

Arts

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# Garrison Keillor puts shyness aside to promote new book

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Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON — To reach the top of the bestseller list, Garrison Keillor assumed a writer needed "an angle," something like "sexual deviance among the wealthy and famous."

But without the faintest trace of an angle, Keillor's new book, "Lake Wobegon Days," is No. 1 on the national fiction best-seller list for the second consecutive week. It replaced "Lucky," Jackie Collins' trashy saga of sex and power.

"Lake Wobegon Days" has a hint of sex, not much power, but a lot of love. It's the meandering social history of a small town. Booksellers classify it as fiction, due to the fact Lake Wobegon (woe-be-gone) is not found on any map. But Keillor says, "Maps are not the last authority on the world.... After all, not everything that's real is on paper."

Lake Wobegon is real enough to the 2 million listeners of Keillor's Saturday night public radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion," where for 11 years he has been telling stories about the town he calls "the gateway to Central Minnesota."

These days Keillor (Keel-or) is far from Lake Wobegon and its Night-of-Rest Motel and Bait Shop. On a 13-city publicity tour, he is staying in fancy big-city hotels, giving three to four interviews a day and talking about Jackie Collins:

"You see, she writes books that nobody would give to another person as a gift. You'd never give Jackie Collins to

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your aunt, or to your uncle either, or to any of your cousins because of what's inside and also what's outside.

"The lurid book cover has dust on it which, if you even touch it, will stay on your fingertips. Your fingers will be blue for years. It's made from PCBs, I believe."

All this has been said with the straightest of faces, but that line about the PCBs is too much even for Keillor. He bursts into a rare laugh.

But Keillor can be serious as well. Speaking of Collins, he says, "her book is basically asexual. If read seriously by too many people, it would turn us all toward celibacy. The act of making love has never been much of a problem. It's what comes before and after."

Keillor turned to radio because he couldn't earn enough money as a writer, then gradu-



Garrison Keillor, host of 'A Prairie Home Companion'

ally built up a national radio audience that has rushed out to buy his book. Three weeks after it was published, it's in its seventh printing, up to 500,000 copies.

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west in the 1830s "were great letter writers and journal keepers, even some poets. They had so much fun recording their impressions and attitudes, that fiction never occurred to them."

Keillor's book may be the first novel with footnotes, a device he recommends to other novelists for "the stuff that

doesn't quite fit, but that you don't want to get rid of entirely."

He is 41, 6-foot-4, has an owl face, bushy eyebrows and likes to wear suspenders and red socks. He's been making up stories ever since he tried to impress a big-city girl when he was 13, and has been writing nearly as long.

He grew up in Anoka, a small town on its way to becoming a suburb of Minneapolis. His parents belonged to the Plymouth Brethren, a tiny fundamentalist sect that prohibited "dancing, drinking, card playing, liberal education and too-friendly association with nonbelievers." His book describes the Sanctified Brethren which, he admits, are exaggerated "for humor's sake."

"The crucial part of the description is not the jokes I make at their expense about household items with scripture verses on them, or their divisiveness over tiny points of scripture doctrine. The crucial point about the Brethren is the feeling we had with each other of great unspoken love."

Keillor, who once wrote an essay called "Shy Rights: Why Not Pretty Soon?", remains an arch-defender of the rights of shy people. When he started on his book promotion tour, he says he was taken off the mailing list of the Shy Rights Movement, but "I doubt if I've gotten over my shyness. As you grow up you learn to take risks and I look upon this as a wonderful risk."

He doesn't expect to stay atop the bestseller list long, not with James Michener's blockbuster "Texas" coming out soon.

"He will sell a million copies in Texas alone," Keillor says. "It makes me wish I was born in a more populous state. Sales of that book will delete forest reserves for decades. At night you'll hear the rumble of trucks and you'll know the Michener book is coming."