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A Natural born KELLOR



After the bright limelight of the city, Garrison Kellor, humourist laureate of Hicksville, USA, has returned to his roots. AUREA CARPENTER met him at the real Lake Wobegon.

It isn't a pretty scene. The cat sits on the dashboard littered with grass and pebbles. The parking lot — a mass of grey puddles under the Minnesota dew-swept sky — is empty. And Garrison Kellor is enjoying himself immensely. "Aren't they amazing?" he says, pointing to a sign of a dog.

There are definitely the worst hangovers in town. Treating a visiting interviewer to the culinary pit of Minneapolis is what you should expect of the man who more than anyone else in contemporary America, has captured the imagination of a generation of 39-cent apes, in not so much Hicksville as Minn. Hills, the kind of place where the local drunk show up after closing time.

But for the 54-year-old author and radio host, crackerbatter philosopher and postmodernist, it is all in a good day's light entertainment. "Now, let's see," he says, pulling the front window of the minivan up as if by magic, "you've got a microphone. They do hangovers — they're like an hour's recovery. And once they're over, they're very good. And coffee. And coffee. "Now, would you like a late cup of homegrown cheddar on yours?"

Kellor is the writer and presenter of *American Radio Company*, a cool program that offers an eclectic blend of politics, social commentary, song, and stories, the centerpiece of which is the weekly news from Lake Wobegon, the fictional town "which time forgot and the decade cannot improve."

Nothing much happens there. There is no news to know beyond what's being relayed in Ralph's Grocery Store ("Remember, if you can't get it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it"). The Holy Bank ("The friendly bank in the green mobile home on Main Street, where your money is always safe and the door is always open").

After more than 20 years on the air, the program still attracts an audience of 7 million — quite something in the country which spawned the three-second attention span. And that the show still goes on is thanks, not least, to the fact that Kellor is a dedicated crusader for the lost cause of live radio. "It's prepared to make it like the Mezz used to do. Each week, assisted by a team of musicians and researchers, he puts together two hours of new music and news. It's a different American place with a different American voice."

He has a different American voice, in his own right. In some dimly lit theatre hall before a couple of hundred checking, like those devoted.

Given that he could, if he wished, broadcast the show from his own backyard, it seems eccentric that Kellor should make these weekly forays into the bleak streets of middle America (when we meet, he is flying off into Minnesota, to bring his own music).

But it becomes monochromatic even, when Kellor admits that the radio thing is "just a hobby which got out of hand."

For what he really cares about is his writing. He has had phenomenal success with this. Not with novel and collections of stories and short stories, and about all with Lake Wobegon (1987). The book that grew out of his radio show and has sold over half a million copies.

Yet it is a success he seems to have achieved almost in spite of himself. "It never again have a book which will half as many copies as Lake Wobegon," he says in 1989, a prophecy he clearly found comforting. "I have your own kind of practical feeling. Why should the ever want to report something so tumultuous and unorthodox of good fortune?"

Perhaps you should take him as a child's story or were called *The Old Man Who Lived In A Shoe*, is an odd one-sided aspect, but it is, nonetheless, a most market in his parable armory, and one aimed at a market which he describes with some relish as "frankly, a horrible waste, a cheat."

"I had an idea they would be easy to write," he says. "I didn't read any other hangover books that just because they are"

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fewer words, it doesn't mean that their books don't require tedious, does intellectual figures. So I thought I'd find one, and indeed they are, or, wonderfully easy to write [read]. I was out of about a week [long, long period] I could turn out 50 children's books."

This sort of disingenuous, snook-crooking is typical of Kellor and the key to his success. He may be a shy man (so shy that "I could hardly bear to be looked at when I was on the air") but he is also a master of controlled, show-escape wit and he has got a T that they don't want to risk dividing from and content when he speaks — noting something clearly or nonlinear while maintaining an expression of goodness, disingenuous.

At first glance, though, he cuts an average figure: tall and large-framed, with the oddest face, a squared, bachelorette square dominated by a pair of thick, round eyebrows, behind which you notice not so much the eyes as the scuffing front the eyebrows when he is eating his hangover the lower half of his face disappears completely behind the hair, and the eyebrows are all you can see) but the smiling, impression is distinctly childlike and benign. Instead, in a striped shirt under his signature jean jacket, and too short jeans that hover gamely

above a pair of red jeans, Bush Puppy shoes, he is a genuine house-boy street Mark Twain.

He arrives a few minutes late to an interview in a modest office he keeps at Minnesota Public Radio in downtown St Paul, and looks slightly unmythical, distracted even, as if he has forgotten why he has come. It is only later, when he reports to the conductor of his station wagon, that he gradually relaxes. And as we coast along the wide, tree-lined streets, he keeps up a running, self-parodic commentary that deep twilight color of his pointed out things and places of note.

He takes us to an affluent suburb called Cicero Hill, the high-end suburb where he lives, and where the young Kellor himself (and the camera, peering into the grand houses and thinking "How elegant and fancy they look must be Yes, fancy," and I thought, if only I could love here, I could do that too").

The odds were heavily stacked against him. Kellor, brought up in Anoka, Minnesota (pop. 15,000), was not just a small-town boy; his parents were members of a branch of the Plymouth Brethren, a Protestant fundamentalist sect domiciled in his Lake Wobegon area. On "The Socialized Brothers"

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a sect to try that nobody but us and God knew about. They kept to strict rules. Radio was allowed, but television, dancing, smoking, along with any form of self-expression or individualism was what was despised or forbidden.

