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The cast of "A Prairie Home Companion," with Garrison Keillor, far right. Keillor will be at the Burr and Burton Academy Gym on Wednesday, Sept. 19, to present his new Lake Wobegon novel "Pontoon." Submitted Photo

Radio host, novelist Garrison Keillor to pontificate on 'Pontoon' in Manchester

BRIAN McELHINEY
Arts Editor

MANCHESTER — No one really knows what to expect when Garrison Keillor comes to Manchester.

"I got a really interesting e-mail saying that each event he does is unique," said Barbara Morrow, co-owner of Northshire Bookstore, and the person in charge of booking author presentations. "He's a natural storyteller and entertainer, and it's fun anticipating what he'll do."

"It won't be a typical author reading," said Marie Leahy, marketing director for Northshire. "He may talk off the cuff, he may sing, he may

read selections from the book."

Keillor's new book, "Pontoon: A Novel of Lake Wobegon," will be released on Tuesday, Sept. 11. The author and host of American Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion" is embarking on a 14-city book tour across the U.S., making a stop at the Burr and Burton Academy Gym at 7 p.m. on Wednesday, Sept. 19. Keillor declined comment, due to scheduling difficulties.

This is Keillor's second appearance in Manchester. He presented a book of poetry, "Good Poems," in 2003 at the elementary school in Manchester. Close to a thousand people attended, according to Morrow. Even so, Keillor's agreement to this appearance "came as somewhat of a surprise" to Morrow.

According to Leahy and Morrow, Keillor's good relationship with The Northshire Bookstore paved the way of a return trip.

"He knows the store," said Morrow. "He knows we will always give him a warm welcome."

The BBA gym was chosen for the event because it can house 800 people, and according to Morrow, tickets are selling fast. "This book is a Lake Wobegon novel. We fully expect we'll sell out," said Morrow.

The setting truly is the novel's

lynchpin, at least from a marketing standpoint. Since 1974, Keillor has hosted "A Prairie Home Companion," which chronicles the small town of Lake Wobegon, based on Keillor's hometown of Anoka, Minn.

"He kept radio alive," said Morrow. "If it weren't for him, a lot of radio today wouldn't exist. He made it funny, interesting and educational in many aspects."

"If it weren't for him [Keillor], a lot of radio today wouldn't exist."

BARBARA MORROW
Co-owner, Northshire Bookstore

The radio show eventually spawned a live stage show, featuring musical numbers, commercial spots from fake advertisers in the town and of course, Keillor's stories of the townspeople.

"Pontoon" is one of these stories. The novel opens with the death of Evelyn Peterson, a feisty woman with an independent spirit who's final wish is to be cremated, with her ashes placed in a hollowed-out bowling ball and dropped into the lake. Evelyn's daughter Barbara is

determined to follow her mother's wishes, despite disapproval from friends and relatives.

Meanwhile, Debbie Detmer returns to her home in Lake Wobegon to be married, or rather, to "celebrate her commitment," to Brent. The ceremony is to be complete with a flying Elvis, a pontoon boat and a minister from the "Sisterhood of the Sacred Spirit" ordaining.

Add to this mix a list of side characters, including Larry, the flying Elvis impersonator; Raoul, a former children's show host and the love of Evelyn's life; and Mr. Detmer, who banged his head on a bathtub, slipped into a concussion and now spends his days shouting about the Rapture.

The novel, like much of the show, is a clever satire of small-town life coming to terms with the modern age, but Keillor never hits the reader over the head with it. Rather than employing scathing one-liners and jokes, the novel makes gentle prods at Lake Wobegon's residents, first and foremost telling their stories. There's a deep understanding and love for these people and their eccentricities that permeates "Pontoon."

That being said, the subheading "A Novel of Lake Wobegon" is fairly irrelevant, except to maybe help

sell books. This is any small town, and people unfamiliar with the show will be able to enjoy the story's simplicity and Keillor's rambling, down-home voice.

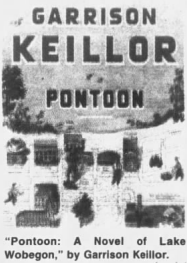
Indeed, Keillor is at his best, and at times, his worst, when he goes off on a tangent. "Pontoon" does lose its focus on more than one occasion, offering perhaps too much information at once in certain tangents. However, some of the funniest moments in the novel come from the side stories of side characters, including the aforementioned flying Elvis.

Although the staff at Northshire may not know exactly what Keillor will do when he presents "Pontoon," Morrow and Leahy are fairly certain of one thing. Keillor will sign everyone's book, down to the last person.

"He will stand and sign books until the last person has left," said Morrow. "He talks to each person, and you come away having met the man."

"He won't be sitting at a table where there's a barrier between the audience and him," said Leahy. "Apparently he's very personable, and also very tall."

Morrow, who proclaimed herself a fan of Keillor's, is looking forward to the event. "I think it's a wonderful coup for the community," she said.



"Pontoon: A Novel of Lake Wobegon," by Garrison Keillor.