

Midwest in Manhattan

By Tom Jacobs
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There isn't a touch of New York in Garrison Keillor. Not a smidge. Yet the best-selling author, popular radio host and creator of the Lake Wobegon stories has left Minnesota for Manhattan.

His wife feels comfortable in the metropolis, and since she left her native Denmark to join him, he figures the specific city they reside in is her choice.

But leaving the streets of the Lower West Side and taking the elevator up to his small suite of offices is like walking into the Midwest. The atmosphere is comfortable. His assistant chats amiably while getting a visitor a cup of coffee.

And when Keillor talks, he does so in the slow cadence so familiar to fans of *A Prairie Home Companion*, his longtime public-radio variety show.

Pauses come frequently — between sentences, sometimes between words. The city is rushing by outside, but he will not be hurried.

"I've never looked forward to performing as much as I have now," he said quietly. "I need to get out of New York. I need to get out and see some streets with houses on them."

His *Prairie Home Companion* Third Anniversary Tour would take him across America.

Keillor returns to public radio in September with a new program, tentatively titled *American Radio Company of the Air*, with a format similar to *Prairie Home*.

"I think that the stories, including any stories I might tell about Lake Wobegon, would be a little bit wiser at this point."

Because he's grown? "I sure hope so. There ought to be some benefits that come to a person from all this flopping around, all these false starts."

The most publicized of those was undoubtedly Keillor's brief experience as an American in Denmark.

He moved there with his wife two years ago, believing he could live comfortably in a foreign land. He was wrong, but the experience had benefits.

"I think that moving away from the Midwest maybe bleeds off a little bit of the smugness that one

AUTHOR, AUTHOR



Garrison Keillor
We Are Still Married

felt all those years," he said. "I lived in Minnesota all of my life until I was almost 45."

Another of the "false starts" Keillor mentioned is a screenplay based on his Lake Wobegon stories (the monologues he spun each week on his radio program, in which he chronicled the life of a small Minnesota town not unlike the one where he grew up).

He compared the unfinished script to "a cabin that you don't take care of. I go back to it once in a while and I find the earth has eroded out from under it and it's infested with animals."

"I have an awfully pastoral imagination," he explained. "I'm not sure (a movie I'd write) would be anything you'd want to invest your own money in."

"It's the conflict of a writer. On the one hand, you think: 'I'd like to write this beautiful, small film, an homage to the Midwest, small towns and their streets with frame houses and overarching elm trees and kids' trucks in the front yard and the cat on the front porch. I want to write a poem to that for the screen.'

"On the other hand, if you think of investing \$25,000 of your own money, you think, 'Sure, make that small picture, but let's bring a crazed killer down that street, and let's have a woman's breasts

somewhere in the first 20 minutes.'"

Keillor has been doing other writing, of course — primarily short stories and essays, a number of which he has collected into a new book titled *We Are Still Married*.

He notes in the introduction that the volume consists of works written "at the time of Ronald Reagan, the president who never told bad news to the American people."

But Keillor is a card-carrying liberal, and he wonders how that seven-letter word became a pejorative label.

He provides a provocative answer in the short story "A Liberal Reaches for Her Whip," in which he points out that Mother was the first liberal in most everyone's life, and implies that conservatives are still stuck in an immature state of adolescent rebellion.

"I'd like to be a conservative," Keillor said when asked to amplify on his political beliefs. "I think it's more fun than being a liberal."

"Liberals are beset with problems, and they're always trying to present problems to other people. That's not happy."

"The homeless and the hungry and the dispossessed and the poorly educated are, by and large, not wonderful people to be around."

"If you go down and put in your time at a soup kitchen, you get tired of it after a while."

"Whereas I do think that throwing millions of dollars around on the phone in the morning and playing golf in the afternoon is an invigorating and amusing way to spend your life. I imagine it is."

But who benefits society more? "I don't know," he said. "I really don't."

"The commandments of scripture are clear. They leave the careful reader in little doubt of what you ought to do. It's just that, living in New York, you start to doubt whether these problems are solvable."

So New York City has made an impact on Keillor's psyche, if not his manner. He's a little more worldly.

Perhaps his writing is better. He suspects so.

But that doesn't mean he's happy here. Rather, he sounds a little lonely.

"I don't know anybody in New York who I could go for a walk with, around Central Park, and we'd just walk," he said.