

Keillor's glorious hick-hack radio

RADIO ROMANCE, by Garrison Keillor

(Faber & Faber, \$29.95)

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TO SAY this is Garrison Keillor's first novel is to presume that his previous books are non-fiction or at the very least only partially made up. Part of the joy of Keillor's style is that the reader takes the real as, well, read. Lake Wobegon is as genuine a place to Keillor's readers as it is to his vast radio audience on 'Prairie Home Companion'. It is the sort of place that other people think would be nice to be there and just might send you cards saying so.

'Radio Romance', Keillor's first declared long fictional work, is, up until its concluding pages, a gloriously funny read, peppered with extraordinary characters and situations so bizarre they must be real or names changed to protect the innocent or the easily offended. The novel is a leisurely account of the life of a South Minneapolis broadcasting station, WLT (With Lettuce and Tomato; it began life as a sandwich shop) from 1926 to 1950 — a period echoing America's obsession with radio and the coming of the accursed cathode ray.

Keillor captures exactly not only the quirkiness of an enclosed studio society, where voices mattered more than appearances and thousands of listeners had to use their imagination, but also the long-gone traditions that are now the stuff of musty audio anthropology. His writing is masterly: meandering in style yet so concise not one word could be cut without affecting the structure. Thus the following paragraph. Some risqué dialogue has been sneaked into the day's episode of 'Friendly Neighbor', and in just a few sentences, Keillor expounds the whole casual philosophy of hick-hack radio at its worst, or popular best:

WLT performers were strictly cold readers, one and all. The notion of rehearsals was foreign to them. It was a matter of pride to stroll into the studio in time to pour a cup of coffee, drink it, pick up the script, glance at it, and when the red light went on, do what the words said to do. You answered the door, you pulled the trigger, you leaped from the ledge, you walked to the mailbox or to the gallows or to the kitchen — you wept, you thundered, you gasped, whatever it said, and when the light went off, you chucked the script into a wastebasket and got the hell out.

Keillor's prose, often arch, is also charming in its sympathy; he knows the secret of never going too far. His characters may be eccentric, but they are seldom exaggerated. For example, the founders of WLT, brothers Ray and Roy Soderbjerg (one randy, the other more business-bent) are perfectly caught, as is their protege, the shy yet determined Francis With, who changes his name to Frank White and becomes even more successful.

All goes well until the very end, when a switch of time and location is as abrupt and unwanted as the flicking off of a mains switch. Only then does the believable (the world of folksy Dad Benson, singing Lily Dale, and white man Tiny who says "Laws, Misteh Dad, but dey's a gal oveh dere who am jes' 'bout de purtiest lil gal dese ole peepers has evah peeped 'pon") become as exposed and as tawdry as the appalling eternally young Little Becky's real age and smoking habits.

Yet this is an admirable novel from one of America's more cosmopolitan humorists, who creates magic from the nondescript flatness of the mid-West in the same way Woody Allen draws mystery and mirth from the myriad maze of Manhattan. I laughed a lot, and longed for the return of proper radio instead of the aural ballast that passes for most of it these days.