

Dive into Lake Wobegon tale

Garrison Keillor spins story of Minnesota life with humor, sadness in his latest book, 'Wobegon Boy'

Being from Iowa, I didn't really get all this Garrison Keillor stuff.

I hadn't read "Lake Wobegon Days," or anything else Keillor has written for that matter. Furthermore, I had only listened to two or three snippets of his radio show "Prairie Home Companion," and more or less found listening to Keillor like listening to a fairly amusing relation — one who can spin a pretty good yarn, but never really knows when to shut up.

So, as time went on I put Keillor in the same category as other things Minnesota: "You betcha," seven months of winter, hot-dishes, ice fishing, hockey and "Fargo." I figured you didn't have to be from Minnesota to appreciate them, but it sure helped.

But suddenly, after reading Keillor's latest, "Wobegon Boy," I get it. Pass me the puke. Bring on the hotdish. You betcha.

In "Wobegon Boy," Keillor returns to the world inhabited by his cast of Lake Wobegon characters. Only this time one of them, John Tollefson, flies the coop for adventures in upstate New York, and later in New York City. Tollefson runs a college radio station, watches his cash flow and his love life wax and wane, and muses unhappily about growing older, sadder and not any wiser.

Frankly, for the uninitiated, the first 75 pages, in which Keillor sets the scene, are no better than an OK read. But once Tollefson is transported home to fictional Lake Wobegon, and especially his second trip home to attend his father's funeral, the book becomes magically alive.

It's tempting to say Keillor should stick to writing about Lake Wobegon, because the action there is by far the best part of the story. But by transplanting Tollefson to a different locale, he allows him a bit of a fish-out-of-water experience. Then he's able to return home with a new and fresh perspective on his life, and other's lives. That, in the end,

is what works best about the book.

Keillor's "Wobegon Boy" is rip-roaring funny, terribly sad and very, very real.

Tollefson loses his investment dream of a lifetime, is pushed out of his radio management job by the forces of political correctness, suffers a mostly dysfunctional family, can't get the woman he adores to marry him and his father up and dies on him.

And, naturally, it has a happy ending.

Keillor shines in the telling of Tollefson's tale and the last 100 pages fly by. There were sublime moments which marched side by side with scenes that easily could be fit in a Three Stooges movie.

But little by little, Tollefson's problems melt like a Minnesota

winter in spring, and even the worst things that happen to him all work out in a Wobegon way.

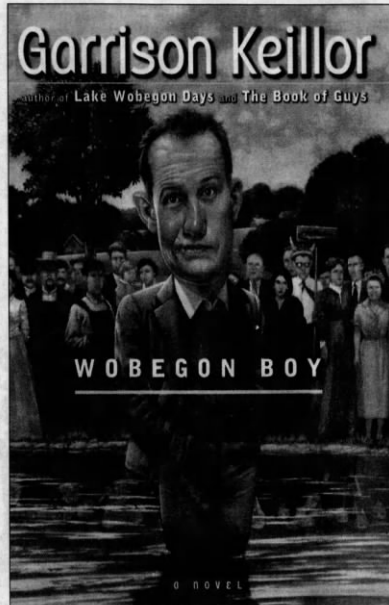
There are numerous side trips in "Wobegon Boy" and, for me, not all of them work. For example, Tollefson's romance with a college professor named Aida is a key element to the book. But she also happens to be writing a book about Bolle Balestrand and the Balestrand stuff is distracting and slows down the pace.

I also could have done without Keillor's apparent, and rather surprising, rancor for public radio and radio talk shows.

By far the best of the book — both the funniest and the saddest parts — is Tollefson's return to Lake Wobegon for his father's funeral. He doesn't even really recognize the man he hears eulogized, but begins to.

Once you get the hang of Keillor's style, it again seems as if you're at the elbow of a story-telling relative. Only this time you're hanging on every word.

Keillor, it's said, doesn't particularly like crowds, public speaking or interviews with the press. That's fine with me. Garrison, lock yourself up and write another chapter in the life of John Tollefson.



Garrison Keillor's "Wobegon Boy."

Minnesota living through Keillor's watchful eye

"Wobegon people are not so much fun to be with necessarily, you know. Not the warmest people you'd ever hope to meet. An embrace is rather intimate for us. A handshake goes a long way. Sometimes we just nod. We aren't all that keen about scholarship, we believe that any display of learning is purely superficial, that nobody is smarter than anyone else. We can be surly and stubborn and downright ugly. We are people of fixed principals, who drive in the passing lane at exactly the speed limit and wonder why drivers are passing us on the right and shaking their fists at us. We have produced no great humorists, only a few romantic writers, all of whom were romantic about other places. In Lake Wobegon there is precious little romance, mostly there is weather, and only three seasons of it: either winter is just over with or winter is on the way again. Or else it's winter. Winter is what we talk about. We thrive in winter. Pain is satisfying to us."

Florian watched. He said: "There was a couple in Sauk Center who wrote a bad check for plane tickets to Florida, and when they got back home they put them both in jail and their children were put into foster homes."

"Not a bad deal," said Carl. "Free trip and then free child care."

"Your dad tried to get that started," said Clarence, "but in this town it takes years. I'll never forget when he and I were both on the council and I was speaking up for ... I don't know what — tennis courts or something — and I said, 'Either this town moves forward or else it moves backward,' and he leaned over



Garrison Keillor MINNESOTA STORYTELLER

WRITE IN WITH YOUR WOBEGON TALES

Central Minnesota is Lake Wobegon. Tell us your stories about writer, wacky relatives and the "Wobegon way."

Living through all Minnesota has to offer entices us to tell stories, so don't be shy. Thanksgiving get-togethers may provide the ideal opportunity to gather story tidbits. Please limit stories to a page in length. Include your name and telephone number.



All stories should be sent to the St. Cloud Times by Dec. 1. We'll share the stories on a Lifestyle cover in early December. Mail stories to "We are Wobegon," St. Cloud Times, P.O. Box 768, St. Cloud MN 56302; fax them to 255-8775 or e-mail them to scimes@cloudnet.com.

For more information, call Laura Cook at 255-8764 or John Molene at 255-8766.

and whispered, "I wouldn't offer these people a choice like that."

"Make yourself useful, Mind your manners, and above all, Don't feel sorry for yourself. In Minnesota, you learn to avoid self-pity as if it were poison ivy in the woods. Writer is not a personal experience, everyone else is as cold as you are; so don't complain about it too much. Even if your cinnamon toast gets peed on. It could be worse."

Excerpts from "Wobegon Boy"

Wobegon people are not ... the warmest people you'd ever hope to meet. An embrace is rather intimate for us.

FROM GARRISON KEILLOR'S "WOBEGON BOY"