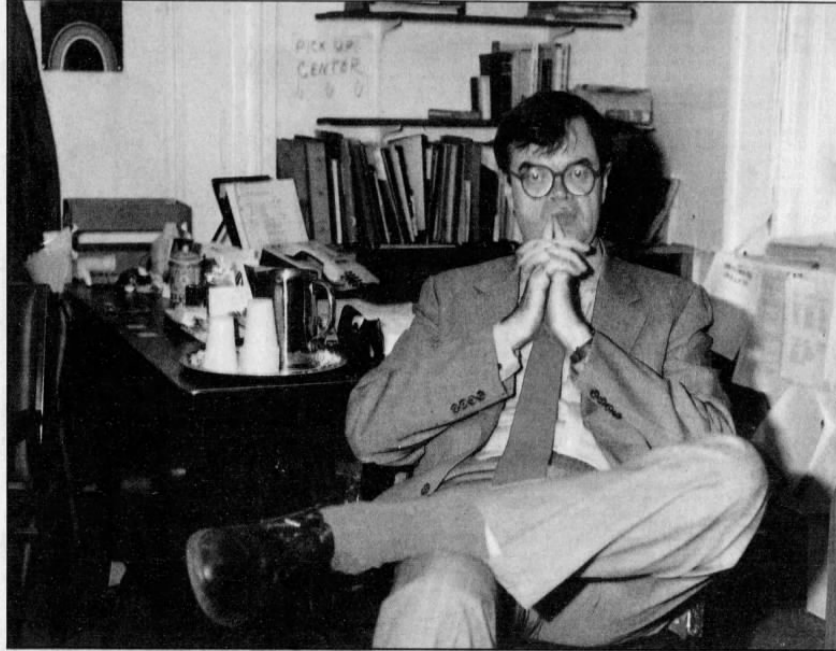


MR. PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION



ASSOCIATED PRESS/KATE BROWER

Garrison Keillor, now on the New York scene, still has one foot in Lake Wobegon

By Tim Warren
Sun Book Editor

T

ime is running short for Garrison Keillor this Wednesday evening. He's closeted in a small room behind an auditorium on the West Side where, in a few minutes, he's scheduled to give a reading from his new novel, "WLT: a Radio Romance." He's good-naturedly fending off questions from an out-of-town interviewer, talking about favorite topics like Minnesota and radio and writing for the *New Yorker*. There are interlopers popping in — people coordinating the reading who are meeting him for the first time, as well as obviously impressed glad-handers who couldn't resist the temptation to meet Mr. Prairie Home Companion himself.

New York

"I try to entertain people, to invent and to surprise. . . . It's very noble work and it doesn't always succeed. You always know when you've let the audience down."

—GARRISON KEILLOR

People are tugging at Mr. Keillor in all directions and he remains unflappable, somewhat aloof but not unpleasantly so. He breaks from the interview to meet three strangers, repeating their names as he gives a friendly smile. Then he comes back to the interview. Then it's time to go on stage.

Tall and courtly-looking in a gray suit with bright red tie, he strides to the microphone. One senses the few hundred or so people in the audience settling in comfortably, readying for the warm, reassuring feelings and gentle laughter they associate with his Lake Wobegon stories. Right away, he establishes the mood with his rich baritone and self-deprecating wit.

"I'm going to read some selections from my new novel," Mr. Keillor intones. He pauses for effect and continues dryly, "It's a cheesy story about rascally

See KEILLOR, 4H, Col. 2

New Keillor book shows folksy Lake Wobegon is just one side of him

KEILLOR, from 1H

people who knew they were sinners and pretty much enjoyed it to the end."

The place breaks up. For the next 75 minutes, he tells about the rowdy souls who run this misbegotten Minneapolis radio station — the gospel singers who pursue women and whiskey in a decidedly un-Christian manner; the practical jokers who take the pants off announcers reading the news; the lust-filled actors and actresses who cavort unabashedly off air when they are not spouting pious homilies about virtue and family in one sappy soap opera after another. It's a bravura performance, and he is rewarded with generous applause and, more important, frequent laughter.

