

HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

At Lake Wobegon, life goes on

BY JEFF BAENEN
The Associated Press

ST. PAUL, MINN. — Garrison Keillor has a new book out, a collection spanning his decades as storyteller, novelist and radio show host. This summer he celebrates the 40th anniversary of “A Prairie Home Companion.” But the curmudgeonly creator of Lake Wobegon, the quirky Minnesota town where — well, you know the rest — insists he didn’t want to mark either milestone.

“I’m not done, so why would you put out a ‘Keillor Reader’ if Keillor is not done writing?” he asked during an interview in his book-lined office.

“The Keillor Reader” includes monologues from “A Prairie Home Companion” as well as excerpts from his novels, newspaper columns and previously unpublished essays. Both the book and the show’s planned Fourth of July weekend anniversary celebration were done, Keillor says, against his better judgment.

“Because you don’t want to let people know how long you’ve been around. If you do, they’ll think, ‘Well, that’s long enough. Pull the plug on that guy. He’s had his chance. Let’s have the next person come up,’” Keillor said.

Keillor, who turns 72 in August, hinted a few years ago that he planned to retire in 2013, and the show had its first guest host in 2011. But while he says the show “could definitely go on” without him, Keillor already has planned the next season and has started talks about



ANN HEISENFELT/The Associated Press

Garrison Keillor, who turns 72 in August, discusses his new book and career plans last month in his St. Paul, Minnesota, office.

the season after that.

Despite his success — Keillor’s weekly public radio show draws about 4 million listeners — Keillor remains his harshest critic.

“It was very painful to put this book together because those old shows were really not any good. And I’ve written a lot that I wish I could delete, but it’s not possible,” Keillor said.

The humorist talks during the interview about his fans (“Radio is for lonely people without much money”), performing (“You stand up in front of a crowd and you say things and people laugh and you don’t always understand why”) and fiction (“I’m pretty sure I’m done writing it and I think I’m mostly done reading it”).

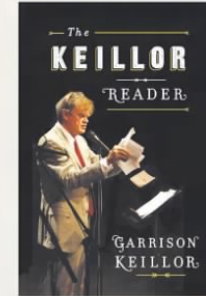
Keillor had a morning show on Minnesota Public Radio when he launched “A Prairie Home

Companion” on July 6, 1974, at Macalester College in St. Paul. About a dozen people paid a dollar each to get in.

Through the years, “A Prairie Home Companion” has stuck to a format of skits, sound effects, fake sponsors such as Powdermilk Biscuits, musical guests and the shows’ centerpiece — Keillor sitting on a stool telling the latest news about Norwegian bachelor farmers and other characters from his imaginary hometown of Lake Wobegon (“where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average.”)

Gloria O’Brien of Minneapolis, now 70, attended that first show.

“I just liked him a lot,” said O’Brien, who remains a regular “Prairie Home” listener. “He’s kind of a promoter of the Midwest,



THE KEILLOR READER

By Garrison Keillor, hardcover, 400 pages, \$27.95, Viking Books.

kind of down-to-earth people and their values and small-town values and that sort of thing, but it’s kind of quirky and funny.”

Thousands of fans are expected when “A Prairie Home Companion” returns to Macalester for the anniversary blowout July 4-6. It will include a concert, an expanded three-hour “Prairie Home” show, and a re-creation of a “Living Flag” from a Keillor monologue.

Keillor said he now has fans who are the children of his original listeners.

“After the show they come up to me and say, ‘My parents forced me to listen to your show and I resented it bitterly. And now, for some reason, I listen to it every week,’” Keillor said. “And I explain to them that this is the Stockholm Syndrome, you know, where the victims, the hostages, come to sympathize with their tormentors.”