

The News From Lake Wobegon

LAKE WOBEGON DAYS, By Garrison Keillor. New York: Viking, 337 pages, \$17.95.

By **WILLIAM PORTER**

Garrison Keillor is not just a writer; he is a phenomenon. For 11 years he has been hosting "A Prairie Home Companion," the Saturday night variety show on National Public Radio, "sponsored" by the merchants of Lake Wobegon, Minn., Keillor's fictional hometown. For most listeners, the high point of each show is Keillor's monologue, which always begins, "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon," and ends, "That's the news from Lake Wobegon, Minn., where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average."

Keillor's weekly reports on these men, women and children, delivered in the dulcet Midwestern baritone of a born storyteller, have become a Saturday night staple for a large and dedicated audience. For them, and for everyone else who would like to know what all the Saturday night fuss is about, Keillor's new book, *Lake Wobegon Days*, is a cause for rejoicing. Here, at last, is a ready reference on this history and culture of Lake Wobegon, "Gateway to Central Minnesota," and its newsworthy inhabitants.

Here are Ralph, proprietor of Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, Dorothy of the Chatterbox Cafe, Wally of the Sidetrack Tap. Here are the competing clerics, Father Emil, priest at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility, and Pastor Ingqvist of Lake Wobegon Lutheran, whose respective flocks are so dubious about each other's creeds, they lay their dead in separate sections of the town's only cemetery.

Here are the Sons of Knute, all of them proud of the town's memorial to their ancestor, the Statue of the Unknown Norwegian. And, best of all, here is Keillor, wise and gentle parodist, seeing and hearing them all and refining nuggets of comic truth from the dross of their everyday lives.

Keillor writes without a hint of condescension and without resort to the mean-spirited brand of satire which Sinclair Lewis (in *Main Street*) and others have heaped upon the small Midwestern towns in which they grew up. Both in his mono-



Photo By Jim Brandenburg

Garrison Keillor, author of "Lake Wobegon Days"

logue and in his book, Keillor is part of, not above, the society he is satirizing.

Though he knows Lake Wobegon is a place "where smart doesn't count for so much," he writes with genuine empathy for his characters' foibles and struggles. He is sad when they are sad, glad when they are glad, bemused when they are bemused.

Though he is now a city dweller (Minneapolis) and an accomplished writer of short fiction for *The New Yorker* and other sophisticated periodicals, Keillor, one suspects, knows he will always see the world through the prism of his small-town upbringing, with its emphasis on church and family, its closeness to the land and its roots in Scandinavian and German culture.

That he has wrestled with the confusion that often arises when provincial sensibilities and values clash with urban glitters and pragmatism is hinted at in the book when one of his characters returns home to deliver his "95 Theses," a manifesto against his Lake Wobegon upbringing. He takes it to the Lutheran Church, but because of his upbringing, is afraid to nail it to the door for fear of making holes in a good piece of wood. The manifesto deplures, among many other things, his

parents having taught him to fear strangers, to feel shame and disgust about his own body and "to value a good night's sleep over all else, including adventures of love and friendship, and even when the night is charged with magic to be sure to go to bed."

There is something in most of us, I suspect, that is still struggling to escape the shackles of such nurture and admonition, and Keillor's ability to make us laugh about it and to invest the struggle with legitimacy of universal human experience is what makes him so appealing.

Maybe our parents were not so strange after all; they were just like his. Maybe we are not so strange ourselves. Maybe learning we are "just like everybody else, only more so" is what Keillor's book is all about. To have these truths revealed in a book so deftly written, so unerringly faithful to the rhythms and idiosyncrasies of Midwestern dialect is a rare pleasure. I hope there will be many sequels.

• **WILLIAM G. PORTER** is a Charlotte physician who rarely misses an installment of "Prairie Home Companion," which airs in Charlotte on WFAE (FM 91) from 6 to 7 p.m. Saturdays.