

# Garrison Keillor writes something novel

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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 nipples and, 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.

Out loud, for goodness sake.

"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 (where, you may remember, all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children above average) was nostalgic."

Still, WLT is different.

It 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 Soderbjerg, establish station "WLT" (With Lettuce and Tomato) to try to improve business at their sandwich shop.

When they begin commercial advertising (after some dispute about whether or not to do it), success comes quickly, as it did to many real-life practitioners of the then-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



GARRISON KEILLOR  
... takes different route

the golden days of radio, a period Keillor cherishes about a medium he remains fascinated with today.

"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 get 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."

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