

THE WRITER'S ART

Garrison Keillor: Plain masterful

By JAMES J. KILPATRICK

A FINE new textbook in the writing art has just come to hand. It is called *Leaving Home*, a collection of Lake Wobegon stories by Garrison Keillor. Every writer who wants to master the gift of narrative can learn something from it.

Keillor's stories are taken directly from his memorable series of radio broadcasts, a series he abruptly suspended earlier this year. He felt his vein of rustic ore was running thin, and he wanted to try something new. He's in New York now, after living briefly in Copenhagen, but he has left his admirers a book to cherish.

Lesson One may be drawn from the circumstances in which the stories were created: They were not made to be read. They were made to be heard, to be listened to, and they thus take us back to the bards of a thousand years ago. One of the tests of effective writing, as I have suggested many times before, is

Use senses intently

Lesson Two will teach us an essential technique. Keillor has learned the art of using his senses not just casually, but intently. In his introduction, he speaks of the sense of smell that returned dramatically when he gave up smoking: "I smelled creamed peas and onions, wood smells, dirt smells. Walked into an old garage, and a hundred smells jumped out, the spirits of a hundred old men in undershirts mixing shellac and sanding a screen door and oiling a rifle and patching an inner tube."

Keillor looked at his Minnesota milieu, and listened to its sounds, with total absorption. I emphasize that word "total." He was like the little girl in a Lee Smith novel who concentrated on her world so intently that things "would stay in her mind forever." Keillor's dialogue thus rings with authenticity. His husbands and wives quarrel in fiction exactly as couples quarrel in life.

One story has to do with Roger and Betty Hediund. They are lying in bed on a rainy night when a large chunk of plaster falls from the ceiling immediately overhead. The spot on the ceiling had been growing for two years. "She said, 'If you'da just done it when you said you were going to.' He knew better than to reply. She said, 'I kept telling you.' She said, 'Well, maybe you'll listen to me the next time. I'm not wrong about everything, you know.'" Perfect.

Lesson Three is yet another old lesson. By concentrating our senses and storing useful images, we build an inventory of simile and metaphor. In church on Sunday mornings, Keillor recalls, "Fidgety kids were put between two grown-ups, usually your parents or sometimes a large aunt. Like tying a boat to a dock." On a Monday in spring, a flowering crab bursts into blossom: "Suddenly, in the morning, when everyone turned their backs for a minute, the tree threw off its bathrobe and stood trembling, purple, naked, revealing all its innermost flowers." Keillor had looked at children, at boats and docks and large aunts; he had seen a woman throw off her bathrobe on a chilly morning, and he had put the images tidily in his barn. When he needed them, they were there.

The fourth lesson is like unto the third. Keillor's camera eye is always set on stop 64. He writes as Andrew Wyeth paints, so you can see every hair on Helga's head. One story turns in part on a broken vase, but this is not just a vase or even a crystal vase. It is a "blue Bavarian crystal vase," and many readers may suddenly be overwhelmed by remembrance. Keillor's characters don't get in cars or automobiles; we see them in a blue Pontiac, a '78 Rambler wagon, a brand-new red Ford Bronco II. Thus we see things exactly.

Down at the Feed 'N Seed

"Down the block, at the Feed 'N Seed, Harold has set up the old wooden bins to put seed packets in that have arrived from the Milton Seed Co. in Northrop, South Dakota. Big corn and bean packets, plain yellow envelopes."

Keillor writes about the things he knows best. He writes about truck stops, bicycles, floor wax, mincemeat pies, and smoking chimneys. He writes about frozen pipes, wood stoves, aluminum siding, a parlor with an upright piano, and a set of encyclopedias. He goes to the Minnesota State Fair and smells cotton candy, corn dogs, diesel smoke, and sawdust. At the fair "we won a roll of linoleum by guessing the number of agates in a toilet bowl." He writes about fishing, about getting carsick, about the decisions that matter: Is it time to take the snowplow off the pickup truck?

This is not highfalutin prose. Keillor does not deal in metaphysics, but he writes with a gifted pen. Read the Lake Wobegon stories, and watch how a writer performs the tricks of his trade.

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