

BOOKS

The Bard of Lake Wobegon speaks

Garrison Keillor pens commentary on new governor

By Marcus Eliason
Associated Press

When Minnesota elected a shaven-headed bone-crusher from the wild world of show wrestling to be its governor, it was a safe bet that another son of Minnesota would soon be taking up pen and paper to help us make sense of it.

It didn't take long. Just four months later, *Me, by Jimmy (Big Boy) Valente*, as told to Garrison Keillor offers an uproarious take on the wrestler-as-governor phenomenon.

But wait a minute. Who is this Jimmy "Big Boy" Valente? Isn't the new governor's name Jesse "The Body" Ventura? And he didn't really fire sweat-seeking cruise missiles into the ring, did he?

Of course not. This slim volume comes with an author's note that it is "political satire," and "should not be construed in any way as an autobiography of an actual governor of Minnesota, God bless him."

Ventura was initially peeved about the 152-page book, complaining that Keillor misused his image for commercial gain. But he has since eased up, and if he ever decides to run for president, Keillor's spoof could easily serve as campaign material.

After all, it portrays a man with everything it takes to get into the White House — humble origins, patriotism, combat duty in Vietnam, devoted husband, honest entrepreneur, straight talker...

So what if he weighs 250 pounds with his head shaven, drives large motorcycles and used to wear feathers and tights and jump on people for a living?

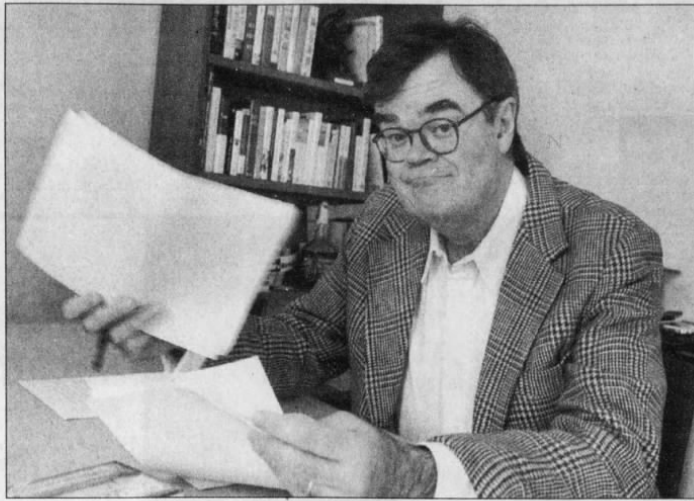
Then again, this is Garrison Keillor talking — the radio storyteller who invented Lake Wobegon and convinced millions of readers worldwide that it was real; the author of "We Are Still Married," a tale that almost makes us believe that an obscure bus driver's marital difficulties could result in a *People* magazine cover story, Congressional hearings and intervention by the pope.

So when he says Jesse Ventura is presidential material, you can't help wondering whether it's just Keillor still being satirical.

Not at all, insists the honeyed voice rolling down the phone line from Keillor's office in St. Paul.

"I think this man can run for president and win in 2000. He talks the talk..."

"And this man, the moment he walks into a room he's the leading man. He's a walking photo oppor-



GARRISON KEILLOR, author and chronicler of the fictitious Lake Wobegon, Minn., pokes satirical fun at Minnesota's new governor, ex-wrestler Jesse "the Body" Ventura, in his new book "Me, by Jimmy (Big Boy) Valente," as told to Garrison Keillor.

**NONFICTION
Satire**

Me, by Jimmy (Big Boy) Valente
As told to Garrison Keillor
Viking
152 pages, \$15.95

tunity. . . . But when he talks, he's brighter than you expect him to be for a 6-foot-4-inch man who shaves his head and talks in a steroid growl. He talks in whole sentences and says some things that make sense."

When the country is peaceful and prosperous, politics falls into a trough and people stop crying out for leadership, Keillor explains. Then government "becomes a sort of immense insurance company. You pay your premium in April and you buy a little insurance against disaster which you don't think you'll ever really need. . . . And it doesn't really matter who's running things and so people are free to elect an entertainer.

What harm can he do?"

It may all be academic. Ventura says he has no immediate presidential ambitions.

Keillor says he has never met, nor tried to meet, Ventura, and

seems to have mixed feelings about him.

But enough about reality. The Valente of Keillor's imagination is an entirely self-made man — a foster child and 98-pound weakling who toughens himself enough to qualify for the elite WALRUS (Water Air Land Rising Up Suddenly) force and draw a stint in Vietnam. There, within 24 hours he is ripping the bolts off tank treads and hurling them into the cockpits of strafing enemy planes, which turns out to be good practice for the mayhem that awaits him on the pro-wrestling circuit.

Here Keillor's satirical vision really starts firing on all cylinders. Fighters get thrown into Dumpsters and blown up, or crushed under 20-wheel monster trucks.

"I was the first wrestler," Valente boasts, "to employ SWEAT-SEEKING CRUISE MISSILES in the ring. . . . A flash of flame and big mushroom clouds and when the smoke cleared, my tormentor was burnt toast and I stood, bloodied but victorious in the criss-crossing spotlights."

Where did Keillor GET this stuff? From watching Jesse Ventura's videotaped highlights, he says. "It's not that difficult to understand."

Anyway, retired from wrestling, "Big Boy" looks at politics and senses a vacuum.

He sees the Democrats as the party with "programs for everything — programs to combat grumpiness, stupidity, discrimination, covetousness, improper lane changes, low math scores, flat beer, poor taste, too much air in the Cracker Jack box, and all of the programs require battalions of social workers and reams of paper."

But the Republicans are equally unattractive: "Squeeze the maximum profit out of everything, strip it clean, gouge what you can, clear-cut the forest, . . . lay off the twenty-year guys and hire cheap replacements, cut costs, inflate the stock, sell out, make your pile, leave town, . . . and feel no more remorse than a fruit fly."

So he joins the Ethical Party, "a grab bag of bikers and bird-watchers and disgruntled dishwashers and surly seniors and people who call in to talk shows to . . . (complain) about the mailman."

And the rest is history. The book ends with "Big Boy" confidently outlining his strategy for capturing the White House.

Ventura — the real deal — has said he's too busy governing Minnesota to consider a presidential run in 2000. And in 2004? He says anything's possible.

But Keillor says its 2000 or never. "He'd be a fool to wait until 2004," he says.