

'Prairie' journey reaches L.A.

Garrison Keillor will drop by local sites to meet fans up close and talk up his new book.

BY CAROLYN KELLOGG

There are 5,870 seats at the Greek Theatre, which plays host to Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" on Friday night. Only a tenth as many people can fit into Book Soup and Diesel Books in Malibu, where Keillor will appear the next day.

"The bookstores are a way of meeting people who listen to the show, and I think it's terribly important to go out and meet them," says Keillor, speaking from the road. "In Phoenix yesterday I met a lady who was 103 years old, and I met a boy who's 10."

That represents the broad appeal of "A Prairie Home Companion," the 40-year-old public radio show that native Minnesotan Keillor writes and hosts. This time out, he's also got a book, "The Keillor Reader" (Viking: 400 pp., \$27.95), which collects fiction from [See Keillor, D6]

'Prairie' companion to meet L.A. fans

[Keillor, from D1] his earliest years to the present day. The pieces come from his 19 books, published poetry, magazine stories and, of course, the stage show.

Usually performed at the historic Fitzgerald Theatre in St. Paul, Minn., the stories of the fictional town of Lake Wobegon — where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average — are broadcast live to an audience of 4 million listeners.

"If you don't meet these people face to face, they're just statistics," Keillor says. On the phone, he speaks as deliberately as on the radio, leaving wide open spaces, employing language with the echo of another era. "Seeing people as statistics I think leads into the swamp of mediocrity and despond."

He continues, "I want to

see them as intelligent, curious, complicated people and that is who they are. I really want to do my best for these people, week after week after week. I don't want to coast, and I don't want to take them for granted. I want to surprise them and make them laugh, and that's not an easy task over a long stretch of time."

Keillor always wanted to be a writer. He covered sports for the local newspaper when he was a high school freshman in the 1950s. After college, he started selling pieces to the New Yorker.

Those bits of life story appear in snippets in his new book. "The book marks a big left turn for me as a writer. I feel as if I've sort of come to the end of writing fiction, except I still do this on the radio show, and the radio show has a future ahead of it, I believe. But I'm drawn more toward memoir at this

point."

Perhaps that's due to age; Keillor is now 71 and the survivor of a stroke in 2009. In his book, alongside his trademark humor there are flashes of melancholy. The eulogy he gave for Chet Atkins, a remembrance of George Plimpton, fond stories of and for his mother, who died at 92.

"We wake up at a certain age and realize that we've become our parents. That's always startling," says Keillor, the father of a grown son and a teenage daughter. "We hear words come out of our mouths that our parents might have uttered, and that's a reminder that we're coming into those interesting late years. Young people are immortal, and people my age are not."

And yet there is something inherently boyish about him, a sense of wonder in his embroidered tales [See Keillor, D7]



ANN HEISENFELD/Associated Press

"THE BOOKSTORES are a way of meeting people who listen to the show," says Garrison Keillor, who's making an appearance at local stores for his new book.

Keillor's road show hits L.A.

[Keillor, from D6] of pontoon mishaps, rotten tomato attacks and impossible winter adventures.

When he appears at Diesel Books in Malibu, he'll be introduced by Martin Sheen, who has appeared on "Prairie Home Companion," and Dick Van Dyke, whom he's never met.

"The thought of meeting Mr. Van Dyke is staggering," he says. "I don't know what one can say. Break into dance and sing 'Chim-Chim-Cheree,' I suppose."

That's entirely possible; Keillor frequently leads his audiences, large and small, in song. "It's really my favorite part of the whole deal, to be in a group of people singing," he says.

With characteristic Mid-

'A Prairie Home Companion'

Where: Greek Theatre, 2700 N. Vermont Ave., Los Angeles

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday

Price: \$46-\$99

Info: prairiehome.publicradio.org/tickets

Garrison Keillor signing

Where: Book Soup, 8818 Sunset Blvd. West Hollywood

When: Noon Saturday

Price: Free

Info: booksoup.com

Garrison Keillor signing / Q&A

Where: Diesel Books Malibu, Malibu Country Mart, 23410 Civic Center Way, Malibu

When: 7 p.m. Saturday

Price: Free, reserved seats with advance book purchase

Info: dieselbookstore.com/event

western deference, he continues, "I don't want anybody to feel odd about it, though, so I don't push this too hard. You can kind of sense if it's that kind of a crowd. You see, they are all public radio listeners, so they have something in com-

mon ... they have this loose connection with each other. And that's really all you need to make people feel comfortable about singing. I love it when they do."

carolyn.kellogg@latimes.com