

AP photo

Writer Garrison Keillor pauses during an interview outside his St. Paul, Minn., home. In his new book, "Love Me," Keillor abandons his fictional hometown of Lake Wobegon for a funny, sometimes racy story that he says is about 15 percent autobiographical.

'Love Me' isn't typical Keillor

Writer Garrison Keillor writes about the mafia, a killing and 4-letter words

ST. PAUL (AP) — Yes, Garrison Keillor once wrote for The New Yorker magazine, just like the narrator in his new book, "Love Me."

But no, Keillor has never shot a magazine publisher. You have his word on that.

"The New Yorker is real, but everything about it in the book is fiction. It's not really run by the Mafia," Keillor said during an interview on the porch of his stately home in a leafy neighborhood of St. Paul.

Looking fit two years after heart valve surgery, the famously sly Keillor is barefooted and wearing blue jeans and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He scrunches his bulldoglike face as he sips coffee and discusses everything from his new book to his decision to quit drinking.

In "Love Me," Keillor abandons his fictional hometown of Lake Wobegon for a funny, sometimes racy story that he describes as "about 15 percent autobiographical, same as with most novels."

Rise of a writer

"Love Me" traces the rise of a writer who leaves St. Paul for Manhattan,

then returns to Minnesota — a path followed by Keillor, who quit his popular "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show in 1987 before reviving it years later.

Larry Wylar, the book's narrator, writes a best-seller, "Spacious Skies," and realizes his dreams when he joins the staff of The New Yorker, a glossy, stylish magazine that Keillor calls "the Valhalla for all English majors in America, or was at one time."

But Wylar's wife, Iris, a liberal Democrat, refuses to leave their blue-collar neighborhood in St. Paul. Wylar goes to New York alone, has several affairs, then suffers writer's block when his second novel, "Amber Waves of Grain," flops.

Wylar turns to writing a newspaper column, "Mr. Blue," dispensing advice to the lovelorn, such as the man who plans a romantic evening, only to discover his girlfriend is Amish.

Along the way, Wylar discovers The New Yorker is controlled by the Mafia and ends up accidentally killing the publisher, mobster Tony Crossandotti (a joke Italian name



made up from cross your t's and dot your i's), in the Oak Room of the famed Algonquin Hotel.

Some similarities

While Keillor said most of the book is fiction, there are similarities: Keillor did write for The New Yorker, had a Manhattan apartment with a big terrace like Wylar's and for a couple of years wrote a "Mr. Blue" advice column for Salon.com.

Wylar lists arrogance, restlessness, an ungrateful heart and dishonesty among his flaws — traits Keillor said he also shares. And like his main character, Keillor said he also went through a period of drinking before stopping about a year ago.

While he didn't have a drinking problem, Keillor said, "I decided to stop for the same reasons that

On the Net

■ "A Prairie Home Companion": www.prairiehome.org.
■ Penguin: www.penguinputnam.com.

If you listen ...

"A Prairie Home Companion" can be heard in the St. Cloud area at 5 p.m. Saturdays on KSJR-FM 90.1 and KNSR-FM 88.9. The show is rebroadcast at noon Sundays on KNSR-FM.

If you buy ...

Garrison Keillor's new book, "Love Me," is available locally at Barnes and Noble, Media Play and Waldenbooks.

I stopped smoking about 20 years ago, which were that I was tired of thinking about it."

'Prairie' birth

Keillor says his first piece in The New Yorker — "a tiny, tiny piece of fiction," titled "Local Family Makes Son Happy" — appeared in 1969 or '70. After he began work on an article for the publication about the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Keillor was inspired to begin a radio show with musical guests

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and commercials for imaginary products. That idea blossomed into "A Prairie Home Companion," which debuted in 1974.

But Keillor's association with The New Yorker ended in 1992 when former Vanity Fair editor Tina Brown was named editor and brought her brand of celebrity journalism to the once-staid magazine.

"When she was appointed, I went down to my office and I packed everything into boxes and I had a copy boy ... get me a handcart and we hauled it down and I called a cab and loaded it into the trunk and I took it all back to West 90th Street and that was that," Keillor said.

"Never looked back. Grateful for my time there and I think they have a terrific editor now, so I read the magazine happily but I have no desire to write for it. None whatsoever."

"Love Me" is dedicated to the memory of Keillor's first wife, Mary Guntzel, who died in 1998. Keillor said the character of Iris, Wylor's wife, is based on Guntzel, who was a social worker.

"She was really in her element when she was doing battle in behalf of old people or whoever they were, in behalf of some individual against some large bureaucracy," Keillor said.

Those who know Keillor only as the teller of folksy tales about Norwegian bachelor farmers may be surprised by the salty language in "Love Me." The mobster character, Crossandotti, uses a certain four-letter word "almost like punctuation," Keillor said.

Keillor's radio show has become increasingly political, zinging Republicans and President Bush. While Bill Clinton's foibles provided much richer material, Keillor said, there's something about Bush "that's kind of smirky and kind of uncurious and proud of it."

Back to Wobegon

Keillor lives with his third wife, Jenny Lind Nilsson, and their 5-year-old daughter in a three-story brick home, where he writes in the dining room.

A list of books by Garrison Keillor

A sampling of Garrison Keillor books:

Books

- "Happy to Be Here," 1982.
- "Lake Wobegon Days," 1985.
- "Leaving Home: A Collection of Lake Wobegon Stories," 1987.
- "Don: The True Story of a Young Person," 1987.
- "We Are Still Married," 1989.
- "WLT: A Radio Romance," 1991.
- "The Book of Guys," 1993.
- "Cat, You Better Come Home," 1995.
- "The Old Man Who Loved Cheese," 1996.
- "The Sandy Bottom Orchestra," 1996 (with Jenny Lind Nilsson).
- "Wobegon Boy," 1997.
- "Me: by Jimmy (Big Boy) Valente," 1999.
- "Lake Wobegon Summer 1956," 2001.
- "Good Poems," 2002 (editor).
- "Love Me," 2003.

Nearby is the birthplace of Jazz Age writer F. Scott Fitzgerald and the house where Fitzgerald wrote his first novel, "This Side of Paradise."

"I've lived in this neighborhood, off and on, for half my life. I like it. We still have young high school students wandering around, looking for places where he (Fitzgerald) hung out," Keillor said.

Keillor plans to return to Lake Wobegon for his next novel, which will be about tomatoes. After writing an opera that debuted last year, Keillor said he's working on two screenplays — one about a man who comes back to Lake Wobegon for his father's funeral, the other a farce about a radio show that originates in St. Paul.

Keillor said he has no plans to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the first "Prairie Home" broadcast. "I don't want to do anything to give away my age to young people who might be listening on the radio," said Keillor, who turned 61 on Aug. 7.


A dozen people watched Keillor play host to the first live broadcast of his show from Macalester College in St. Paul on July 6, 1974.

Today, about 3.9 million U.S. listeners hear "A Prairie Home Companion" each week on more than 500 public radio stations. The Saturday evening show — produced by Prairie Home Productions, presented by Minnesota Public Radio and distributed nationwide by Public Radio International — opens its new season Sept. 27 from its home base at the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul.

Keillor said he's never had a perfect "Prairie Home" show. "There's always something that just makes you cringe, just gives you pain, causes just intense suffering," he said.

But he has no plans to quit. "The show's a lot of fun to do, and it's still my ambition to do it well. And as long as your ambition is not realized, you keep coming back to it with fresh fervor," Keillor said.

"It helps to be a perfectionist. Otherwise, you'd get tired of it. You would just kind of wear out."



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