

Keillor's down-home humor charms Madison

By Samara Kalk
The Capital Times

The weekend before he came to Madison, Garrison Keillor did his radio show live from Buffalo, N.Y.

Two days after he left the city, it got buried under 50 inches of snow.

"We'll wait and see what happens to you people," Keillor told a packed and adoring house at the Madison Civic Center's Oscar Mayer Theatre on Saturday evening.

Not only did the "A Prairie Home Companion" host sell out his Madison broadcast — more than 2,200 seats — in about two hours, he also sold out an appearance Sunday at the 1,800-

seat Orpheum Theatre as part of Canterbury Booksellers' "Marquee Reading Series."

The big difference between the Madison and Buffalo weekends is that Keillor had never spent time in Buffalo.

But the Minnesota Public Radio star, who is based in St. Paul, has a certain affection for Madison. Not only did he bring his show to the Civic Center in 1994, but Keillor also has a brother in town and other family members in the area. His niece, Lisa Collins, is a cardiac nurse in Madison and his nephew, Douglas Keillor, is an assistant director for Madison Teachers Inc.

"He's a labor agitator," Keillor said with a grin.

The humorist's daughter turned 4 years old Saturday and Keillor and his family got together for a big brunch.



Keillor

"I did a little work on the side,"

Keillor, 59, quipped, between sips of coffee at a table in the Orpheum Grand Lobby Restaurant after signing fans' books, posters, photos — even hats — for more than an hour Sunday following his reading.

Resting his four pens on the table — two Sharpies, a Unibal and a Pilot — Keillor analyzed their virtues and shortcomings: "Unibals are terrific. Pilots are good but scratchy."

He also critiqued the effects of

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■ A review of Saturday's "A Prairie Home Companion." 3C



FILE PHOTO

Garrison Keillor charmed two audiences in Madison over the weekend with his "Prairie Home" brand of humor.

Keillor

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Sept. 11, brushing off the suggestion that his brand of quaint, down-home radio may get a boost given the turmoil the country experienced following the terrorist attacks.

"I don't see Sept. 11 as a transforming event," he said. "I think it's an event that mostly belongs to the people who suffered directly from it. I don't think it should be appropriated by other people."

Keillor himself was in his New York City apartment about four miles from the World Trade Center at the time of the attacks.

"I don't care for all these long essays about how we are all affected by it," he said, noting that four miles was a tremendous buffer.

Keillor said he was moved at a recent show when a woman came up to him with a stack of books that belonged to her brother-in-law, who was killed in the World Trade Center attacks. She was there with the wife of the victim and asked Keillor to sign them in his memory.

"It had been all these months, but for these women it was like it had been last week," said Keillor.

Canterbury bookstore sold about 225 books Sunday, mostly copies of "Lake Wobegon Summer 1956," which came out a month ago and which Keillor read from Sunday.

Considering the event was less than a week after Christmas, Canterbury owner Trudy Barash said she considered it a success.

"Right now everyone is so totally spent out from Christmas. Probably the last thing they were thinking was to buy another something," she said.

Barash marveled at the generosity Keillor showed his fans and the way he got the whole audience to sing "Will the Circle Be Unbroken."

"I felt it was sort of a fantasy reading," Barash said.

Keillor also charmed Mark Benno, the general manager of Canterbury Booksellers Inn.

"He's just the least pretentious person you'll come across. He definitely struck a chord with the crowd," he said.

Keillor's comments on writing as "recording what you see" especially resonated with Benno.

"It's not about trying to distort or project what you are recording to try to please someone," said Benno.

Bookstore manager Soren Schoff introduced Keillor at the suggestion of Barash, "because, as she put it, you're Norwegian," said Schoff.

"The appeal of Keillor's work is not in its Midwesternness or in its Lutheran-ness or whatever, but in its universality," said Schoff, who said he identified with the people of Keillor's fictional Lake Wobegon because he grew up in Madison and went to a Lutheran church.

"Like a lot of other great writers, the more specific he is about the place and the people, the more it resonates with people everywhere," he said, comparing Keillor to James Joyce and William Faulkner and other writers famous for creating an entire world out of a fictional or semi-fictional place.

Schoff called Keillor's new book — which is told through the semi-autobiographical voice of the 14-year-old Gary — laugh-out-loud funny.

At the same time, the hilarity is tempered by the author's adult voice, he said.

"There is an awareness of the absurdities and ironies and sadnesses of life that I think keeps him from ever being sentimental," Schoff said.