

Wobegon is he

Keillor finds it tough to cope with new life in Copenhagen

'We Are Still Married' shows a great humorist at his best

By CHARLES FERRO
Associated Press

COPENHAGEN — It has been two years since Garrison Keillor came to Denmark to lead the life of a "tall, silent person," leaving behind Buster the Showdog, Sheila the Christian Jungle Girl and other inhabitants of Lake Wobegon.

During that time, he returned to the United States and managed to put another book on the market. Now he's looking ahead to fresh ventures, while trying to find a new spot on which to hang his hat.

Keillor still calls Minnesota home, even though he has a place in Manhattan, and makes frequent trips to his wife Ulla Skaerred's native Denmark where they also have an apartment.

His new book, "We Are Still Married," is a potpourri of letters, poems and stories written during the Reagan years. His first book was about his fictional hometown, "Lake Wobegon Days." His next was "Leaving Home."

More than 4 million people tuned into American Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion," Keillor's hit radio show that celebrated the Norwegian bachelor farmers and others of the quiet, imaginary little town of Lake Wobegon — the town that time forgot. The show started in 1974 and Keillor gave the last broadcast in June 1987.

To the end, "A Prairie Home Companion" was Keillor's show, reflecting his diverse and sometimes cornball musical tastes and his affection for small-town life. But since leaving the show, Keillor has been unsettled and at loose ends.

"The worst possible thing is when all your dreams come true. And mine did, including some I didn't realize I had. But I felt better about facing up to those things in Minnesota," he said in an interview.

The show was broadcast from St. Paul, but the 46-year-old Keillor staged it in Lake Wobegon, Minn., which became so familiar that some listeners thought it was a real town.

The monologues grew from a regional hit show into a national phenomenon running more than a decade. Keillor's best-selling "Lake Wobegon Days" was the book version of his radio humor.

The radio show made Keillor a nationally known figure. Wider recognition came after the success of the book, and it generated a resentment that he said took him by surprise.

"If somebody I'd gone to school with, whom I didn't think was that smart to begin with, had written a book that sold a whole lot of copies... I would envy him. I know that I would," he said.

Keillor said he felt forced to give up his home when the local press took too much interest in his private life. "It bewildered me. I had no idea

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— Garrison Keillor



File photo
Life after "A Prairie Home Companion" hasn't been all that Garrison Keillor expected.

what they were aiming at," said Keillor. He felt hatred directed against him, which was entirely strange to him.

What bothered him most was that he couldn't see anything funny about it: "Usually I can think of something humorous about something, but I've never been able to write about that. It just seems so utterly grim."

Today, Keillor thinks less about that time, which he calls awkward, confusing and embarrassing.

He confessed to escaping the Midwest, first to Europe, then to New York. "I fled first to Copenhagen, sort of under the illusion that I could live over here," he said.

Keillor's move to Denmark was accompanied by much fanfare, particularly since his humor played on themes of small-town America and

We Are Still Married
By Garrison Keillor
Viking; \$18.95, 330 pp.

By CHRISTOPHER CORBETT
Los Angeles Times-Washington Post

Back on Valentine's Day, in a roundabout piece on love in the New York Times, Garrison Keillor offered this antidote for the Reagan years: "All we need is a little religion and some satire, and passion of course."

Readers will find those ingredients splendidly displayed in Keillor's new collection of pieces, "We Are Still Married." For those who have concluded that we will not soon be seeing a kinder, gentler nation, this is your book.

In his introduction, he writes: "My cash crop is humor, a bastard genre of literature that includes Mark Twain and the gentlemen of the old firm of Benchley, Thurber, Pereiman & White and also includes

REVIEW

'How to Talk Suth'n,' 'Buddy's Big Book of Booger Jokes' and 'Funny Fotos of Cats in Hats,' a mixed field."

Keillor finishes in the first order, for he is the finest humorist writing in the United States. "We Are Still Married" is wonderfully funny.

There is some satire:

"End of the Trail," a piece about the last two smokers in the country hiding out in the High Sierra, and "Hollywood in the '50s," with the poet William Carlos Williams, baseball great Ted Williams and swimmer Esther Williams members of the same odd family (Ted and Esther are the parents of Vanessa Williams).

"Letters From Jack" is anti-fan mail aimed at his successful radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion," from its disgruntled first sponsor.

And there are several nice pieces from Lake Wobegon, along with Keillor's retrospect on what the little town that time forgot has done to him. In "My Life in Prison," he hilariously looks at sudden fame in a brilliant parody (I hope it's a parody) of a feature story about his failure to send an autographed photo to a bed-ridden child:

"Every day Timmy whispers Garrison Keillor's name and looks for an envelope containing the autographed photo he requested from the former 'Prairie Home Companion' host way back in March 1987. Doctors say that such a signed photo could give Timmy the spark of hope he needs in order to live. His Aunt Brenda, Timmy's custodian since his parents and sister died at the hands of a furloughed maniac on Christmas Eve, says, 'If only Garrison knew how much it means to us, surely as a Christian he would spare 30 seconds to autograph a picture.'"

The story ends with Timmy hallucinating with a 110-degree fever while Keillor swills Pouilly-Fuisse at the Stork Club. Just wonderful.

values inherited from the Scandinavian immigrants who settled in his Lake Wobegon. But he had problems working here, and found he could write more easily in the United States.

"I was embarrassed and had to go back to America. I suppose that was kind of embarrassing, too, to have failed so publicly, to have planted your flag so publicly and having to pull it out," he said.

Denmark provided some anonymity, but the humorist feels like a tourist here, and he cannot foresee adjusting to the Danish scene. While in Copenhagen, he mixes socially with Danes and with other Americans, shoots baskets near his home and does occasional speaking engagements.

After only a short spell on his first

visit to the country, he was so taken with Denmark that he thought it could be material for a book. But that feeling of newness has worn off, and he now feels he'd have trouble writing a few good paragraphs.

Nonetheless, he has spent a good deal of time over the past three years in Denmark and plans to continue doing so.

"I think it is such an amazing thing to come to another country and marry someone from another country. It's miraculous," he said. "And then to do it in middle age, to have a passionate romance when you're 43. I can't wish things were different."

Keillor is concentrating on his writing, but announced last Thursday he's also returning to the airwaves. "I want to start up another radio show and make something of the second half of my life."