Keillor knows he has passed peak of fame

By DAVID STREITFELD
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NEW YORK — "It's clear to me that when people read my books they like me a little less at the end than at the beginning. My fourth book, 'Company A, Chaaaaaaarge!,' is evidently the worst. Nobody bought it at all."

So says western author Dusty Pages, also known for "Wagons Westward!!! Hiiii-YAW!" and "Pa! Look Out! It's-Aiiiieee!" At book signings, Dusty keeps waiting for readers to come up and declare, "Your book saved my life, Mister," but instead only gets asked: "You wouldn't know where the little boys room is, wouldja?"

Dusty is a character in a sketch by Garrison Keillor, and it wouldn't be unfair to see a trace of his creator in him. Four years ago, Keillor was a genuine folk hero, one who had risen to prominence not through media machinations or by purveying trash but with the slenderest reed possible: his voice and the simple, seemingly artless tales he told with it. People held "Prairie Home Companion" parties; when the show was on, they turned their phones off. Almost single-handedly, he made Minnesota chic.

"Lake Wobegon Days" became one of the biggest best sellers of the decade, and Keillor was on the cover of Time magazine. Even then, his status might have survived, but the wrong things happened. He left his longtime companion and producer, to whom he had lovingly dedicated "Lake Wobegon Days," for the Danish woman who had been a foreign exchange student in his high school graduating class 25 years before. He gave up the show to move to Denmark, where he seemed to stay only long enough to change planes. Resettled in New York, he quickly announced a series of farewell tours. He published two more books in quick succession. Now he's going back on the radio on a regular basis this fall with a new series, "Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company of the Air."

Hardly anyone thinks of him as a folk hero anymore. Now he's just a writer, and it's fashionable not to be crazy about him. Even Minnesota has dropped off the nation's "in" lists. And while Keillor still has a comparatively large audience — his latest book, "We Are Still Married," spent 13 weeks on the best-seller list — he knows his popularity peak is past.

"I will never have a book again that sells a third as many copies as 'Lake Wobegon,' and how could one possibly be dismayed by that?" Keillor asks, sitting in a grungily upscale breakfast joint near his Manhattan home. "To have your success behind you is the most calming, most peaceful feeling. Why should one ever want to repeat something so tumultuous — this catastrophe of good fortune?

"You don't believe me, huh?"

Keillor, who looks as if he just woke up, is nothing if not believable. Eating a bagel about the size of a life preserver, he explains the love he feels for his adopted city and talks obliquely about fame.

In Denmark, he felt a tremendous frustration from being in the middle of a great tale he could not tell — the story of his rise and the intrusions of fame. "I still think it's such an interesting story," he says earnestly. "But I wouldn't. I couldn't trust myself to tell it. I had ulterior motives of punishing the wicked and lifting up the righteous, and no writer with any sense would go and do a story with his armor on. Stories can only be written naked."

Still, from the cheeky title on down, "We Are Still Married" seems filled with little riffs of Keillor writing about what happened to Keillor. You don't have to know the inside story to get the joke, but it adds to the entertainment.

Take his well-known distaste for what he sees as invasions of his privacy — especially pesky questions from reporters and everyone else about his personal life. "I don't appreciate a book that's packed full of

Garrison Keillor

people grumbling at me," he writes in the story "My Life in Prison." There was a real book that did exactly this, "The Man From Lake Wobegon," by Michael Fedo, but Keillor gives it the pseudonym "Geek: An Unauthorized Biography of You Know Who (The Big Jerk)."

In "Your Book Saved My Life, Mister," there's this:

"I know what it's like to be disappointed by a hero. You think I don't know? Believe me, I know. I met my idol, Smokey W. Kaiser, when I was 12 ... I had waited outside the YMCA in Des Moines for three hours while he regaled the Rotary with humorous anecdotes, and when he emerged at the side door, a fat man in tight green pants tucked into silver-studded boots, he looked down and growled, 'I don't sign pieces of paper, kid. I sign books. No paper. You want my autograph, you can buy a book. That's a rule of mine. Don't waste my time and I won't waste yours.'

"Smokey's problem," the narrator concludes, "was that he was a jerk."

And then there's the list of forthcoming Keillor books opposite the title page, including "Shawn of the New Yorker" and "What Will Our World Be Like in the Year 1990?" None of these books will appear, of course, at least not from him. But in the year 1990, he expects his life to be much the same: living in his cherished New York and writing.

"New York," Keillor says in a voice that no one would quite describe as sweet-sounding but that has had all the rough edges, all the Midwestern tang, worn away by years of broadcasting, "is the only place in this land of ours for a writer to live and feel normal about being a writer."

Now, you may be thinking that only a very successful writer would say this about New York — someone with a BMW, and standing reservations at fancy restaurants, and a multi-room apartment with a maid and a view of the river — but even if Keillor could have all this and much more, his feelings for the city go further.

He's almost anonymous here. In a metropolis where even Jackie Onassis goes mostly unhassled, Keillor escapes notice. He looks like a car mechanic who is amiable but a little slow, and even as he takes time out to correct some galley proofs of a forthcoming New Yorker story, the diners in the surrounding booths ignore him. Snatches of their conversations — "If he's stupid enough to get himself in trouble ..." "Well, you were staring at the ambulance ..." — drift over, but these tales of woe go unheeded. Finally, satisfied, Keillor looks up.

"By George, it's a good piece of work," he proclaims. "Now I've got to go convince him I've been struggling with this for hours." He moves off slowly to look for a phone. Keillor does good pieces of work. If "We Are Still Married" had come from a newcomer, its humor and cleverness would be marveled over. "Lake Wobegon Days" isn't talked about much anymore, but the book seems likely to become a classic, read long into the 21st century.