

RACY RADIO DAYS

Garrison Keillor's latest novel is set in Minneapolis and there are no shy bachelor farmers in this big city

WLT: A RADIO ROMANCE
By Garrison Keillor (Viking, 401 pages, \$19.95)

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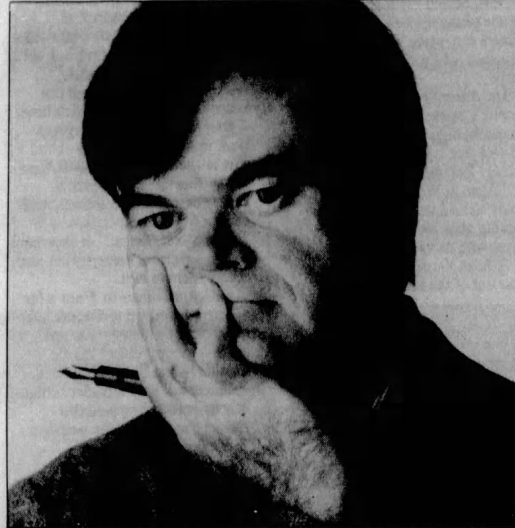
Sex was so rare in Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon radio monologues — what with all those Norwegian bachelor farmers, Lutheran sermons and Powdermilk Biscuits (giving shy people the strength to get up and do what needs to be done) — one had to worry about the propagation of the tiny Minnesota town.

This was admirable. Keillor's meandering tales never went for cheap laughs. Instead, his weekly programs on National Public Radio relied on a complex, quirky fundamentalist sense of humor; they were absurd stories that grew into farce. Graced by his droll delivery, they somehow came off as wonderful storytelling and hip, campy wit.

Based on that reputation, his first novel, "Lake Wobegon Days," shot to the top of best-seller lists in 1985. The book had some lovely moments — Keillor is too talented to be boring for long — but the charm was missing. It was dull.

Now he returns to the Minnesota landscape with "WLT: A Radio Romance," a novel about the birth, growth and demise of a radio station in Minnesota. Keillor has worked on the book for 10 years and, happily, he recreates the warmth, charm and hilarity of the best of his Lake Wobegon monologues.

But Keillor's setting this time is



HOME AGAIN: Humorist Garrison Keillor returns to the Minnesota landscape with "WLT: A Radio Romance," a novel about the birth, growth and demise of a Minneapolis radio station.

the "big city" of Minneapolis, where Ray and Roy Soderbjerg buy a tiny new station in 1926 as a way to promote their fledgling restaurant. WLT (short for "With Lettuce and Tomato") becomes immensely popular — but the mostly male staffers are a randy and raunchy bunch who never take it seriously.

Of course, this is after the red "On Air" light blinks off. In the late 1920s and into the '30s and

'40s, only the most heartwarming, sappy broadcasts went over the airwaves. The contrast between the two — and their occasional convergence — gives the book a delightful energy.

In 1937, for example, Vince Upton is on the air with the hugely popular children's show, "Story Hour with Grandpa Sam." He settles into studio B, prepared to send Cowboy Chuck off to the Pecos to rescue Sally and Skipper.

But someone has slipped him an

tries to ad-lib, points to the turntable in the control room, gives the "cut" sign, waves to the engineers — who are in helpless tears of laughter on the floor — all to no avail.

"Slowly, his voice shaking with the effort, Vince picked his way through the story, glancing ahead as he read and skirting most of the worst parts . . . but suddenly there were naked bodies slipping around in the sheets moaning and pounding the mattress and he had to edit on the run, condense, mumble, beat his way out of the underbrush, and toss in an occasional "Of course, I knew I should not have done this," or, "Something told me that someday I would be punished for that." Vince was a script man: The thought of speaking impromptu made him feel faint. Nonetheless, when Cowboy Chuck and Pabletta went swimming and Chuck stripped off the paper-thin white cotton shirt in which her taut nipples protruded like accusing fingers, Vince had to put down the script and improvise his way to shore."

Despite — or because of — such occasionally startling broadcasts, the entire state is enraptured by the new invention. Stores that advertised on radio got rich; those that didn't went out of business. Serial shows got hundreds of letters each day.

Through all this, however, it is achingly clear how the medium was growing old and "stars" were little more than shallow images manipulating the false morality of the era.

It makes for bittersweet, lovely storytelling. Time and again, "WLT" is laugh-out-loud funny; somehow Keillor manages to hold the thin balance between innocent charm and burlesque. Only at the end, with a needless epilogue, does the book falter. It matters little. The people of WLT, like the characters in Keillor's radio tales, hang in memory long after the tube lights in the back of your old radio have faded from a warm orange to a silent, dusty black. ●