

Radio king Garrison Keillor speaks on maturity, manhood

A quick chat with the creator of Lake Wobegon

By TIM FUNK
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SPARTANBURG, S.C. — Radio storyteller Garrison Keillor arrived in the Carolinas recently on the same day an ice storm hit.

Coincidence? The man is from Minnesota.

Anoka, Minn., to be exact, though many Americans would probably still guess he hails from Lake Wobegon — that make-believe Gopher State burg where, as Keillor reminds his national audience every Saturday night, "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average."

Keillor's report on the news from Lake Wobegon always comes near the end of "A Prairie Home Companion," an old-timey mix of songs, sound effects (from rifle-wielding cats to creeping slime in the woods) and stories (about ordinary Midwesterners with names like Myrtle Krebsbach and Darryl Tollerud). The show debuted back in 1974 before an audience of just 12 people.

Sellout crowd

Keillor and company pretty much packed the house when they opened their Carolinas tour at Spartanburg Memorial Auditorium. And it was a sellout crowd Saturday night, when the latest edition of "A Prairie Home Companion" — brought to you, as always, by such pretend sponsors as the Chatterbox Cafe and Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery — was broadcast live from Spartanburg.

I caught up with the 30-year radio veteran a few hours before show time. He was in a dingy dressing room, pecking away at his portable computer and softly singing "Carolina Moon."

During the interview, Keillor — whose friends say he's shy off-stage — avoided eye contact. But he gamely fielded questions on everything from Lake Wobegon to his new collection of short stories ("The Book of Guys," Viking, \$22).

Some highlights:
Q. I asked your office how old you are and they said to ask you. How old are you?

A. I'm 51.

Q. Did Gladys, the muse of maturity, whistle in your 50th birthday (as she does to the god of wine in Keillor's short story, "The Mid-Life Crisis of



Garrison Keillor is 'doing a lot of crazy things.'

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Garrison Keillor

Dionysus")?

A. She came clapping down the stairs. I don't have a temple like Dionysus did. . . . But what matters is not how long you've lived but how many years you have left. It's like with money. It doesn't matter how much you've spent if you still have a lot left over. So that somebody who is 40 years old and who's going to die when they're 65 is actually older than somebody who is 51 and who's going to live until he's 80.

Q. And how old are you going to live to be?

A. Well, I think there's some longevity (in my family). My parents are still around. My father's 80. And my mother's 76.

Q. When you fill out your tax

return and they ask your occupation, do you put writer? Humorist?

A. You would never tell the IRS that you were a humorist, I don't think. Don't want to go out on a limb like that. They might decide to test you.

Q. So, how do you see yourself?

A. I'm a writer. That's what I do.

Q. Time magazine put a suited pig on its cover as a representation of the modern male. As the author of "The Book of Guys," you're sort of an expert on the modern male. How's he doing these days?

A. Well, I think it's delicate. But . . . I don't find that to be a very important subject. See, when I'm with men, we never talk about manhood. We tell stories and we talk about our children. And we talk about our work. We tell jokes and say what's on our minds. I've never, ever been with another man when we've discussed the nature of manhood.