

A shy man's romance with writing, radio

Garrison Keillor's 'WLT' broadcasts his radio humor

By MARSHALL FINE
Gannett News Service

PLAYBOY magazine wants Garrison Keillor to sit for a Playboy interview.

A Minnesotan by birth (and by nature), Keillor is not one to greet unsought attention without suspicion. Even as he evinces a note of pride at Playboy's interest, Keillor says with a smile, "It really gives me a lot of conflict."

The reason for the Playboy inquiry, Keillor says, is his new novel, "WLT: A Radio Romance" (Viking, \$21.95), a comic tale of two Minneapolis restaurant owners who accidentally start a successful radio station in 1926. What has captured Playboy's interest, Keillor believes, is the mischievous sense of scatological humor that pervades his book.

"I don't usually laugh out loud at the stuff I write but I did with this stuff, at all its scatological humor and dumb jokes. I enjoyed writing it. It wasn't a lifelong struggle."

Struggle — which Garrison Keillor relates to discipline — is something he always strove to avoid. He knew what he wanted to do and he's been lucky enough to get paid to do it.

"I started writing for the New Yorker in 1969," Keillor, 49, says. "To me, that felt so successful. It was all a person ever needed to accomplish in life. . . . I just wanted to write and publish and earn a living. I didn't want to have to work for a living. That was my lifelong goal. I hated work. And I've been successful at avoiding it ever since."

In "WLT," Keillor repeatedly describes the lure of radio and the fascination with which people regarded it in its early days.

"It's the idea of speaking to people from a position of invisibility," he says.

A novel about a radio station blends the two things Keillor has used to fend off hard labor: writing and working in radio. Each has supplemented, complemented and energized the other in a career that has seen this shy man from Anoka, Minn., become synonymous with small-town values, even as he has moved to the big city of New York.

"WLT" grew out of three short pieces Keillor had written about the imaginary radio station, WLT ("Without Lettuce and Tomato"), for the New Yorker. Collected in his first book, "Happy to Be Here," these humorous tales of WLT inspired Keillor to expand them into a novel. He received a contract from Harper Publishing — but, after working on the book for a couple of years, found that his publisher



FRED PETERS/Gannett News Service

ON THE AIR: Garrison Keillor performs during a broadcast of his show, "The American Radio Company," which is now in its third season.

"didn't care for it."

"They said they didn't think it was going to work," Keillor recalls. "I offered to try to sell them as a substitute a book about a small town in Minnesota, based on stories that I was telling on the radio. I thought it would sell well and that I could make them into a book. But they turned it down."

Keillor wrote that second book anyway and "Lake Wobegon Days," based on stories about "the little town that time

forgot but the decades cannot improve" became an improbable best seller. Keillor's picture appeared on the cover of Time and his radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion," became one of the most popular in the history of public radio.

Eventually, the fame that found him with "Lake Wobegon Days" drove him to abandon "Prairie Home Companion" and his St. Paul home. He married a Danish woman and moved to Denmark, doing a

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couple of farewell "Prairie Home" shows before heading abroad to become an expatriate writer.

"I thought I'd go and sit in a room in Denmark and be a writer of serious American literature," he says. "I'm not a serious writer and don't want to be, so I'm not sure why I thought I should do that. I don't even like serious American literature. It seems cold and inhospitable to me; I think of it as the empty parking lot school of fiction. It wins a lot of awards and cheats a lot of readers."

"But people from Minnesota are earnest and high-minded to a fault. We set our standards high and stick to them. So it took me a long time to admit defeat — about two months."

Keillor and his wife moved back to the United States — but to a co-op on Central Park West in New York, rather than to the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Two years ago, he decided to get back into radio and created "Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company," which just started its third season.

Produced by Minnesota Public Radio, the show is based in New York and tours to smaller towns for part of its season of Saturday night broadcasts. This year, its Manhattan home is Symphony Space at 95th and Broadway.

During the first season, Keillor, in his largely impromptu monologues, talked extensively about the experience of being a newly situated New Yorker, rather than reporting the news from Lake Wobegon.

"But Lake Wobegon is what I know. It's not easy to write about when you live on the Upper West Side of Manhattan," he says, "but it can be done. If I talk about Manhattan or about living in New York, I don't feel I have anything original to say."

While working on "American Radio Company" scripts last season, he decided to rewrite "WLT."

"I wrote this book by virtue of turning down every invitation I received to give speeches, appear at benefits and do TV or commercials," he says.

"You do a few and you realize that you should not be spending your prime years in the ballrooms of hotels eating chicken. Writing is really kind of a monastic life; it requires a monastic spirit, which I have gotten back to."