

# 'Love Me' by Garrison Keillor is a funny, touching tribute to literary life

By Mary Ann Grossmann  
Knight Ridder Newspapers

Who could imagine that the New Yorker, that most venerable magazine, would be owned by the Mafia?

Garrison Keillor, that's who. In Keillor's funny, touching new novel, "Love Me," protagonist Larry Wyler learns a lot about himself and the workings of the magazine, as well as the price of fame and the secret fears and frustrations of sad/frightened/confused Americans who need advice.

Some of this stuff must be autobiographical, since Keillor wrote for the New Yorker and did an advice column for Salon.com.

"Love Me" is told in the first person by Larry, who's writing this memoir in his home on St. Paul's Sturgis Avenue. He's middle-aged and calm, living happily with his wife, Iris, whom he met when they were in choir at the University of Minnesota.

When Larry's first novel became a best-seller, he moved to Manhattan to write for the New Yorker, a magazine he'd loved since he was a child. Iris, a social worker unimpressed with her husband's new fame, remained in St. Paul, Minn., to work with the mentally ill and homeless. Larry calls her "the custodian of lost minds" and he loves her, even though she has filled their garage with shopping carts and possessions of people who have been committed.

Life in Manhattan isn't so good for Larry. He's awed when such writers as Calvin Trillin and John Updike pop into his office, and he pilots William Shawn's boat while the legendary editor drinks.

"Love Me"  
Garrison Keillor  
Viking (\$24.95)

But Larry has a severe case of writer's block, which drives him to drink. He's trying to write a second novel about Scandinavian pioneers, giving Keillor a chance to do a parody of every earnest, Ole Rolvaag-style novel ever written.

When Larry's second novel bombs, he's even more unhappy. So when he gets an offer to write an advice column from an editor at the Minneapolis newspaper, he jumps at it and becomes Mr. Blue. Woven throughout the narrative are letters to which Mr. Blue replies.

"I had no idea that the readers of the Minneapolis Star Journal were so troubled," Larry writes. "I thought of Minneapolis as fundamentally sound, Scandinavian people given to low-fat diets, aerobic exercise, listening to public radio..."

So he's astonished to hear from Distressed, whose grandfather is "holed up in the attic, ogling naked nymphets on the Internet, hour after hour, tying up the phone line," and Floundering, who found poems suggesting that her lover "is Bob but is also 'Blanche' who is not happy about sharing a body with Bob." One woman, whom he recognizes as an old friend who writes bad poetry, asks advice about her relationship with a turkey caller.

As Larry becomes more disenchanted with New York life, less sure of his writing ability and increasingly ashamed of cheating

on Iris, his advice becomes more gentle. This gradual change is the sweetest part of the book, as Larry tells people, in various ways, to have more fun, be kinder, forgive.

Meanwhile, Larry's being threatened by Tony Crossandotti, a mobster who wants his grandfather's poetry published in the New Yorker. The climactic scene in the famed Algonquin hotel, complete with gunshots and a confused tourist, is high comedy. And it sends Larry back to St. Paul and to his wife.

There are delicious bits here about the literary life, including William Shawn's scolding of Larry: "You're a guy who's capable of singing his little song and doing his dance and you try to make it into The Ring of the Nibelungs, for crying out loud."

Shawn's rant about writers whom he has edited is hilarious: "I know about you guys. I spent my life trying to make writers look good. Salinger! Hersey! Rachel Carson! The world hailed them as visionaries! All I can say is: YOU SHOULD'VE SEEN THE FIRST DRAFT, PEOPLE!"

St. Paulites will especially enjoy Keillor's sense of place. Larry and Iris take a nightly constitutional, "a two-mile circuit along West 7th past the old Czech lodge hall and the Day By Day Cafe, the porn shop and the magic store and the funeral parlor, and the half-mile trek across the High Bridge over the Mississippi to Cherokee Heights and back."

Keillor upset a lot of people when he denounced Norm Coleman's election as senator. So



AP Photo

Writer and radio personality Garrison Keillor stands outside his St. Paul, Minn. home.

there's not much doubt to whom he's referring in this description of an unnamed St. Paul mayor: "He was a slippery little sucker with a big pickerel smile and a quick hand and he'd grab your elbow and massage your back and murmur endearments in your ear even as he was planning how to dispose of your body."

"Love Me" is Keillor's first non-Wobegon book of fiction since 1999's "Me: By Jimmy (Big Boy) Valente," as told to Garrison Keillor." His 13 books have sold more than 5 million copies in the United States. Besides hosting public radio's "A Prairie Home Companion" show, now in its 27th season, Keillor is a regular contributor to Time magazine.

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