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Garrison Keillor

REVIEWED BY  
SAMUEL HUDSON

This book brings between best-selling boards the neatly crafted, print versions of 36 of the weekly, live-on-the-line "News from Lake Wobegon" monologues that Garrison Keillor performed on the American Public Radio network's *A Prairie Home Companion* program.

The ideal reviewer of this collection is a hermit who never heard Keillor's closed-miked, honey-eyed, goofy, grieving, hypnotically slow voice as the world's tallest radio bard sang the original broadcast versions of these stories.

I'm not that hermit. I was addicted to *A Prairie Home Companion* from its third broadcast on KERA-FM in 1980 to its gala farewell on American Public Radio and the Disney channel in June. Week after week, along with countless millions of other Americans, I arranged my Saturday evening schedule so I was always present in front of an FM radio receiver when Keillor's smooth baritone said, "Well, it has been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, my hometown," and the works and days of that mythical town in the middle of Minnesota were again made present.

The stories rendered as print in *Leaving Home* are not the very best of Keillor's monologues. Those resounding aural constructions have been published on audio cassettes by Minnesota Public Radio and the very best of those best monologues cannot be rendered in print without severe losses. Available on audio cassette but not in this book: a monologue in which Keillor's voice becomes a sentimentally demented piano, burbling wordless choruses of sweet old songs.

## Meanwhile, back at Lake Wobegon

### Leaving Home: A Collection of Lake Wobegon Stories

By Garrison Keillor  
Short fiction  
Viking Press, \$18.95

Also not available in this book are versions of those monologues in which the force of Keillor's insight, whimsy and invention failed and his voice fell *splat* from my FM radio receiver into the kitchen sink and flattened my dishwashing suds.

(That's the way it goes with narration done as live-on-the-line *salto mortale*; the bard's big toe catches on the tightrope and into the dishpan he goes. The *splats* grew more frequent as Keillor tired of his weekly grind and the fame it brought him.)

These stories are the middle-of-the-line, pretty-good-to-solidly good yarns that do not needlessly duplicate key sequences in Keillor's 1985 certainly-a-book-and-almost-a-novel *Lake Wobegon Days* and that could be printed without any impossible problems of translation.

There has been a considerable amount of rewriting and emendation. As a writer who has taken radio into print on several occasions, I think I have spotted two cases of superbly done invisible inweaving. Most of these print renderings are exactly appropriate and common-sensical. For instance, in this print collection, each story begins with "It has been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon." Period. Each story closes *without* the liturgical clauses "Well, that's the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, and all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average" — with which Keillor closed each live broadcast. The stories don't need those ritual lines in print. Addicts of the broadcast will play them back in their heads anyway — so why waste good typesetting?

Keillor's introduction to this collection explains why — to the relief of his devoted addicts and 16 months after the quitting whistle began to sound on the horizon — he ended *A Prairie Home Companion* and moved out of the legal hunting range of newspaper reporters. Hint: He is a radically sane man.

Certainly he earned his freedom thrice over. In making his escape, Keillor has proved that one of the truly noble American types — the intelligent and cultivated provincial whose classical education *took* like a saving vaccination while leaving him devoutly local — still appears and may even — *By golly! O gosh and little fishes!* — flourish. Flourish shyly. Flourish quietly. Faithfully. Slowly. Truly. Tritely. Hilariously. Digressively, always digressively.

But flourish — *dagnabit!* — flourish. After all, it was a shared sense of the conjunction of the banal and the mystical, of the downright dumb and the exalted, that was Keillor's meeting point with the invisible audience of listeners and readers whose applause at last set him free.

Grateful digression: If it weren't for Keillor, I would have died without ever seeing Dr. Ruth Westheimer on a color television set in the privacy of my own home. In Fort Worth, if you subscribe to the Disney Channel on the Sammons Cable system — which I did to see as well as hear Keillor's last shows — you get Dr. Ruth, free for nothing extra and whether you want her or not. I take this as proof that we're living in an outpost of an advanced civilization. Samuel Hudson is a *Star-Telegram* writer.