



Neil Karlen

Garrison Keillor, author and host of the radio show *A Prairie Home Companion*, is bringing his Midwest humor to town.

Keillor

Down-home humor charms audiences

instinct

By Barbara Yost
barbara.yost@arizonarepublic.com

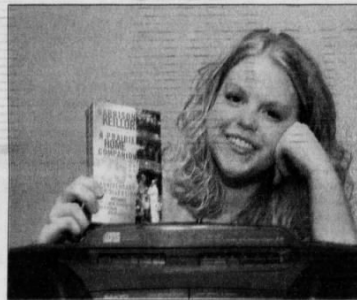
Jenne Ronningen's mother is strong, her father is good-looking and Jenne is above average.

Which qualifies her for citizenship in Lake Wobegon, Minn., where folks shop at Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, eat Powdermilk Biscuits and join the Cat-sup Council.

Ronningen grew up with an ear cocked to the radio every Saturday night when humorist Garrison Keillor brought his fictional town of Lake Wobegon into her Cedar Rapids, Iowa, living room. *A Prairie Home Companion* became a must-listen event in the Ronningen household.

"I remember laughing along with my parents," says Ronningen, now an Arizona State University junior. "The humor is not complicated. It pokes fun at the small town, but not nasty. It is real life."

Whenever she can, Ronningen, 20, still catches the variety show that airs Saturday nights and Sunday mornings on Valley station KJZZ-FM (91.5). She is a fan of the folksy humor that has made its creator the Mark Twain of our time.



Sherrie Buzby/The Arizona Republic

ASU junior Jenne Ronningen has been listening to Keillor's show since she was a child growing up in Iowa.

"I remember laughing along with my parents. The humor is not complicated. It pokes fun at the small town, but not nasty. It is real life."

— Jenne Ronningen
Arizona State University student

Keillor brings his one-man show to the Red River Music Hall in Tempe on Wednesday, hosted by Changing Hands Bookstore and benefiting KJZZ and sister station KBAQ-FM

(89.5). Negotiations are also under way to bring *A Prairie Home Companion* to the Valley in February.

Wednesday night, Keillor will chat about his life and read from his latest books,

if you go

Garrison Keillor

WHAT: An evening of poetry and nostalgia with the host of radio's *A Prairie Home Companion*.

WHERE: Red River Music Hall, 730 N. Mill Ave., Tempe.

WHEN: 6 p.m. Wednesday.
ADMISSION: \$20, or \$12 with purchase of one of his new books at Changing Hands Bookstore, 6428 S. McClintock Drive, Tempe.
DETAILS: (480) 730-0205.

Lake Wobegon Summer 1956 and *Good Poems*, an anthology gleaned from his daily radio spots, *The Writer's Almanac*. Keillor has written eight other books and an opera, *Mr. and Mrs. Olson*, about a curious Lutheran couple from St. Paul.

A native of Anoka, Minn., and a 1966 graduate of the University of Minnesota, the one-time newspaper reporter launched his radio show from St. Paul in 1974 to a live audience of 12. It

See **KEILLOR** Page E8

'Offbeat, quirky, Midwest' humor

KEILLOR from E1

became a regional hit before Minnesota Public Radio took it national in 1980. In 1987, Keillor declared he was burned out and quit the popular show to write.

Retirement from the airwaves was short-lived. Regretting he'd quit his plum job, Keillor debuted *The American Radio Company* two years later — hosted in, of all places, New York City. In 1993, he came to his Midwestern senses and returned to St. Paul with *A Prairie Home Companion*.

Keillor lives there in a restored 19th-century home with his third wife, Jenny Lind Nilsson, and 5-year-old daughter, Maia. Thoughts of retirement have sunk to the bottom of Lake Wobegon.

In an e-mail interview from St. Paul, Keillor says he enjoys his job and expects to continue "until my daughter is old enough to understand the jokes."

Maia might seem an unlikely fan of her father's show, but she's just one of 3.4 million listeners from New York to San Francisco to Savannah who represent a spectrum of age groups and cultural mind-sets.

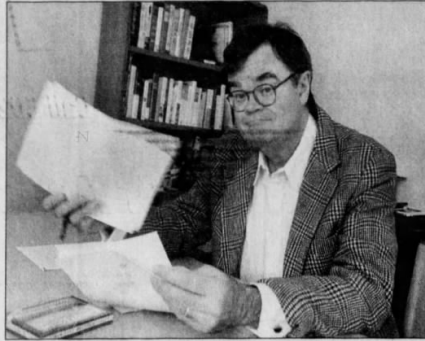
Trudy Norred, 55, a commercial appraiser in the Maricopa County Assessor's office, is originally from Wyoming but says "that Midwest kind of humor appeals to me."

"It's offbeat, quirky, Midwest but not mainstream."

Robert Ballint, 11, listens to *A Prairie Home Companion* on his way home from church on Sundays.

"I especially like Guy Noir (Keillor's dry-witted private-eye character)," says Robert, a sixth-grader at All-Saints Episcopal Day School in Phoenix. "I like 'The News From Lake Wobegon.' It makes subtle jokes. I like the funny parts best. The singing is kind of boring."

Aleen Pace Nilsen, an Arizona State University English professor and 2001 president of the International Society of Humor Studies, credits Keillor's popularity to the



Ann Heisenfeld/Associated Press

Keillor, at work in his St. Paul, Minn., office, writes most of his radio show, and considers himself primarily a writer.

universal homeyness of his humor.

"We all know the same relatives like the ones in his stories," she says. "You get the feeling he's just as funny as the people in his small town."

Keillor's own explanation is that "Americans seem to enjoy hearing a cranky old guy natter and grumble about things."

"Young people whose own grandpas are busy doing tai chi in Phoenix can tune in and hear how a real grandpa sounds."

Few grandpas have Keillor's resonant voice, which Nilsen believes accounts for much of his appeal. Keillor describes it "a radio voice ... developed over the years, just as a person develops a writing style."

"I hope I still sound as if I might be from Minnesota."

Despite almost 30 years in radio, Keillor considers himself primarily a writer. He writes almost all of the radio show. His latest novel, *Lake Wobegon Summer 1956*, is a droll and sometimes racy tale of a 14-year-old boy chafing against his evangelical community.

Keillor says his compulsion to write novels stems from his legacy as an English major, "all of us sitting in those smoky old classrooms in Folwell Hall."

"I'm a lucky one who got the chance to do it, so it's my

responsibility to go as far as I can down that road in behalf of the others who settled down to respectable lives."

On Saturday nights, he's a writer "who can be propped up and put out onstage in front of people and won't fall down." His favorite part of the show — whatever 11-year-old boys might think — is the chance to sing with his guests.

Poetry is another of Keillor's passions. *Good Poems* contains more than 250 selections from *Writer's Almanac*, honoring not only such celebrated poets as W.H. Auden, William Blake and Anne Porter, but also the lesser known, such as Guy W. Longchamps.

Longchamps is Keillor's pseudonym, his poem a waggish ode to the men's room.

Though a soft-spoken man, Keillor hasn't hesitated to direct a few barbs at outgoing Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura, who has responded in kind, once threatening to cut off state aid to Minnesota Public Radio.

As a Minnesota citizen, Keillor says, he won't be sorry to see the former body-builder retire from politics. But as a comedian, Keillor will miss his nemesis: "He was a great natural resource. All over America, everyone laughs whenever Jesse (the Body) Ventura is mentioned."

Reach the reporter at (602) 444-8597.