write for The New Yorker, because I was so enthralled by the writers I had grown up reading. I started reading the magazine when I was 13, and I loved A.J. Liebling above all other writers. E.B. White to some extent, and James Thurber. But Liebling, I thought, owned the earth and could do anything. I've read everything he's written, twice. But he was a New Yorker, an entirely different race, and to be

working in his shadow — to try and be a writer that he would have liked, if he were still there — was very odd, like dancing in a mirror. So to create the radio show was to create another magnetic pole that in the end pulled me away from the magazine, in a direction that I wanted to go. It also gave me the chance to be my own boss, to put it very simply. At the New Yorker, you know, we were always in the dark about what they wanted, which is not unusual in an employee-boss situation. What does William Shawn want? What would Roger Angell like me to write? And so you pushed yourself into a knot, trying to figure that out. When I started the radio show, I was very relieved to be on my own.

Q: A piece called "Guys I Have Known" is a sort of sensational fantasy about The New Yorker people, including Shawn, John Updike, Pauline Kael and others. Shawn is this macho, back-slapping, profane sort of guy, which is the opposite of how we think of him. Although he does seem to have had a private life that didn't fully conform to the popular idea of him as this very proper, fastidious person — his romantic connection with the magazine's Lillian Ross, for example.

A: I saw Mr. Shawn once on the street with Lillian Ross, who I didn't know. I reached for her hand and said, "Mrs. Shawn, it's a pleasure to meet you." And he corrected me — he was an editor, you know, a fact guy. He said, "No, no, no, no! No, Mr. Kellor! This is Lillian Ross." I don't know anything about his private life, but he was a beautiful editor. Some people became exasperated with him, but I did not. I took him to lunch once, after he'd gotten fired by (the magazine's owner) Si Newhouse. Mr. Shawn was a sweet man, but so sad, so extremely sad. He didn't live a long time after that. And in "Guys I Have Known," I just wanted to have fun with him. I wrote it after he was gone; I never would have written it while he was alive.

Q: You end the book with "Cheerfulness" about your mother. I'm thinking it must have been fun, and maybe not fun, to write this piece.

A: Well, it was a piece of discovery, as an essay should be. I wanted to write about her, as I didn't imagine anybody else would, and I thought she was very much worth writing about. I wasn't able to stand up at her funeral and make a proper eulogy; that would have been completely beyond me. And so I wanted to take this on. I think what I discovered about her in the writing of the essay is that with radio, and particularly with "A Prairie Home Companion," I came around full circle to my parents' view of life, which was based on their experience growing up in the Depression. My father graduated from Anoka High School in 1931, my mother in 1933. So they came out into the world at a time when the people they knew were having a hard time, or fully expected to have a hard time. Life was very precarious. And their reaction to this was similar to other people growing up then, which was to be cheerful. To them, it was in bad taste to complain, knowing that the people around you might very well be going through even harder times than you. How could you complain about being too poor to buy new clothes if you were talking to somebody who was unemployed and having to scratch for food? I just remember them never complaining. I, of course, rebelled against that and intended to be a dark and brilliant writer. I associated brilliance with darkness, perhaps madness, self-destructiveness. But radio turned me around in a different direction and really required me to invent a new self. I'm talking to you now as me, myself, but on the radio I'm a sort of cheerful, avuncular person, because that's what's useful to people. And a writer does want to be useful. I do.

Kevin Nance is a Chicago-based freelance writer and photographer. Twitter: @KevinNance1.

“
On the radio I'm a sort of cheerful, avuncular person, because that's what's useful to people. And a writer does want to be useful. I do.
”