

BOOKS

Traveling In A Cocoon Populated By Readers

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

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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 public radio station featurettes, "The Writer's Almanac," and more subtly in his immensely successful, 36-year-old radio show, "A Prairie Home 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 of flowers, 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 surfed. "A Prairie Home Companion" is meant to absorb 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, \$25.95) and a political book ("Homegrown Democrat," Viking, \$19.95). Asked about a 2004 National Endowment 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 noticed it.

"But I travel in a cocoon populated by readers," says Keillor, who will be the final 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, I'm usually going to a coffee house that I like in my neighborhood 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 — "Maybe cellphones are taking the place of the portable book," he suggests — Keillor 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 Prairie Home Companion' we try to avoid pop culture references," he says. "We don't refer to things like 'American Idol' — we wouldn't do jokes about it because you can no longer assume that the majority of

people have seen this or know what you're talking about. The entire world of popular entertainment has become so fragmented that there are no longer uniting figures."

For example, despite Britney Spears' status as a recognizable celebrity, he says, few people would recognize her music as they still recognize Frank Sinatra's. He adds that David Letterman's audience may be smaller than his own, if you count Internet "Prairie Home" listeners.

"But we've always made reference to books, especially to the classics, as a kind of normal part of life, and nothing hoity-toity about it — we would think nothing of referring to Shakespeare or doing a parody of Shakespeare and other well-known authors who are in the canon, and without apologizing, without being sheepish."

His own reading is made up of nonfiction and poetry, he says.

"I would be embarrassed to tell you all of the famous contemporary writers and their famous novels that I have not looked at... nonfiction gives me material, it gives me something to jump off from. I can't get material from fiction. It would be called plagiarism."

"I care about poetry as a place where people are still able to express powerful feelings, and this is rare. It seems to me that the American language has been so riddled with postmodernism

and irony that it is very difficult for people to gracefully express the fundamental loyalties and affections except in poetry. In poetry it is still possible for people to express gratitude for the small blessings of everyday life and to express awe 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 Simic, Billy Collins, Mary Oliver and a new discovery, Barbara Hamby.

Keillor enjoys discoveries. "I just plow along. I just walk into my neighborhood bookstore and I walk around and look at the new things 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 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight To Survive Inside the Twin Towers" (Holt, \$36) the detailed account by Jim Dwyer 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 takes you back to that beautiful morning in New York... When



GARRISON KEILLOR will speak at the National Writers Workshop next Sunday at the Sheraton Hartford Hotel in East Hartford.

you open the book and there are people heading for the tower at 8:30 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, and a lot more.

"I think that I would want to talk about the beauties of journalism and say a word in its behalf, as against, say, the personal essay and the memoir and other genres that seem more 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 love 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. They don't turn to 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 really change anything."

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.