



Palm Beach Post File Photo by Cydney Scott

Author and radio personality Garrison Keillor, who spoke at The Society of the Four Arts last year, has written a novel that pokes fun at a wide variety of subjects — from the writing life to the president.

## Humorous observations propel quest for success

By HOWARD FRANK MOSHER

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**LOVE ME** by Garrison Keillor. Viking, 272 pages, \$24.95.

During the bleakest days of World War II, a brilliant young American writer named Nathanael West published a daring novel called *Miss Lonelyhearts*, in which a problem-ridden advice columnist for a daily newspaper is unable to help either himself or the tormented people who seek his assistance. Now, nearly three-quarters of a century later, the popular humorist and storyteller Garrison Keillor has written a novel in some ways reminiscent of West's masterpiece. There's one important difference, however.

*Love Me*, the latest work of fiction by the host of the public radio show *A Prairie Home Companion*, is a hilarious satire of just about everything in the early 21st century worth poking fun at, from the writing life to the president of the United States.

*Love Me* opens in St. Paul, Minn., where its narrator, Larry Wyler, is struggling to establish himself as a fiction writer.

"Please, dear Lord, do not let me die a local writer," Larry Wyler prays after toiling five years to publish three stories in obscure regional journals. His dream of success seems to come true when he publishes a steamy best-seller called *Spacious Skies*. Soon afterward, he lights out for New York in order "to be in the midst of things, not out on the fringe."

His wife, Iris, a down-to-earth social worker and vigorous advocate for the elderly, thinks he has gone off the deep end. "So maybe you better go to New York and get it out of your system and if you want to come back and be married again, then we'll see," she tells him. "I hope you know I love you."

Initially, Larry is entranced by New York. He makes the talk-show rounds, writes a second, very bad novel that bombs, has a one-night stand and a fling, and goes to work for *The New Yorker* magazine. Trouble is, Larry is desperately homesick and entirely out of place in the Big Apple. Next, writer's block

sets in, and here Keillor is at his sidesplitting funniest, lampooning all writers. Unable to write so much as a single decent paragraph, Larry sits down and compiles a list of answers to the question "Why do I write?" "Am otherwise unemployable," he acknowledges.

Out of the blue, Larry receives an invitation from his hometown newspaper in St. Paul to write an advice column for people experiencing trouble with their personal lives. Some of the many letters to "Mr. Blue" are sad, some are laugh-out-loud funny, and some are both. Not all of the advice-seekers hail from Minnesota:

*"Dear Mr. Blue,*

*I grew up in Midland, Texas, and went to Yale though I am no reader and married a fine woman who supported me through my Lost Weekend years when I goofed around in the oil business and got high as a kite on weekends and went around making a fool of myself. With the help of dear friends, I was able to sell my bankrupt company at a handsome profit and then obtain a major-league baseball franchise and get public financing for a ball park, whereupon I sold the team for a fabulous profit. What a lucky duck. Now that I'm off the sauce, I am considering taking a stab at politics. ... my wife says 'Why don't you try writing?' You have so many good ideas. What do you think?"*

*—Curious George"*

In the meantime, Larry learns that the modern-day *New Yorker* magazine is a very different outfit from the stately publication of Harold Ross and E. B. White.

Sadder and wiser, Larry returns to the Land of 10,000 Lakes to try to win back his dear wife's affections.

In the end, I read this boisterous, good-natured tall tale as the chronicle of one man's search for connectedness with family, community and meaningful work, in a society increasingly estranged from these universal needs.

Unlike his feckless hero, Keillor has never lost touch with his Midwestern community and the rich and varied material it has afforded him over the years. In its revelation of what it means to be a human being in our gloriously absurd day and age, *Love Me* is Garrison Keillor's funniest and most ambitious novel to date.

Howard Frank Mosher's most recent novel is *The True Account: A Novel of the Lewis and Clark and Kennison Expeditions*.