

ENTERTAINMENT

# Boston would do better if Garrison Keillor passed it by

By Alex Beam  
© 1992 Boston Globe

**B**OSTON — The entertainment sensation of the moment is Garrison Keillor's decision to move his American Radio Company broadcast from New York City to a new home, possibly in New England.

Politicos, impresarios and newspaper columnists from Bangor all the way to mighty Maine have been begging Keillor to set up the mikes in their hometowns. I would like to add my voice to the swelling chorus.

Garrison, please move to Burlington or Bennington, Vt., Hartford or any of the innumerable burghs trying to catch your batwing-browed eye. But don't come to Boston. This city is humorless enough without you.

How unfunny is Garrison Keillor? Let's face it, this is a man who made his mark goofing on Lutherans for the benefit of several million well-heeled men and women who had nothing better to do on Saturday nights than listen to public radio. Not exactly what you'd call the Fun Bunch, I think you'd agree.

Although I must confess I'd rather listen to a nonstop Dictabelt recording of a "Spotlight on Latvia" classical music review than the Wobegon One, I was recently trapped in front of a television broadcasting his Thanksgiving special. I caught one of those rambling folksy monologues — you know, about Keillor and his friends making a pilgrimage to the spot where Buddy Holly's plane crashed.

You remember Buddy Holly, the yuppie icon, the man who, if he had lived, might have been, I don't know, the Frankie Valli of our times. The anecdote was long and, really, pretty pointless, except it was told in that, you know, very dour, kind of downbeat way that Keillor tells his stories.

It doesn't sound very funny in the retelling, but it wasn't very funny — well, maybe if you had seen his facial expressions, or even been there. The show is really good live, they say.

In fact, it was incredibly boring.

I have mounted a 10-state search for signs of levity from the man many call "America's greatest humorist" — so far, in vain. Although the publishers of "The Big Book of New American



Keillor  
Ib Ohlsson

Humor" plastered Keillor's face on their cover — he's unfunny, remember, not unfamous — they couldn't find anything funny for their collection.

Keillor's sole contribution is a 34-line poem about male urination. (Fragment: "Women are so

How unfunny is Garrison Keillor? Let's face it, this is a man who made his mark goofing on Lutherans for . . . public radio.

circumspect/but men can piss to great effect.") It's a real hoot.

Keillor the person turns out to be even less funny than Keillor the writer. With much fanfare, he left Minnesota, home to the fantastically successful "Prairie Home Companion" show, spitting bile at the local media for invading his privacy. Keillor waged a protracted legal battle against non-profit National Public Radio, which he accused of infringing his copyright by selling copies of a speech he made to the National Press Club.

When St. Martin's Press decided to publish the unauthorized biography, "The Man from Lake Wobegon," Keillor's lawyers threatened a lawsuit. The book went forward, but, in a Dante-esque flourish, Keillor demanded the last laugh. In a grotesque and bafflingly irrelevant epilogue to his unfunny new dirty novel, "WLT," Keillor introduces an unauthorized biographer, who becomes a catatonic vegetable after being struck by a truck. Take that, St. Martin's. Ha, ha, ha.

Keillor's defenders, who prefer to speak anonymously, as the ubiquitously reclusive author's dark side has been all too clearly revealed, have a fallback position. He's not funny, they admit, but he's . . . profound. He's an American original, an artist of the grotesque, a Sherwood Anderson, a Sinclair Lewis. Then, a pause before delivering the punch line: He's the modern-day Mark Twain.

So that explains the white suits, the gutter talk, the religion-baiting and the broadcasts from the Mark Twain house. Garrison Keillor as Mark Twain: now that's funny. Take Mr. Clemens' advice when thinking about moving to New England, Garrison: It's easier to stay out than to get out.

Alex Beam is a Boston Globe columnist.