

BEHIND LAKE WOBEGON

Garrison Keillor's Experiences Shaped Fictional Town

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EAST HARTFORD — Central Minnesota, as Garrison Keillor remembers it, was not kind to outsiders during the late 1960s and early 70's.

It was the kind of place where a succession of answers to direct questions followed by silence passed for a neighborly chat. And it was where Keillor, then a young aspiring writer with a wife and child, was never invited into anyone's home.

"This is where Lake Wobegon began," the author, longtime host of the popular radio show "A Prairie Home Companion," and member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, told a rapt audience of about 700 at the Sheraton Hartford Hotel attending the National Writers' Workshop. "This was all created out of loneliness in

a small town."

Keillor, the final keynote speaker at the two-day workshop that concluded Sunday, spoke about the craft of writing and of the importance of being connected to the world.

He encouraged the crowd to take long walks, to listen to the sound of language and to reject arrogance.

"Walking is the first tonic for discouragement and for depression and for confusion," Keillor said. "When you go walking, you create a conversation with yourself that the telephone and the Internet only interrupt."

His anecdote about the creation of Lake Wobegon, a friendly town where "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking and all the children are above-average," underscored another piece of advice: write about something painful and shameful with humor

and intelligence.

He later described a jarring moment from his childhood that he never fully developed in his writing. He had an aunt who was funny, liked the same radio shows as he did and spoiled him. One day, when they went into town, he realized that people thought his aunt was crazy.

"I literally stepped a couple of steps away from her," he said. "I keep going back to this painful moment. If I were to write a memoir, which I won't, that would be the place to start: when you were willing to betray her and go be with those people."

Mary Beth Mahler, a retired librarian from Newington, has attended the writers' workshop in Hartford for almost 11 years.

"The understanding of what the craft entails helps you understand what you're reading and why it's there," she said.