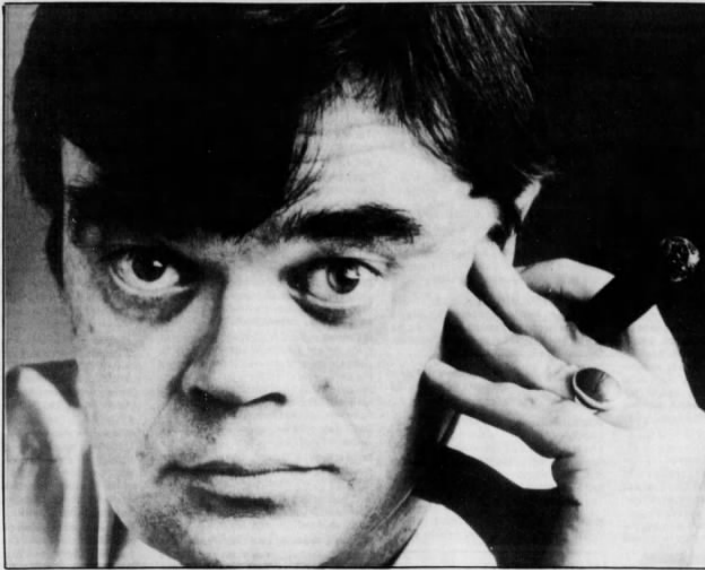


PROFILE



Gannett News Service

Radio whiz Garrison Keillor shifts gears with *WLT*.

'WLT: A Radio Romance' is 'laugh-out-loud funny'

By Neely Tucker
Knight-Ridder Newspapers

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 the "big city" of Minneapolis, where Ray and Roy Soderberg 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.

REVIEW

WLT: A Radio Romance by Garrison Keillor.
Viking, \$19.95.

But someone has slipped him an X-rated script. Vince desperately 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.

Cowboy Chuck by this time has made a fortune in the whiskey trade and is shacking with a dark-haired beauty named Pabletta:

"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."

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.

Keillor changes pace with *WLT*

■ Forget *Lake Wobegon*'s gentle reserve; *WLT* is a radio station with not-so-wholesome characters.

By Linda Quigley
The Nashville Tennessean

Garrison Keillor found that the hardest thing about writing his new novel was knowing people would read it.

After all, his previous novel, *Lake Wobegon Days*, is among the best-selling first novels of all time.

The new one that people are already reading in great numbers is *WLT: A Radio Romance* (Viking, \$21.95). It was published this fall, 15 years (and several other books) after Keillor began it.

But *Lake Wobegon Days* was widely received as a nostalgic book about endearing and cranky but altogether (almost) wholesome folks. In *WLT*, by page 5, Keillor introduces a character that has pert, uh, privates. And she gets patted on them.

Now he's not only written such things, he's also traveling around the country reading about them.

"It was a hard book to write," Keillor says. "It's not easy for me to think about people reading this book expecting maybe a nostalgic book about small-town life. I never felt that *Lake Wobegon* was nostalgic."

WLT is the story of the rise and fall of a radio station in Minneapolis during the 1920s, '30s and '40s. As it begins, two brothers, Ray and Roy Soderberg, establish station *WLT* (With Lettuce and Tomato) to try to improve business at their sandwich shop.

When they begin commercial advertising, success comes quickly, as it did to many real-life practitioners of the new medium of radio.

Of course, the lives of the characters, on and off the dial, are aired in the book, just as LaWella Wells' household hints and Slim Graves' gospel singing are aired on the fictional radio station.

It's a lighthearted novel about the golden days of radio, a period Keillor cherishes about a medium he remains fascinated with.

"When you travel in this country in your car, about nine-tenths of the stations are absolutely like any other station — they are the Holiday Inns and the Dennys of radio," he said.

"It's the one-tenth that make it worthwhile — where you find people telling stories and preaching and whispering and telling secrets."

What small-town radio has, he said, is "all kinds of bits and pieces of the America that never got on television. Television is created by 100 white guys in their 40s. I'm not saying they're bad people, but they know nothing of America. America is just too big and too interesting to ever get on television, but America has been on radio for 70 years."

His own Saturday night broadcasts of *The American Radio Company* (and previously of *A Prairie Home Companion*) on American Public Radio capture some of that essence, and he also hopes that some of it is in *WLT*.

"I love to read from it," he said about his national tour for *WLT*. "It has passages in it that are very jokey and raunchy at the same time. It's a different kind of humor, true to some of the fraternity spirit of old-time radio. It's wonderful to watch an audience laugh and blush at the same time."

The characters they are laughing at are fictional, however, he reminds his readers: "But once they come into being they are very real to me, and I dread running into one of them, just a bunch of gospel quartets and old hypocrites and hard-drinkers and hopeless people with a sense of humor."