

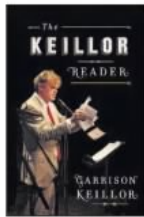
AUTHOR

A companion of the prairie

Keillor talks of Lake Wobegon, music and Iowa in advance of visit to the state

By Laura Farmer, correspondent

There is perhaps no greater champion of the Midwest than Garrison Keillor, beloved humorist, poet, singer and host of the live radio variety show, "A Prairie Home Companion." Keillor's stories and musical selections take us back to a simpler time and challenge us to slow down, put our bare feet in the grass and have another piece of rhubarb pie. In anticipation of his upcoming Iowa events, Keillor and Gazette correspondent Laura Farmer communicated over email about Lake Wobegon, music and the difference between Iowans and Minnesotans.



IF YOU GO

- **What:** Garrison Keillor discusses his new book, "The Keillor Reader"
- **When:** 7 p.m. today
- **Where:** First United Methodist Church, 214 E. Jefferson St., in Iowa City.
- **Cost:** Tickets for the event are available only through Prairie Lights Books. Two tickets will be given with the purchase of each copy of "The Keillor Reader" from the bookstore. Tickets for this event are still available.

Q. The show "A Prairie Home Companion" takes us back to a simpler time. Could you talk a little bit about what time period your program is set in, and why you chose to set in then? Do you think there was an ideal time period for American life?

A. Lake Wobegon is set in the culture of the 1950s in some ways, although people have cellphones and kids text and there's GPS and Google. But the families are intact and observe religious customs and everyone goes to public school. It's the era of my childhood and I think it was pretty great, although there was darkness to it, too, racism and other forms of cruelty ... kids who we now know are on the autism spectrum were treated badly back then. In my own family, however, there was no alcohol, nobody went berserk, my parents were very sweet on each other, and we kids were free as birds. That was wonderful. Parents didn't hover back then, none that I knew. I had long, lazy, delicious summers when I hung out

with whoever I chose, lay on the bank of the Mississippi, talked, invented games, and this dreamy life went on until I was 15 or so. A lovely childhood for a writer.

Q. Pete Seeger once said: "Once upon a time, wasn't singing a part of everyday life as much as talking, physical exercise and religion?" Why is music such an important part of your broadcast?

A. We started out as a musical variety show, wanting to put American roots music out on public view so that kids in the audience could hear the blues, gospel, ballads, theater music, opera, everything. Music seems to be diminishing in public schools, and it troubles me that kids grow up without ever hearing "Frankie and Johnny" or "John Henry" or "The Sun's Going to Shine in My Backdoor Someday" or Greg Brown's beautiful "Iowa Waltz." Pop stations are never going to play "Iowa Waltz" because it's not commercially successful, but it's still a lovely song, perfect



Garrison Keillor

Minnesota's Garrison Keillor discusses his new book, "The Keillor Reader" at 7 p.m. today in Iowa City.

in its own way.

Q. In another interview you said that if you were told you had just six months to live, "I might grow back my old beard and put on a Panama hat and write heroically again." What does it mean to write heroically? Are you able to write this way now?

A. I don't have a heroic view of myself anymore. I've become an

old scoutmaster uncle who believes in cheerfulness as a life principle. Nothing heroic about that. I used to battle for my view of public radio and I lost all the battles and public radio has gone its own way and so much for heroism. I just want to enjoy the ice cream before it melts.

Q. A friendly rivalry exists between Minnesota and Iowa.

What would you say are the differences between Minnesotans and Iowans?

A. Minnesotans used to look down on Iowans for reasons I never could fathom. The Iowan joke, which is descended from the moron joke and the Polack joke, always seemed forced to me. Iowa is a beautiful state and if Minnesotans drive south they will see that for themselves.