

BIBLIOPHILES

Garrison Keillor: Prefers biographies over fiction

Garrison Keillor, host and creator of the public radio program "A Prairie Home Companion," says his fundamentalist Christian parents never thought much of fiction, but they didn't forbid him from reading it. Their most lasting effect on his life, he says, is that he's still uncomfortable swearing. "Sometimes I try but it never comes out right," he says. His newest book is "O, What a Luxury," a collection of verse he's written and performed for his show.

BOOKS: What is the book you read most recently that knocked you out?
KEILLOR: The novel "Children Are Dia-

monds" by Edward Hoagland. It is gripping. It makes me want to go back and read all of his collections of essays again.

BOOKS: What are you currently reading?

KEILLOR: Deborah Solomon's new biography of Norman Rockwell, whose work I admire. By god, the man was a hard worker and was true to his vision. He was so dismissed as a painter of sentimental kitsch, but he labored hard and long to bring a Dutch masters-like technique to scenes of common life. I'm also reading books of local Minnesota history by way of Lake Wobegon research, light trash for parody purposes, and poetry for "The Writer's Almanac."

BOOKS: How much poetry do you read for "The Writer's Almanac"?

KEILLOR: I'm a speed reader of poetry. I can tell right away if a poem is anything I'd use on the "Almanac." I only use poems that a listener driving in heavy traffic with two nattering kids in the back seat can get in one listening. That reduces the field considerably.

BOOKS: How long have you been a poetry reader?

KEILLOR: I left it alone after college. I was just plain tired of all that sensitivity and people whooping it up over a

crucifix blooming in the snow. Then I started "The Writer's Almanac" and had to do my homework. Most poetry is pretty dreadful. So you find people you like and stay loyal to them, like Maxine Kamin, W.S. Merwin, John Ashbery, and May Swenson. You don't need a hundred friends, and you don't need a hundred favorite poets. A few will do.

BOOKS: What do you spend most of your time reading?

KEILLOR: I'm more and more drawn to biography having built up some intolerance to fiction. I open up most novels and read the first few lines and think, "Oh, spare me," and head for biography. Who could have invented Julia Child or Ava Gardner or Charles Schulz or Flannery O'Connor?

BOOKS: When did you grow averse to fiction?

KEILLOR: Maybe it was when I was busy writing Lake Wobegon novels. I was overworked between the radio show, "The Writer's Almanac," and a column I wrote for Salon. I had little time to spend on stuff I didn't find useful. Since then I've become kind of a cranky reader. I don't want to waste my time, which is a fundamental Midwestern value.

BOOKS: Which novels did you like



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when you were an English major in college?

KEILLOR: I loved Theodore Dreiser's "Sister Carrie." That was my idea of an American masterpiece. Willa Cather didn't quite compare.

BOOKS: Why do you think people such as yourself gravitate to nonfiction as they age?

KEILLOR: I think it's the feeling that American life is separated from reality. We live in this odd, dreamy world of prosperity and calm, and most fiction is not going to give us what we need to know. The reason I love the Hoagland novel is because it's about a world entirely outside of America, a world of tribal warfare in Africa. I felt it was important to have that experience.

BOOKS: And when you need light trash, where do you find that?

KEILLOR: I love to read narcissistic trash on blogs and on Facebook. That's American life now. We've done with making steel and cars and shirts and pants and now the big quick money is in social networking, people posing for pictures, telling you what they had for breakfast.

AMY SUTHERLAND

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