"I try to entertain people, to invent and to surprise," he says shortly before the reading. "The verb 'to entertain,' to serious people like ourselves, seems dismissive or trivial, a less noble verb than 'to inform' or 'to educate.'"

"But it's very noble work and it doesn't always succeed. You always know when you've let the audience down. They come in expecting to feel really good, and you've given them used goods — you've taken them around the block and they sit there with this vague sense of hopefulness instead of being amused."

This night, as in many others,

THE KEILLOR FILE

Born: Aug. 7, 1942, in Anoka, Minn.
Family: Married to his third wife, Ulla Skoerved.

Education: Graduated 1966 with a B.A. in English from the University of Minnesota.

On listening to the radio: "I do when I drive a car, but I don't have a car because it was stolen a couple of years ago. Besides, being in New York, you just don't need it. That's when I love to listen to the radio, when I'm driving cross country. Especially in the South. There's great stuff down there. Black preachers on Sunday mornings — their style of preaching. It's amazing. These guys gasping, singing almost. So rhythmic, so beautiful."

On New York: "I live on the West Side and a lot of times I'll walk along Broadway to downtown and to the East Village. The buildings still have the power to thrill me — the Chrysler Building, Rockefeller Center, Central Park and the Public Library. They still have the power to thrill me as they did when I was a child and come here for a visit. I was 11; it was 1953."



Garrison Keillor

people are clearly amused.

That's been the case since the *New Yorker* first accepted one of his humorous pieces in 1969. Mr. Keillor was a struggling 27-year-old writer from Anoka, Minn., longing desperately to be published in the same magazine of his boyhood idols — James Thurber, A. J. Liebling, S. J. Perelman and E. B. White. The *New Yorker* soon took on more stories, and American humor has never been the same.

In 1974, after doing a piece on the Grand Ole Opry for the *New Yorker*, he came up with the idea of putting together his own radio show in St. Paul, Minn., where he was living. Thus began his hugely popular "Prairie Home Companion," which ran

from 1974 to 1987 and convinced millions of Americans that the best way to spend Saturday nights was listening to this marvelous blend of arcane musical acts, storytellers, mock commercials and his own Lake Wobegon monologues.

"I has been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon," he would begin those pieces reassuringly, and he would speak with gentle good humor about the quirky but solid and earnest Scandinavian-Americans who lived in his fictional small Minnesota town. His latest weekly show, "The American Radio Company," which he has hosted since 1989, continues that eclectic mix of music and storytelling.

Though he frets that "I give much

too much time to radio," he's also a best-selling writer. "Lake Wobegon Days," published in 1985, was an enormous success and introduced his stories to a whole new audience. "Leaving Home: A Collection of Lake Wobegon Stories" (1987) and "We Are Still Married" (1989) also were best sellers, as should be "WLT."

Making a mark in one area is tough enough; being as original and successful in two is extraordinary. Humorist Dave Barry, a friend and sometime guest on "The American Radio Company," is amazed at what Mr. Keillor has accomplished in his 49 years.

"I've been a fan of his for years and years, going back to his *New Yorker* pieces," Mr. Barry says. "I loved 'Lake Wobegon Days' and the 'Prairie Home Companion.' He's what I call an intelligent humorist. In the tradition of Calvin Trillin and Roy Blount. I'm a sophomore, yuk-oriented humorist — that's partly because I'm a newspaper columnist and partly because I'm an incredibly insecure person."

"But he's got that confident literary quality of building his story slowly and letting you fall into it. I need to have readers laugh before the first paragraph. I'm more like the Three Stooges. I'm constantly hitting the reader in the face with a fish."

"In his career I certainly felt, because of his touch and his simplicity and his ways with the language, that he was the closest thing I had ever seen to a young E. B. White," says Roger Angell, who accepted Mr. Keillor's first piece for the *New Yorker* and has continued to edit him. "His piece didn't come through an agent. We didn't know a thing about him. What I remember was that his writing was funny and clear and absolutely different. It was perfect. We didn't have to change a word."

Told of Mr. Angell's comments, Mr. Keillor arches an eyebrow — a favorite gesture — and says, deadpan, "I tried so hard to sound like E. B. White — I'm not surprised."

