



Host of radio variety program *A Prairie Home Companion*, Keillor is more comfortable behind a laptop. "I'm better at writing," he says.

PORCH CONVERSATION

Garrison Keillor

Seeing Wobegon Through a Child's Eyes

For many, Lake Wobegon's Garrison Keillor is this generation's Mark Twain—the voice of ordinary people. Recently Andy Nash of *The Front Porch* talked with Keillor about his place in American culture—and how he got there.

THE FRONT PORCH: Mark Twain, James Thurber, Garrison Keillor. That's the line people place you in—champions of the common person. Is that the line you sought?

GARRISON KEILLOR: I was hoping for Mikhail Baryshnikov, George Clooney, Garrison Keillor—champions of slender elegance, but if you want to put me with two dead guys, that's okay. Too bad the third guy doesn't have the bold social conscience and keen ear and stylistic bravado of the first two, but he is still breathing and walking around and so there is hope for him, though at his age (61) he had better do something remarkable soon.

Who first believed in you?
My mother, of course. She had two children already, one 5 and one 4, and when I came along, my father was in the U.S. Army, so Mother took the three of us down to Bettendorf, Iowa, to live with Aunt Jean and Uncle Les and their three kids. I don't remember much about it, but Mother does and she mentions things I did and said that struck her as amusing or interesting at the time. How I talked man-to-man with my uncle. How I made sure nobody sat in the chair that Daddy had sat in when he came home on leave. If your mother thinks that you are remarkable, then you grow up confident that others will find you to be of interest, which is basic to becoming a writer. Almost nothing can dent the confidence that your mother instilled in you by listening to you when you were two years old. At this rate, my daughter is going to be another Tolstoy.

Accomplished writers often struggle with public speaking. But you've succeeded in both. Millions know you primarily through your radio show, *A Prairie Home*

The Front Porch

WHERE PEOPLE SHARE LIFE

Companion. Which do you actually enjoy more: writing or speaking? What are you better at?

I only speak as a writer, so they're really the same thing. The trick of public speaking is to be clear about what you're going to say. I sit down and write out the whole thing and then leave it at home. Anything of value I remember and all the forgettable stuff I forget. Simple as that.

How do you do at social gatherings?

Not that well, as you might guess to look at me. I'm a big gloomy galsot with eyebrows the size of fruit bats and a face like a lunatic from a Bergman movie. I walk into a room, and there's silence, and then people sort of sidle away. That's if they know me.

The thing that gets people—and perhaps the reason your breakthrough bestseller *Lake Wobegon Days* (1985) resonated with city people as well as country people—is your ability to view life through a child's eyes. Almost everyone can identify somehow with a tomato fight with a sister or the nervousness of playing third base or a first crush. Is this the universal appeal of *Lake Wobegon*—the experiences and emotions of youth?

Well, I don't know what interests people about *Lake Wobegon*. A young man told me once that he loved the show because when the *Lake Wobegon* monologue came on, his parents stopped arguing and listened. Some people enjoy it because my voice makes their kids fall asleep. Others listen as a way of torturing teenagers in the back seat of the car. (Why are we listening to this? It's so boring!) But I tend to view *Lake Wobegon* through a child's eyes because I lived there as a kid. In some form or other, most writers keep going back to their childhoods. In most autobiographies of the great and famous, the early part is the most interesting, when they were awkward and spooky and full of trepidations and people were mean to them. After they become distinguished and beloved and all, it's a long ride through Sleepyville. When I was a kid and throwing tomatoes at my sister and playing third-base against vicious right-handed pull-hitters and falling in love with somebody's cousin from Minneapolis who was reputed to be a good kisser, I didn't know I was having such a big time. I looked forward to adulthood and having a bigger time. But as we know, life gets narrow in adulthood, and you tend to hang out with people like yourself, and not the roughnecks and bullies and ne'er-do-wells and outright idiots you knew as a child. You miss them deeply. Life without them is not as rich.

Your recent book, *Lake Wobegon Summer 1956*, is told completely through a kid's eyes—a 14 year old named Gary. You introduce the book as a "work of fiction," though you yourself were 14 in 1956, were raised by a Brethren family, and had a sister with big hips. Would it be fair to say that *Lake Wobegon Summer 1956* is to the childhood of Garrison Keillor as *Tom Sawyer* is to the childhood of Mark Twain?

I certainly am the Gary in the story, the skinny kid in the high-water pants and half-rim glasses, the kid with the Underwood typewriter, no doubts about it, and our family was Brethren all the way, but the sister is invented, and my real sister didn't have big hips that I can recall. She was rather slender and lovely when she

was chosen to be Miss National Guard and rode in the forward hatch of a Sherman tank in the Pumpkin Bowl Parade in 1957.

The kids in this story. They're obviously loved by their families, but they never hear the words "I love you." Nor are the daughters told that they're pretty. Why is that?

In *Lake Wobegon* parents don't praise their children for fear of making them prideful and corrupting them. And it would undermine parental authority. If my father or mother had ever told me they loved me, I'd have been deeply embarrassed. It never occurred to me that they wouldn't love me.

In an essay for National Geographic, you basically said you created *Lake Wobegon* in the 1970s because you were lonely—because the people weren't friendly in the town you then lived in, Freeport, Minnesota. You wrote: "All those omniscient narrator stories about small-town people came from a guy sitting alone at the end of a bar, drinking a beer.... In three years only one man ever walked the 15 feet to find out who I was.... So I invented a town with a bar in which, if a stranger entered, he is, by God, without fail, intriguing to the regulars, and conversation ensues, and he turns out to be someone's long-lost cousin. In order to be accepted, I had to invent a town like the imaginary friend I had in second grade, David, who walked to school with me." You later explained Freeport's "fear of outsiders" dating back to the World Wars—but is this sort of small town reticence really that unusual? Are bars anywhere as friendly as *Wobegon's Sidetrack* Tap?

Yes, I've been in bars where the bartender served as a host in the classic sense: you moderate the political arguments and make sure people don't get carried away, you look out for your guests' well-being and their ability to operate a motor vehicle, and you make sure the newcomers feel welcome. You acknowledge their presence. Bars on the south side of Milwaukee are like that. New York City bars can be like that. Definitely, St. Paul bars are that way. Of course it's been years since I've frequented bars, so what do I know? And maybe if I'd drunk more whiskey in that Freeport bar, I would've felt more beloved.

Do most people, as Thoreau put it, "lead lives of quiet desperation"?

They lead lives of quiet perspiration. Also quiet evaporation. Of course I live in St. Paul, Minnesota, so what do I know? You could shoot a cannon down Selby Avenue and not hit one despairing person. If you're in despair, I say, Lighten up. Look around. While you sit looking at the wall, the world goes on, and the parade is passing, and the way to brighten your mood is to go outside and look at it. Thoreau was a rather snuffy sort of guy, a real New Englander, who enjoyed holding the moral high ground and who didn't have a great many close pals as a result. He didn't know people well enough to know if that was quiet desperation or just mannerliness. If he'd had a girlfriend there at Walden Pond, I daresay he'd have written a better book.

To read more of *The Front Porch's* interview with Garrison Keillor, go to www.porchsyndicate.com.