

Luther English professor writes book about 'radio's tallest shy person'

# Taking a good look at Garrison

By MELODY PARKER  
Courier Staff Writer

**D**ECORAH — Everyone knows Garrison Keillor. Unauthorized biographies, tabloid newspaper exposes, his own best-selling novels, albums, New Yorker magazine pieces and, of course, the ever-popular "A Prairie Home Companion" have made him a bona fide personality.

Keillor's folksy style of wit, both satirical and sentimental, has been compared to those American bards of cracker-barrel philosophy and humor, Mark Twain and Will Rogers.

The complexities of Keillor's private, often temperamental personality coupled with his prodigious creativity as a writer and abilities as a storyteller intrigued Luther College English professor Peter Scholl, who has written a scholarly book about "radio's tallest shy person."

"I think of Keillor as a literary comedian — a writer who performs what he writes, and like Twain, Keillor is a strong regional character," notes Scholl, who describes himself as a student of American humor.

Simply titled "Garrison Keillor," Scholl's in-depth study draws parallels between Keillor's public career as a radio performer and his solitary life as a writer. Scholl calls it "Keillor's duality, his doubleness. There is the celebrity and private citizen, the writer and the performer."

"Gary Edward Keillor chose 'Garrison' as his name when he was 13, growing up in Minnesota. There's a Garrison, Minn., which links him to a place, and it's also a body of soldiers at a fort. His parents were hostile to his ambitions as a writer, and 'Garrison' sounds like someone who is formidable," he explains.

**S**choll became interested in Keillor in the late 1970s. He wrote a paper on the humorist for an Iowa English Teachers meeting and, in 1982, made an academic presentation at a regional conference. "Somehow it found it's way into Keillor's hands. He wrote me a nice letter and sent me a record album."

"I felt encouraged and wrote an article about him which was published in an academic journal. Then, in 1989, I decided I'd write a book about him," Scholl explains.

The English professor landed a book contract in 1990 with Twayne Publishers in New York, an imprint of Macmillan Publishing Co., which was preparing a series of books on great American writers.

Keillor is skittish about what is written about him, and Scholl was careful to obtain his permission before writing the book.

"I wanted to be accurate, and I knew if I was going get access to good sources and gain their cooperation, I'd need Keillor's permission. I wrote him, he wrote back and said OK."

"He just wants people to be fair, and I



Photos by RICK CHASE/Courier staff photographer

Luther College English professor Peter Scholl, below right, has written a scholarly work, shown above, about "radio's tallest shy person," Garrison Keillor.

wanted to do things in the proper way," Scholl explains.

Scholl was given complete access to the Minnesota Public Radio Archives, and spent hours listening to reel-to-reel tapes and reading scripts. He also corresponded with and interviewed Keillor associates and interviewed the man himself in August 1990 in Keillor's offices at the New Yorker.

Keillor has revitalized the traditions of local color and literary comedy, Scholl maintains in his book. "A Prairie Home Companion," broadcast every Saturday night on the American Public Radio Network, attracted nearly 4 million listeners in its 1980s heyday, and his new show, "The American Radio Company," appeals to a similar audience.

"His output is phenomenal. He did two hours of radio on Saturday nights, seven hours a week for a morning show he did for several years, plus pieces for the New Yorker, radio talk and commercials. In books, he was constantly drafting novels. I found myself wondering how he can do it all and keep sane," Scholl marvels.

**T**he author touches on Keillor's often turbulent personal life, but only as it relates to his work.

Scholl also examines how Keillor's work on the New Yorker "has affected the structure and nuances of his oral tales; they represent a cross-pollination between traditional oral storytelling

and the verbal artistry of not only the New Yorker writers young Keillor so admired — James Thurber, S.J. Perelman, A.J. Liebling and E.B. White — but also such experimentalist writers as Donald Barthelme."

Keillor broke with the New Yorker when Tina Brown took over as editor.

"Probing the complexity of this man's mind ... the strength of Keillor's talent is impressive, the way he's honed his talent. I'm in awe of his abilities. I consider him a major American humorist," Scholl adds.

He hopes to see his literary portrait of Keillor made available in high school libraries and used as text in American humor courses, as well as read and enjoyed by Keillor fans.

The hardcover book is \$21.95, and is available by writing Twayne Publishers, 866 Third Ave., New York, NY 10022.