Conversing with Garrison Keillor is an experience. As in his writing and stage demeanor, he is controlled, deliberate. The question comes and he leans back languorously in his chair, one long leg crossed over the other. His eyes frequently close while he gathers his thoughts, and he can pause so long between sentences it seems he has finished or is dozing off. Then the eyelids suddenly open, he looks at you intently, and continues speaking, always throwing out a well-turned phrase or dry observation. His hands accentuate this feeling of contemplation. He strokes his chin, or folds his hands in his lap, or holds them together, pointing skyward, like a churchgoer — *Let us now ask Brother Garrison to lead us in prayer.*

Right now, he is considering an oft-asked question: Will he move back to Minnesota? It's a touchy issue, for Mr. Keillor left St. Paul in 1987 after a local newspaper printed a picture of his house and disclosed he was divorcing his wife, Margaret,

to marry Ulla Skoerved, whom he had encountered at his 25th high school reunion (she had been a foreign exchange student from Denmark). "I felt watched," Mr. Keillor, a self-professed "Shy Person," wrote in "Leaving Home." "Felt mistaken for somebody else. It dawned on me that life might be better elsewhere."

They went to Copenhagen for a year, but he always felt out of place, and so they settled in New York. But it's different now. "The writer starts to lose his ear when he moves away from the area he writes about," Mr. Keillor acknowledges. "It's a real deprivation. It's the same as if an American writer would go to Sweden and live in a place where English is spoken but is so declarative and literal."

As so often with Mr. Keillor, it's a circuitous route before the answer finally comes, and when it does it's both subtle and elusive. "But I don't know what I'd find if I were to go back. Isaac Bashevis Singer, when people asked him if he wanted to go back to Poland and see the town where he grew up in, would say no, because it didn't exist anymore and he wouldn't want to find out it did not exist anymore because it still lived for him." He stops and nods to the interviewer for the next question.

Asked if he's comfortable living in New York, he answers, "I don't know if anybody is, but I think I'm more comfortable with the city than many native New Yorkers. I'm just a tourist here. But the city has a great deal of anonymity, and that's appealing to me."

"WLT," which had its origins in a short story he wrote years ago for the *New Yorker*, is a decided departure from the kindly, almost elegant world of "Lake Wobegon." "WLT" is a ribald and raunchy comic novel.

Mr. Keillor emphasizes that "WLT" is not nostalgic at all for the "Golden Age of Radio." I don't think it was that golden. The old radio shows that people collect on tapes and traded at conventions — it's like people collecting plastic purses. It's perverse."

Mr. Barry is pleased at the approach that "WLT" takes. "I think that Garrison's gotten tired of being seen as the avuncular, homespun Minnesotan," he says. "There's a part of him that hates that whole world and needs to break away from it. He felt trapped by it."

But as Garrison Keillor talks about Minnesota, it's clear that the auld sod retains a firm hold. "More than anything, there are the relatives of mine I miss," he says wistfully. "I miss the way they talked, I miss their voices, and nobody will ever have their voices again. They spoke an English I don't find anymore because their English was, of course, of their own experience, their lives."

"It's missing so much. My grandmother, my uncles — their voices. I think, are more the basis for the Lake Wobegon stories than anything you can find in Minnesota now."

ELEGANCE TO THE HOLIDAYS
Images Portraits

Just \$29.95
Session Includes:
Make-over
Hairstyling
Wardrobe
Accessories
Photo Session
Video Proofs
Free Take-home Print

Gift Certificates Available

High Fashion Photography
Columbia Mall 964-2500
White Marsh Mall 931-4050
Towson Town Center 296-3300

Gift Certificates Available

Baltimore's Only Spa
Spa & Fitness Vacations

- Weight loss and relaxation
- Professional, caring staff
- Award-winning solar fitness center
- Two hours nearby

Weekend to month programs from \$259 for 2 nights.
1-800-888-8768 (304) 258-4500

COOLFONT
Berkeley Springs, West Virginia

Time After Time . . . The finest collection
of watches may be found at
J. Brown Jewelers