

Other Views

Goodbye, Garrison Keillor, and thanks for everything

Among the many Donald Trump denunciations that have inflamed the Internet, few have been blessed with a rhetorical gusto equal to Garrison Keillor's.



Mary Schmich

"It is the most famous ducktail in America today, the hairdo of wayward youth of a bygone era," he wrote recently in a hugely popular piece. He goes on to call Trump a bully and a braggart, summing him up as "the C-minus guy who sat behind you in history and poked you with his pencil and smirked when you asked him to stop."

And that's just the first paragraph.

If you know Keillor only vaguely, as that avuncular storyteller on public radio, the sweet, sometimes crotchety sage of a mythical Midwest, a man fond of powder-milk biscuits and mandolins, you may not know what a clever, biting, lyrical writer he can be. But before he was a radio host, Keillor was, above all, a writer.

At the age of 73, after 42 years of hosting his live variety show, "A Prairie Home Companion," he's giving up radio and returning full-time to the thing the loner in him has always loved best: writing.

For years, I've carried around some of Keillor's thoughts on writing, not only from reading him but from interviewing him. I met him in 1983 when my editor at the Orlando Sentinel gave me my first out-of-town assignment: Go to Minnesota and interview the strange creator of this strange show that has bizarrely become a hit.

I requested an interview. I was told Mr. Keillor hated interviews. I could come to the show but not talk to him.

"Get on the plane," my editor said when I informed him the story wasn't going to work out. "Make it work."

By then, Keillor's parents had moved from his Minnesota hometown to an Orlando suburb, so in an attempt to keep my job, I looked them up in the phone

book. His dad answered.

"Success of that kind isn't everything," he said, musing on his son, sounding a lot like a character in Keillor's fictional small town of Lake Wobegon.

Nevertheless, when I asked if there was anything he'd like me to take to his son in St. Paul, he said, yes there was.

A couple of days later, he appeared in the Sentinel lobby with a 25-pound bag of Florida oranges slung over a shoulder.

I lugged those oranges to the airport, wrestled them into the plane's overhead compartment, dragged them into the St. Paul theater and when I was told again that I couldn't interview Mr. Keillor, I pointed to my heavy mesh bag. "But I have some oranges for him from his dad."

For half an hour, I sat with him, and though he rarely looked at me, he talked.

I interviewed Keillor again four years later when he was quitting his show — for the first time — and moving to Denmark because, he said, fame had intruded on his ability to live normally and write honestly.

"I always feel like various forms of bulls — and cheap maudlin effects and cheap humor and gross sentimentality are anxious to be my friends and earnestly trying to get into my work all of the time," he said in that interview. "... You have to keep them out, and you have to be wary of saying things that you really do not mean."

Keillor's radio fans, people who counted on him to talk and sing to them every Saturday night around dinnertime, will miss him dearly.

Thanks, Mr. Keillor, for the stories, the songs, the jokes, the poems and the writing still to come. And for cementing these ideas in my brain: Don't be afraid of sentiment but beware of cheap maudlin effects and cheap humor. Be wary of saying what you don't mean.

When in doubt, bring oranges.

Contact Mary Schmich at mschmich@tribune.com. You can follow her on twitter.com/maryschmich or contact her on facebook.com/maryschmich