

# Only Keillor could create 'Wobegon Boy'

*There's no particular plot and the sex is low-key, but wait: Its true pleasure comes from a masterful job of storytelling*

Reviewed by James Lilleks

If Garrison Keillor hadn't written this book, it wouldn't have been published. It's a classic mid-lister — funny, patient, chiseled and whittled to its author's satisfaction. Box-office poison, in other words. The plot is neither squishy Crumbsque nor Clancy-hard. The sex scenes are chaste; parents can leave it around the house without fear of corrupting their innocent offspring.

But you want to. "Wobegon Boy" concerns the troubles of John Tollefson, a Wobegonian who becomes the manager of a public radio station at a small, wealthy college. His job has complications. He falls in love with a woman who may or may not marry him. He goes home a few times, then moves to the Valhalla-Manhattan of his dreams. The end.

The pleasure here isn't in the tale, but the telling. With its harried, erudite hero troubled by middle-aged lust, the book reads like a Peter DeVries single played at 33 1/3 rpm. DeVries' energy and erudition sometimes hit you in the face like a fizzy gun from a shaken soda can. This book moves carefully, at the grumpy pace of an old man picking his way across an icy way.

If it lacks anything, it's a plot. This is not as fatal as it sounds. A few things threaten to happen — a subplot about the construction of a restaurant has plenty of promise that evaporates each time the subject comes up. A trip to Washington to receive an award goes badly, but not as badly as it might. There are no comic set-pieces here: With the exception of some pan-

## Review

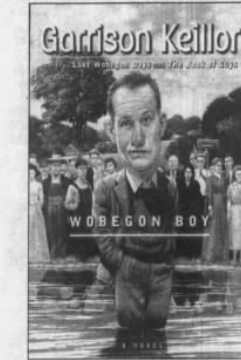
### Lake Wobegon Boy

- **By:** Garrison Keillor
- **Publisher:** Viking, 320 pages, \$24.95
- **Review:** John Tollefson is the hero of Garrison Keillor's latest novel, a picaresque tale that moves, slowly, from Minnesota to the Valhalla of his dreams — New York.

tomime slapstick observed through a cafe window, the comedy is secondhand, related through anecdotes about bygone times. A main character dies, providing room for an unsparing examination of Lutheran funeral rituals, but it doesn't deliver great emotional impact. Granted, it would be uncharacteristic for Tollefson, the main character, to start keening at the gravesite. Sometimes it seems as if the events are a hat rack onto which the characters can toss their favorite tales. And good tales they are.

Most entertaining, and perhaps unnerving to people who come to Keillor through his radio work, is the author's incineration of public broadcasting. Keillor doesn't just bite the hand that feeds him; he rips it off and buries it. Tollefson thunders a grumpy litany of every vapid blatheration he has ever heard:

"Drowsy voices dithering and blithering, obsessive academics whittling their fine points, aging Bohemians with their Bambi world view, the earnest



schoolmarm, the mummy liberals, the dirty New Ager, the plodding Ludlites, the sad-eyed ladies of the lowlands, all of them good and decent and progressive and well-read and deeply concerned."

So nasty, and so true — all listeners of public radio have found themselves in the car on a sunny Saturday, trying to muster the appropriate tut-tut dismay over

how the legacy of colonialism still haunts a community of Peruvian dish-jugglers. You'd rather be listening to Mozart. You'd rather be happy.

But happiness is not for Dark Lutherans. Although Tollefson professes himself one of the happy and enlightened sons of Martin, a black streak runs through him, and through this book. It's not just talk radio he detests; it's the infernal bilge pump of academia, and the lifeless soddan hairballs it produces. All of this nonsense is just self-aggrandizement, useless brain-buffing for people too dead in their hearts to grin and whistle. "Live!" Tollefson shouts — or would shout if he weren't genetically encoded not to.

He makes a peculiar advocate for carnal glee. For all Tollefson's insistence that he would rather be dancing, rather favor the gut over the brain, he seems to be too shy, too quiet, suspicious of the spontaneous thought that hasn't been approved beforehand.

As with a Woody Allen comedy, the hero advocates for life for lust! L'Chaim! while ridiculing characters who exhibit these qualities without the hero's sense of self-examination. Tollefson's exhortations to break free of Dark Lutheran bonds means allowing yourself to tap your toes to Mozart. Whether or not Keillor sees it, there's a bumper sticker on Tollefson's psyche: I'd Rather Be Italian.

This is not so much the work of a content man faking bitterness, but a dyspeptic spirit finding solace in fictional contentment.

He wouldn't be the first.

— James Lilleks is a Star Tribune columnist.