

# KEILLOR

## AT THE

# CROSSROADS

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**L**ike everyone else, I was disappointed last year when Garrison Keillor announced that he was leaving, after 13 years, the popular National Public Radio program, *A Prairie Home Companion*. He was abandoning Minnesota and radio for Denmark and writing.

Now, having seen Keillor speak in person, and having read his new book, *Leaving Home* (Viking, \$18.95), I realize that stepping away from the limelight is the best thing he could have done, for himself and for his audience.

Keillor acknowledged part of this — the lesser part — when he appeared at the Miami Book Fair two weeks ago, and said he had wanted to leave before other people thought he should. "It's not good for a person to outlast his audience," Keillor said. The fact is, judging from the crowd on hand that night, Garrison Keillor the oral storyteller is decades from wearing out his welcome.

People came that evening prepared to have a good time. Those that didn't arrive early found the auditorium full and had to watch the performance on closed-circuit television in the lobby. A pack of young, professional-looking people stormed the door, as if they were at a rock concert. The audience laughed even at Keillor's troubles with an unruly microphone stand and applauded at the first mention of the name *A Prairie*

**Garrison Keillor of *Prairie Home Companion* fame has the talent to be one of the giants of literature — if he has the guts to let himself be unpopular.**

*Home Companion*. They were pushovers for his jokes and stories, which were good just the same.

No, the problem isn't that people will tire of hearing about Lake Wobegon ("The little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve . . . where all the women are strong, the men good-looking and the children above average"). The problem is that Garrison Keillor, since childhood, has wanted to be a writer, and the show, for all of its success in attracting listeners to NPR, in reviving the glorious possibilities of live radio, and making him personally rich and famous, finally proved too much a drain on his time and energy.

Not that Keillor hasn't been writing all along. The weekly monologue for *A Prairie Home Companion*, though delivered without notes or memorization, was always written out beforehand. In later years, he spent three days a week writing short stories and articles for high-powered literary magazines such as *The*

*Atlantic* and *The New Yorker*. And of course, the books derived from the monologues — *Leaving Home* and its predecessor, *Lake Wobegon Days* — are best sellers.

In fact, Keillor's output has been just sufficient to reveal his potential to become one of the great writers of American literature. But potential it remains, for that type of achievement requires total effort, concentration and tough-mindedness. So, at present, Keillor occupies the same place in literature that Norman Rockwell does in painting. Lest anyone misunderstand, I do not mean that as a compliment.

Like Rockwell, Keillor has an eye for detail and the good sense not to eschew (as so many contemporary fiction writers do) local color. Like Rockwell, he has a profound understanding of the soul of America to be uncovered in small towns. Like Rockwell, he knows that the good in people is as real as the evil. And like Rockwell, his gentle, bucolic portraits of good, ordinary, small-town Americans all too often veer into sentimentality.

A compilation of monologues from the past couple of years, carefully edited and polished, *Leaving Home* is a wonderful book. Keillor, who has described himself as "a champion of small pleasures," continues to chronicle the smallest of details with warmth and wit, but also with clear-sightedness. Always these stories contain some measure of unforced wisdom, like the

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KEILLOR

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### Author's writing is sensitive, but very sentimental

aroma of sweet corn so coveted by Lake Wobegonians. And they are always, without fail, hilarious.

All of the characters and most of the stories will be familiar to anyone who has been even a semiregular listener of *A Prairie Home Companion*. There is, for instance, Carl Krebsbach, helping his dad replace his septic tank: "People often call Carl in this sort of situation. It's what comes from being handy. Sometimes he envies the incompetent."

Or Aunt Flo, who insists on slaughtering chickens in her back yard: "The chickens in the store were pumped full of feed and kept drugged and in the dark and you could taste the misery of the bird in its meat. Aunt Flo's philosophy is to let them run free, to feed them table scraps and delicacies and talk to them while you feed them, to keep them in chicken bliss right up to the moment their heads hit the block."

Keillor's skill is such that even the most sentimental of passages sometimes contain an aching beauty, such as when he contemplates the eternal joy of riding a Ferris wheel: "The wheel carries us up high, high, high, and stops, and we sit swaying, creaking in the dark, on the verge of death. You can see death from here. The wind blows from the northwest, from the farm school in St. Anthony Park, a chilly wind with traces of pigs and sheep in it. This is my vision: little kids holding on to their daddy's hand, and he is me. He looks down on them with love and buys them another corn dog. They are worried they will lose him, they hang on to his leg with one hand, eat with the other. This vision is unbearably wonderful. Then the wheel brings me down to the ground. We get off and other people get on. Thank you, dear God, for this good life and forgive us if we do not love it enough."

This passage reveals both what is best — a sensitivity to small truths — and worst — superfluous, sentimental commentary — about Keillor's writing. Much of the sentimentality on the written page is a carry-over from the origin of these pieces as oral stories. Keillor's warm, flat, beguiling Minnesota voice imbues these words with a personal liveliness that smooths the lumps and makes the sentiment go down easy.

On the page, the naked sentiment sometimes turns the words, game though they are, awkward. Indeed, the memory of this voice works against both reader and writer. It was only when I found myself silencing Keillor's spoken voice and reading in my normal mental reading voice, that I was able to divine his skill and promise as an author.

Also because of the oral origin of these pieces, few of them are really stories at all. They are sketches, meditations, nostalgic

essays. What is really exciting about this book is those few that really do work as stories, for it is in these that Keillor stops wading in the friendly shallows of Lake Wobegon and dives into its icy depths — where he gives at least a passing nod to Sinclair Lewis, another Minnesotan who covered similar territory but with considerably less warmth.

"The Dollar Bill" is about a teen-ager whose father is a miser. "Life Is Good" is also about a father's unthinking cruelty to a loving son. Adultery and abandonment are explored in "David and Agnes, A Romance." "The Royal Family" tells of the hard life of a woman and her children after they are discarded by her husband. "Darlene Makes a Move" is about an aging waitress who finally decides to leave in search of a better life.

In fact, all of these stories touch on leave-taking in one form or another, and they add up to a memorable sum.

And, of course, overshadowing it all is the knowledge that Keillor himself has left home. At first he moved to Denmark, home of his new wife, but he spent only a summer there. As he said in Miami, people there didn't get his jokes and he didn't get theirs.

So now he has settled in New York — of all places. At the book fair he read two new stories set in New York, where he has no nostalgic history to extol, where the hurly-burly of urban life frightens him a little, I think. And I am happy to report that these stories, while as funny and observant as ever, contained at least a small measure of darkness all too often absent from Lake Wobegon.

Let us hope, therefore, that Keillor has left Minnesota not only to find a more congenial place to live, as he says in the foreword to *Leaving Home*, but also in search of new characters, new themes, new subjects. Let us hope sentimentality is edged out of his work by the discombobulation of living in places where not all the women are strong, not all the men good-looking and not all the children above average.

And let us hope, perhaps, that his next effort will be less widely popular. It is hard not to suspect that someone so beloved isn't holding out on us in some way — otherwise, how could he appeal to so many? Which reminds me of Gore Vidal's comment, spoken through a fictional character in his novel *1876*, on Mark Twain: "Had he the character to be unpopular, he might have been greater than Swift, another Voltaire, a new Rabelais. . . ."

This comment is made when Twain is 39; still ahead was the composition of *Huckleberry Finn*, the book with which he did dare to be unpopular, and which today is head and shoulders above anything else he — or most any American author — has written.

Keillor has shown his mettle by walking away at the top of his radio career. Let us hope this is an indication that he also has the character to be unpopular.

If so, I have no doubt there is a *Huckleberry Finn* in his future. And ours.