Kellor, the third of six children, was the odd one out. When at 13 he submitted his first poems to his junior high school literary magazine, his parents deemed it "a shame on the family." There was even more bartering when he changed his name from Gary to Garrison (after looking up "Garrison" in the dictionary and finding it there near garbage and airplanes — it sounded mighty and formidable. He considered not to be trifled with).
And then, one day at his mass, mooching about in the Anoka Forker. With his elegantly casual style, the magazine of E. B. White and James Thurber and S.J. Perelman was, he has recalled, "a fabulous sight, an immense glittering ocean liner off the coast of Minnesota."

He was a copy house and read on a surprisingly, and from then on "with a constant, low fever waiting for my cue to come and take me away to something funny".
By the time he finally landed a staff job at the *New Yorker*, in 1987, he was already a star. In the

increasing three decades whether writing a satirical column for his company magazine in the '60s, or short stories and articles — a married, Vietnam veteran in the early '70s — or hosting his radio show and crafting fine essays in the '80s — he had worked quietly away at his authorial persona.

By the 1980s, he had celebrity draped upon him. *Time* magazine hailed him as the unaffiliated humorist laureate of America, upholding his face as a fictional image of Lake Wobegon. The city took from the sticks had arrived (and he was later that year *Playgirl* magazine named him one of America's 10 sexiest men, a best-selling opportunist, as he said at the time: "I'm a near-sighted, middle-aged widower who grew up fundamentalist").

Of course, Kellor was, by then, much more than that. He was "decent and funny," he had hoped he would be. But fame came at a cost there; he had not always taken in his stride. For there is a flip side to all the laid-back, self-deprecating charm.

Kellor, not to put too fine a point on it, is a man of temperamental extremes. He has been married three times — most recently, a year ago, to Jenny, a book publisher, 23. It is a few years older than his own by five years. Much more than the of former acquaintances to whom I asked about their friendship with him, not a little sarcastically, in terms of which relationship era they fell into: "Oh, yes, I knew him during the Moon administration" (Margaret Moon, the producer of his radio show, who whom Kellor lived for a number of years). "Yes, I knew Garrison when he was with Ullis" (Ullis Shaverred, his second wife, a Danish woman who had been an exchange student at his high school and for whom he left Moon in 1986 after running into her agent at a 25th-anniversary class reunion).

It flows where not that much has been said about it. Kellor, in a body snuff, and more than once, Kellor has found himself subject to attacks in the local press. In fact, it was the media tirade following his whitened courtesy of Shaverred that precipitated his departure for New York in 1987. "I felt watched... it depressed me that life might be better elsewhere."

It might have been. But whether out of predictable malice or something that their most famous son had departed for the city, or because he just didn't want to live there, there is still much ill feeling towards him in his home town. And when he decided, seven years later, to return home (once again upon a cloud of unwanted publicity following his abrupt departure from the *New Yorker*) the prodigal would not be welcomed.

This time, of course, the trouble was also a result of a bout-up with a woman, though the one with whom he had been a relationship partner, when Kellor found that Tim Brown was leaving family life to take the helm of his previous magazine, he did not want to see her leave the way to something funny.
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And so on, but out of the dizzy-making disperse what most comes across in his professional sense of sadness. Though he would never dream of going back to the *New Yorker*, his departure from it has left a gaping hole in his life.

So here he is, back home in Minnesota, perhaps even a slightly changed, making himself at home with his children's books, and other projects. The other — an anthology of American poetry, another *Wobegon* novel. In 1994, he brought some land within commuting distance of Minneapolis-St Paul on the St. Croix River. He and Jenny now spend much of their time there in a little wooden house in the middle of a cherry wood forest, with a big porch out back and a wood-burning stove.

Or so he tells me. After too many bad experiences of going off from his parents. But it all sounds very good. Garrison and Jenny, using in their house in the area, Garrison scribbling away and Jenny practising her scales of Garrison. But by the porch will soon be filled with the laughter of more baby Kellors.

In some respects, then, Wobegon must seem to have ended up where he started — bound by the mere social codes established by the region's earlier Scandinavians and German pioneers. Among those was the harsh Mennonite law of "who do you know you are?" (The "do you know you are?" of the many, neighborhood, tanning disapprovingly behind an all-curtain, this is the law aimed at anyone who dared to distinguish himself, who dared to move on. "That Gary Kellor," he has gone above himself, Dorothy Know. Who does he think he is?" Kellor has made a career out of mocking it, now, strongly, he seems to have re-embodied it.)

So who does he think he is, ask him as we clear up the car and hand him nearly the great satire of middle American conservatism he's been known to overplay. "I had to be long phoned again."
"The thought of making it or anything else is much more interesting to you when you are in the city, or because he just came for me any more. Yes, I would feel imprisoned if you told me I had to stay here for the next 20 years, but I would everyone else here, I think, I'd be late to be late, though."

"Oh, yes," he says, back in mock-proud mode. "Oh, yes, I think it's a awful one. The spirit of this life is the spirit of democracy, the spirit of America."

But what of the spirit of individualism, eccentricity and an artist's wacky individualism? "It's a great country," he says, "that can contain contradictions."
Two years on, he clearly feels

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