

BOOKS

## 'Wobegon Boy' proves you can't go home again

■ Big-city ways may have spoiled Garrison Keillor's small-town charms.

**By James S. Howard**  
The Fresno Bee


Near the end of Garrison Keillor's new novel, one of the characters goes into a Barnes & Noble to spy on his girlfriend's new book. As he skulked around the stacks to see if anyone would buy it, he gradually realized that a number of people were doing the same thing.

The store was filled with small-time authors waiting around to see how the public reacted to their books.

It is a wonderful image and classic Keillor.

Unfortunately, there aren't too many great scenes like that in "Wobegon Boy." Telling the story of John Tollefson, the son of Byron and Mary Tollefson of Lake Wobegon, Minn., the novel has a few nice moments in an otherwise uninteresting story.

Like Keillor himself, Tollefson is split between the high life of New York



**Split personality.** Like the novel's main character, Garrison Keillor seems split between the high life of New York and the quiet life of Minnesota.

and the quiet life of Minnesota. He finds surprising success at a public radio station in a college filled with the "academically challenged children of financially gifted parents."

He finds true love with a beautiful historian who won't marry him. He even finds a nice house at a good price.

What he doesn't find is peace of mind. His stern Lutheran upbringing won't let him be happy.

As Keillor lets the story unfold, the reader can almost hear his deep and melodic voice telling the tale. In five-minute segments for his radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion," those quiet and gentle stories charmed audiences and made Keillor a star.

**A patronizing view**

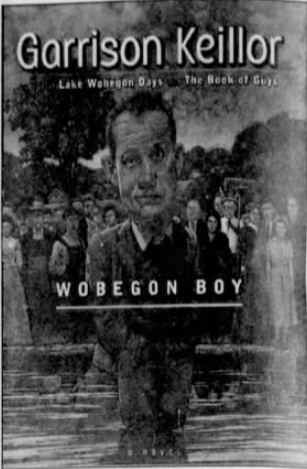
But after an hour or so of reading, with the Keillor voice coming through, even the hardest Wobegon fan will need a break.

The book is engaging for the first few chapters, but when the story shifts from the East Coast to the upper Midwest, something goes wrong. Perhaps Tollefson/Keillor have been away from home too long. Maybe their big-city ways have spoiled them for small-town charm.

Whatever the cause, the book takes a patronizing view of Wobegon ways.

Instead of an enviable example of a simpler life, Lake Wobegon has become a mere curiosity.

The women are still strong, the men are still good looking and the children are all above average, but Lake Wobegon just isn't the same



**Without a prairie.** The novel lacks the gentle stories Keillor told on "A Prairie Home Companion."