

## Feminists, meet Garrison Keillor, who's in a 'guy' mode

Quiet weeks are the norm around Lake Wobegon, Minn., radio humorist Garrison Keillor always says of his mythical hometown.

So maybe he'll be rested and ready for what could be a noisy weekend in Des Moines — particularly if discussion turns to relations between the sexes.

Oh yes, on this same weekend in which we have a three-day "Women's Voices" conference at Drake University — organizers hope it will re-ignite the feminist movement in Iowa — here comes Keillor to do a show he calls "The Story of Guys" tonight at the Des Moines Civic Center.

Hummm.

At Drake, 800 women from across the state are expected for lectures and workshops addressing such topics as "personal empowerment," "politics and leadership" and a hip new book, "Mother Daughter Revolution — From Betrayal to Power."

And over at the Civic Center, the 51-year-old Keillor will do readings, songs and skits based on his just-published, "The Book of Guys," which certainly has an interesting perspective on manhood.

"It is time for women to take over the world," Keillor writes, in a line all feminists will like. But the rest of that very sentence is, "so that guys can pursue their destiny as adventurers, lovers, humorists and backup singers."

Hummm, again.

IOWA BOY



Chuck  
OFFENBURGER

He goes on: "Manhood used to be an opportunity for achievement — look at St. Francis, Mozart, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Vince Lombardi — but now people treat it as a problem to be solved. Sometimes we guys feel like manhood peaked back in the 18th century. Here's one guy who is not afraid to stand up and defend the gender..."

It's a good time, I decided, to check in with Peter Scholl, a professor of English at Luther College in Decorah, who has a new biography out, "Garrison Keillor."

Scholl, 48, has spent 15 years or more studying Keillor, and his book, published

by Twayne Publishers as part of their series on U.S. authors, is a thorough and entertaining analysis of Keillor's life, his writing and his radio work.

Scholl startled me, after I'd asked what he knows new about Keillor, by reporting that the tall Minnesotan spent two days in Decorah a couple of weeks ago. Hey, no one told me.

"Keillor is going to be one of the on-camera hosts of CBS-TV's coverage of the Winter Olympics in Norway," Scholl said. "So CBS was filming him here to get together some advance material about the Norwegian heritage in the Decorah area, using it as an example of Norwegian influence in America."

He did on-camera interviews at a big gathering of the Sacquette family, which is one of our real Norwegian-American families around Decorah. And he did a piece on a Norwegian-language service at a rural Lutheran church.

And you know how he's always joked about 'bachelor Norwegian farmers' around Lake Wobegon? Well, CBS found Arvid and Aaron Swenson, who are not only bachelor Norwegian farmers, probably in their 50s, but they're also twin brothers about 6 feet 5 inches tall.

They brought them here to Decorah from Flom, Minn., and Keillor did an interview with them. They dwarfed him, and they had these stoic faces and didn't have

much to say at all. Keillor loved it."

But on to the main reason I called Scholl. Where does he think Keillor, in this "guy" mode now, stands on feminism?

"Well, he's certainly satirized the women's movement over the years, but then he's also satirized the men's movement," Scholl said. "I think he'd generally be in sympathy with mainstream feminism and would think it's a good thing."

"But I also think some of his work would be vulnerable to attack from feminists. A lot of feminists might consider him kind of an old, unreconstructed man. And then there's the sad history of his love life."

Keillor's first marriage, which produced a son, now 24, ended in divorce in 1976, just as his radio career was taking off nationally. Then he had a long relationship with a woman who also was the producer of his show, "A Prairie Home Companion," on American Public Radio.

That broke up in 1985 when Keillor attended his 25th high school reunion in Anoka, Minn., and fell "sick to my stomach in love" with Ulla Skaerved, who'd been an exchange student from Denmark in his class. She was divorced with four kids and living in Denmark.

Skaerved and Keillor married within six months, moved first to New York, then

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# Garrison Keillor in 'guy' mode

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Denmark and back to New York. One of the reasons they moved from Minnesota, Keillor has said, was the nosiness of Twin Cities newspapers about his personal life.

He moved back about a year ago, built a home in Wisconsin, a short commute from the Cities. He has been doing his Saturday evening radio shows from St. Paul again. Tonight's broadcast is a re-run so Keillor could be in Des Moines for his stage show.

But is Keillor still married?

"Well, I don't know," biographer Scholl said. "I kind of hemmed and hawed about it in the book. I didn't press it with him. He had to read the manuscript and sign it before it was published, and I thought pressing him about the marriage might be poison to the whole project."

In February 1992, just ahead of Keillor's show at the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, I asked him about the persistent rumors that his marriage had ended. "It's all up in the air — it seems like it always is," he said. "Oh yes, I'm still married — and to my wife, Ulla — but it's interesting. It's always interesting."

And it got even more interesting in September. Keillor had been on a visit to Denmark and wrote a piece for the New York Times — it was subsequently re-printed in the Minneapolis Star Tribune — on how civilized Denmark is, how the newspapers and the citizenry there are good enough to leave a guy's private life private, even if he happens to be a celebrity.

Two weeks later, the Minneapolis paper carried a letter-to-the-editor, headlined "Dear Garrison" and authored by none other than Ulla Skaerved. Why this hasn't made further news, I'm not sure.

Skaerved wrote in reaction to Keillor's piece about how civilized Denmark is. "In America it is different," her letter said. "People who have the public eye watching them either have to live a life — or produce an official image — that is considered proper by the public, the audience, the listener, the reader."

"A celebrity, like yourself, keeps building on the illusion he is still married to the Dane he married some years ago. The truth is the marriage ended two years ago when you moved in with another woman." The letter was signed, "Yours, ex-wife Ulla Skaerved," in New York.

It's a letter the likes of which I've never seen in a letters-to-the-editor section.

"We were all surprised when it came in," said Lisa Hoff, letters editor of the Star Tribune. "We immediately verified it by calling her."

Any answer from Keillor? "No," Hoff said, "it's been strangely quiet about it."