

Lake Wobegon, where writers are above average

PONTOON, by Garrison Keillor. Viking, 248 pp., \$25.95.

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Evelyn Peterson's desire to have her cremated remains sealed in a bowling ball and deposited in Lake Wobegon figures among the thousand eccentricities of character that Garrison Keillor catalogs in "Pontoon."

Keillor's approach in this very enjoyable novel is to lay out, one after another, the enormous inventory of his small-town characters' quirks. Practically every sentence proffers a new weirdness. Only a virtuoso could carry off such a method; a less inventive writer would be boring you to death by the 10th page.

Evelyn receives her visit from the Angel of Death in the first paragraph. The funeral planning falls to her daughter, Barbara, a testy woman with "a

creme de cacao problem" who enlists her college-age son, Kyle, to drop the bowling ball from a parasail he's constructed from a kit.

Meanwhile, Lake Wobegon native Debbie Detmer, who made her fortune in California by providing aromatherapy to cats, has returned to celebrate her relationship with a workaholic who sells time-shared luxury jetliners. She's planning a ceremony on the lake that involves four gargantuan duck decoys and a pontoon boat.

You can sense what's in store.

The climax doesn't turn out to be hilarious — just amusing, like so much of Keillor. There weren't many lines in "Pontoon" that made me laugh out loud, though I kept reading happily.

Of course, I wanted more. Keillor has thought long and deeply about his characters; this is a story, he explains in an author's note, that he has "told several hundred times to audiences in theaters here and there with many variations."

Hence, no doubt, the luxuriance of psychological filigree. His Minnesota oddballs are very real to him.

If they're less real to us, I suspect it has something to do with the gentleness of his world view, which, without being Disneyish, suggests the optimism of a kindly minister.

The shaggy-dog tales he recounts on his radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion," often have the air of homilies.

Keillor doesn't play down the destructiveness of human

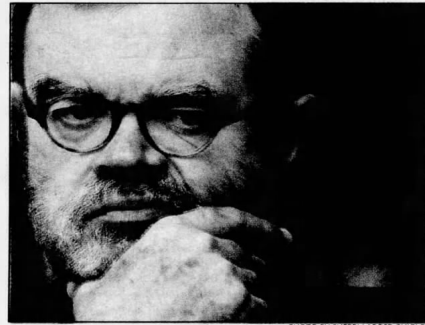


PHOTO BY SHERRI LAROSE-CHIGIO

Garrison Keillor

foible: There are sad portraits of hopeless losers here. Yet there's no real darkness, either. When he writes about politics in his syndicated column, he shows an awareness of predatory malice. Yet it doesn't seem to have found its way into Lake Wobegon.

He represents a peculiarly American phenomenon: the talented artist of overwhelming modesty. (E.B. White was another one.) Everything in his manner says that he wants you to know, and to know that he knows, he's no better than you

are. That folksiness works on the radio — I do laugh at his stories there — but it limits him as a writer.

Self-importance is probably necessary to an artist. I'm not sure Keillor's modesty is such a great thing, even on the radio. I used to listen to "A Prairie Home Companion" all the time, and then one day I'd had enough. And that was it. "Pontoon" is smart, it's well written, you'll have a good time if you read it. Still, you may have better things to do.

