



Above and below: Radio personality and host of the public radio show "A Prairie Home Companion," Garrison Keillor speaks to a crowd of a few hundred people at First United Methodist Church in downtown Iowa City. Keillor also read from his new book "The Keillor Reader." BENJAMIN ROBERTS / IOWA CITY PRESS-CITIZEN

'A Prairie Home' evening

Garrison Keillor discusses book, shares experiences with hundreds

By Aly Brown |
Iowa City Press-Citizen

Garrison Keillor was born with a face for radio. Luckily, that is just the profession he found success in.

Keillor, 71, host of Minnesota Public Radio's beloved variety show "A Prairie Home Companion," writer and humorist, spoke to a crowd of hundreds Sunday at the First United Methodist Church.

"I know it's a shock to see someone whom you've known on the radio for years, and there's just nothing to be done about it," he told the crowd.

Hosted by Prairie Lights and Iowa Public Radio host Charity Nebbe, Sunday's event was in honor of last week's release of "The Keillor Reader." "The Keillor Reader" anthologizes a selection of Keillor's rich body of work, including radio monologues, humor pieces, novel excerpts, stories and newspaper columns.

Keillor began and ended the

event by leading the group in songs such as "The Iowa Waltz" and "Let My People Go," filling the sanctuary with a cheerful chorus that naturally fell together as though they had known each other for years.

"I don't look like a cheerful person, I know," he said. "I come by this face honestly. It's a radio face."

Keillor said his "severe appearance" was the result of his strict upbringing in a fundamentalist Christian family in Anoka, Minn., listening to "sermons that really chilled the heart" and parents who were products of the Depression.

Keillor's career began at the University of Minnesota's student radio station while studying English and supporting his first wife and a young son. He said he intended to be a literary genius, writing dark poems "affecting a kind of hopelessness I did not feel assuming this is what a writer should write about."

Instead of on the page, Keillor



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said he found “the dark side of the moon” while driving at 4:30 a.m. in the cold Minnesota morning to switch on the transmitter to work the morning DJ shift.

“But it changes your life because you realize, in this instant, that your fine sense of desperation and tragedy, however affected, is of no use to you now,” he recollected. “Your tragic condition of life is not negotiable. Your listeners have their own tragic visions, and theirs are better than yours. ... What’s of use to you now is cheerfulness. This is what you have to provide to your listeners at five o’clock in the morning.”

Keillor’s programming finds inspiration deep in Midwestern culture, past the pleasantries and pot-lucks and into the gritty, secret darkness. Keillor told stories of good fortune, such as narrowly escaping death through nearly fatal blood clots in his brain and a close call with a semi on the road during a blizzard, both in one day.

Although Keillor’s tales were serious, they were met with roaring laughter, a “dark” humor that deeply resonated with the audience.

“How close we come to disaster,” he said. “How close. ... It’s right there, it’s right there. And how lucky I had escaped on the highway. Had I wound up in the ditch under 20 tons of pipe, I would never have found out how lucky

I had been. I never would have gotten this news that I had escaped a close call.”

Keillor fielded questions from the audience on topics from if he considered a career in ministry, to how to succeed as writer, to what he will miss most once his tales of Lake Wobegon inevitably end.

“I haven’t even touched on the real stuff in Lake Wobegon,” he said. “Not that I even dare. ... It’s a cheerful show. It’s supposed to be. There is a lot of darkness there, and that’s why I keep on doing the show because I don’t know how to deal with all of that. I don’t know how far I can go.”

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