

Lake Wobegon, via teen eyes

By Rob Thomas

Oh, that Garrison Keillor. He can even make us mist over with nostalgia about old-fashioned pornography.

The smut in question is "High School Orgies," a magazine that his 14-year-old narrator Gary sneaks furtive peeks at throughout the course of "Lake Wobegon Summer 1956," Keillor's latest trip home to the mythical Minnesota community.

The magazine contains sordid tales that begin like this: "Miss Erickson asked young Bill to stay after class. 'You've done nothing but cause trouble all day,' she said. 'Now, for once, you're going to do what I say.' He offered no resistance as she unbuttoned his shirt."

The presence of "High School Orgies" should alert the longtime Keillor fan to two things. First, Keillor has nailed the overwhelming preoccupation that sex has in the minds of 14-year-old boys, and how curiosity and embarrassment over that undiscovered country compete for top billing in their minds.

Second, readers should recognize that making a teenage boy the center of "1956" makes the novel a bit of a departure for Keillor. The language is a little saltier, the humor a little cruder, the situations more explicit than in Keillor's Wobegon dispatches on public radio's "A Prairie Home Companion," and that might offend a few genteel readers. One shocked reviewer on Amazon.com huffed that Keillor's editors must have told him to "spice it up."

But despite the sexual content (much of it existing entirely in Gary's mind), Keillor hasn't turned Lake Wobegon into Peyton Place. Instead, he's written a hilarious novel about a



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Garrison Keillor contemplates his next funny line.

young writer growing up and finding his voice. Any resemblance between Gary and Garrison is up to the reader to decide.

Gary's family seems somewhat typical of the Upper Midwest of 1956, in that they try with every fiber of their beings not to talk about the things that are on their minds. His father rails against Communists and considers a 10:30 p.m. bedtime a "moral absolute," while his mother seems to just shake her head and move through life. Big brother is away at college and absent for nearly the entire book, while big sister delights in tormenting Gary for his sins, theoretical or real.

Above them all, Grandpa and Jesus watch and comment, sort of like the old men Statler and Waldorf on the "Muppet Show."

In a way, Gary seems more closely connected to his extended family. There's his Aunt Eva, a tragic and lonely figure who suffers from mental illness and dotes on Gary. And his Uncle Sugar, who gives him the gift of a typewriter that unlocks Gary's writerly impulses.

And above all, there's cousin Kate, a free spirit (she smokes and occasionally goes bra-less!) on whom Gary has a serious crush. His desires unrealized, Gary ends up a witness to Kate's burgeoning romance with Roger Guppy, starting pitcher for the Wobegon Whippets, and somewhere in between his dreams of lust and his experiences on love's sidelines, he finds his voice as a writer.

"1956" doesn't have much of a plot, bouncing from one episode to

Lake Wobegon Summer 1956

By Garrison Keillor
Viking Press
337 pages, \$24.95

Garrison Keillor will read from and sign copies of "Lake Wobegon Summer 1956" at 3 p.m. Sunday at the Orpheum Theatre, 216 State St. Advance tickets are \$5 and are available through Canterbury Booksellers, 315 W. Gorham St.

another with glee. Gary's travails with a disapproving English teacher are especially funny, as is his peek behind the curtain of what passes for a celebrity in Lake Wobegon: Jim Dandy, the Whippets' booth announcer and Doo Dads' lead singer.

The joy here is in Keillor's writing, his gift for understatement, characterization and just the right dash of absurdity to make a scene truly laugh-out-loud funny. The only thing missing is the sound of Keillor's voice, which you expect could coax the biggest laughs out of already amusing prose.

The story of a writer torn between the comforting repression of his small-town upbringing and his vast yearnings for something more is hardly new territory. But with a bounce in his stride, Keillor takes us back through those confusing, heady days of adolescence in a story that, despite the specificity of its title, is surprisingly timeless.

Rob Thomas is an entertainment writer for The Capital Times and a regular book reviewer.