## BOOKS

## Traveling In A Cocoon Populated By Readers

In Era Of Electronic Media, Keillor Finds Comfort In Great Reportage And The Power Of Poetry

## By STEVE COURTNEY

Garrison Keillor has won fame in an electronic medium, but he uses it to snare people into reading. He does it pretty blatantly with literary factoids and poetry in his short ubblic radio station featurettes public radio station featurettes, "The Writer's Almanac," and more subtly in his immensely successful, 26-year-old radio more subtly in his mus-successful, 26-year-old r show, "A Prairie Home

show, A France House Companion." Electronic media are supposed to be the death of reading, but "A Prairie Home Companion" evokes the impossibly ancient days of radio, when families sat in the living room, eyes fixed on a particular spot of carpet or vase offlowers, letting the sound, story and song flow in. His shows are meant to be listened to with focused attention, not the way radio, TV and computers are usually listened to, watched or surfd. "A Prairie Home surfed. "A Prairie Home

taking justices to yatched or surfield." A Prainte Home Companion." is meant to abord you as a book absorbs you. In fact, Keillor wrote (for the New Yorker) for years before the radio show was dreamt of, and continues to turn out books — novels, collections of Lake Wobegon sketches and recently an anthology of poetry ("Good Poems," Viking, 825.85) and a political book ("Homegrown Democrat," Viking, 825.85) Asked about a 2001 National Endowment for the Arts survey nent for the Arts survey that says "literary reading" -

novels, short stories, plays and poetry — as a leisure activity is in decline, he says he hasn't in decline, ne says ne anal -noticed it. "But I travel in a coccon populated by readers," says Keillor, who will be the final speaker Sunday at the National Writers Workshop sponsored by "The Courset

speaker Sunday at the National Writers Workshop sponsored by The Courant. "My wife reads, and my 7-year-old girl is an avid reader," he says, "and when I get out and travel around and get to see people, Tm usually going to a coffee house that II like in my neighborthood and it is full of readers — but most of them are students, so I suppose they're reading things that they've been told to read." On airplanes, he says, "there are still people who console themselves in the face of death by opening a book — usually a book in which death features prominently, a murder mystery or thriller." Whatever the NEA report says

prominently, a murdee mystery or thriller." Whatever the NEA report says — "Maybe ediphones are taking the place of the portable book," he suggests — Kellior has what some might consider a dumbly optimistic view of the future of the classics vs. the future of, say. David Letterman. But it's a firmly held view. "In the course of doing 'A Prail're Home Companion' we try to avoid pop culture references," he says. "We don't refer to things like 'American Idd' — we wouldn't do jokes about it because you cain no longer assume that the majority of

eople have seen this or kn people have seen this or know what you're talking about. The entire world of popular entertainment has become so longer uniting figures." For example, despite Brirney Spears' status as a recognizable celebrity, be asys, few people would recognize her music as they still recognize her music

they still recognize Frank Sinatra's. He adds that David Sinatra's. He allos unas tras Letterman's audience may be smaller than his own, if you count Internet "Prairie Home"

listeners. "But we' valvays made reference to books, especially to the classics, as a kind of normal part office, and nothing both visity about it—ve would think nothing of referring to Shakespeare and other well-known authors who are in the canon, and without the canon, and without well-known authors who are in the canon, and without outerpoorty writers and their fumous novels that I have not toked at... molitclion gives me naterial from fiction. I would be called plagitarism. Thera eabout poetry as a place where people are still able to where people are still able to where people are still able to the canon can bout poetry as place where people are still able to the previous seems to me that the American language has been so riddled with postmodernism "But we've always made

takes you back to that beautiful morning in New York . . . When

and irony that it is very difficult for people to gracefully express the fundamental loyalites and affections except in poetry. In people to express gratitude for people to express are at the second the small blessings of everyday life and to express a we and wonder at the beauty of the natural world and express a kind of everyday passion for other people and for company." The poets he likes are those who do these things: Charles Sinic, Billy Collins, Mary Oliver and a new discovery, Barbara Hamby. and irony that it is very difficult

and a new discovery, Barbara Hamby, Keillor enjoys discoveries. "I just plow along J just walk into my neighborhood bookstore and I walk around and look at the new hings and I find three or four and I pick them up and I start in on them." A recent nonfiction book that springs to his mind is "102

A recent point to not an ar springs to his mind is "102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight To Survive Inside the Twin Towers" (Holt, \$26) the detailed account by Jim Dwyer and Kevin

account by Jim Duyer and Kevin Flynn of what happened inside the World Trade Center on Sept. 11. "It's just one of those great books of reporting, and you read it almost at one sitting with your hair on end. It tells you something about 9/11 that you may not have known before, and it does it by marshalling facts. There have been 50 different preachy books and 10,000 op-ed pieces, but this is one that really pieces, but this is one that really

you open the book and there are people heading for the tower at 830 in the morning, going up to Windows on the World for their conference, you really choke up. Keillor plans to talk about journalism at the National Writers Workshop on Sunday, when he speaks to an audience that usually includes a hefty proportion of reporters and editors. He wants to talk about one of his heroes, A.J. Liebling,

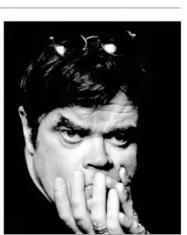
one of his herees, A.J. Labing, and a lot more: "I think that I would want to talk about the beauties of journalism and say a word in its behafi, as against, say, the personal essay and the memoir and other genres that seem more in vogue... But I think that American newsnapers have in vogue..., but i think that American newspapers have taken a very serious wrong turn, and that aside from a few newspapers the quality of the product is in decline, especially for the reader, and I think that newspapers have forgotten that

their readers are readers and low writing — writing is what people want. They don't want a sort of concept of Journalism; they want writers. And writers are always individuals. "This is what people turn to newspapers for advice and for newspapers for advice and for personal service and for sort of glossy pieces about lifestyle and home decor and cooking and how to bring up your children. They're really looking to newspapers for the same thing that people looked to newspapers for back before television— television didn't change anything and USA Today didn't television didn't change anything and USA Today didn't really change anything."

Garrison Keillor will give a talk titled "The Magic of Making People Happy" on Sunday at 2:45 p.m. at the National Writers Workshop at the Sheraton Hartford Hotel in East Hartford.

Copyright © 2021 Newspapers.com. All Rights Reserved.

**Newspapers**<sup>TM</sup>



GARRISON KEILLOR will speak at the National Writers W Sunday at the Sheraton Hartford Hotel in East Hartford. orkshop