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# Keillor's Unwanted Bio

## Books / The story of a shy, lonely childhood


**"The Man from Lake Wobegon"**  
By Michael Fedo.  
St. Martin's Press. \$16.95.  
234 pages. Hard cover.

**Reviewed by NICOLE PENSIERO**

It's hard to say if Garrison Keillor, perhaps the world's most famous "shy person," had ever wished for the type of public adulation that greets him now.

As host of the weekly public radio show "A Prairie Home Companion" — which folded when he left it last spring — and author of three best-selling books, including "Lake Wobegon Days" and the more recent "Leaving Home," Keillor — who grew up unpopular and relatively friendless — has found himself increasingly the subject of public curiosity and media scrutiny.

Keillor brought the mythical community of Lake Wobegon — "the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve" — to life. And now this shy, bespectacled guy in suspenders — who even made



Garrison Keillor: press war

who, at age 14, changed his name from Gary (as if he already knew that someday he'd need a name that, in his own words, "sounded a little bigger").

"From the start," Fedo writes, "Gary was almost never like anyone else." Socially awkward and introverted, Keillor was set apart from other youngsters in his community because of his religious upbringing. The Keillor family was part of a tiny fundamentalist sect called the Plymouth Brethren. Brethren eschewed use of alcohol and tobacco (although Keillor was, for many years, a heavy smoker), and forbade dancing, gambling, motion pictures and unnecessary work on Sunday.

Keillor 'discovered' the now-famous fictitious Lake Wobegon during his early days as a radio disc jockey. After visiting the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tenn., to write a feature for The New Yorker, he was inspired to emulate the Opry's format of live music and commercials set before a studio audience.

No matter. Fedo has turned out a fine book about the elusive Keillor, Playgirl magazine's list of the 10 sexiest men in America — stands at the forefront of American popular and literary culture.

But the fact that Keillor has become a major celebrity doesn't mean he was about to give the go-ahead for a biography. As fellow Minnesotan Michael Fedo makes clear in the introduction to "The Man from Lake Wobegon," Keillor did everything possible to dissuade his friends and associates from providing Fedo with information.

The first live broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion" in 1974 drew an audience reported at only 12; by the time Keillor signed off the air on June 13, 1987, the show could be heard on more than 300 stations and had an audience of 4 million.

Fedo has done a meticulous job of following Keillor's rise to fame from his humble beginnings as a newspaper writer and college radio announcer. Keillor's personal life, however, remains more of a mystery. Fedo offers insight into Keillor's whirlwind romance with his new wife, Ulla Skaerved, a former Danish exchange student Keillor rediscovered at their 25th high school reunion. But the author has had little luck in revealing much about Keillor's first marriage or his romantic involvement with Margaret Moos, the former producer of "A Prairie Home Companion."

Instead, much of the second half of the book focuses on Keillor's ongoing war with the media regarding his private life and what Fedo calls the "dark side" of Keillor's personality that has been known to emerge in full-fledged anger.

Keillor once said that the press covered him as if he were a cross between Joan Collins and Watergate. Fedo, thankfully, views him simply as a talented man.

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