

A trip to Wobegon

Radio host gives funny tale of Minnesota town

Wobegon Boy

By Garrison Keillor
Viking, 305 pp. \$24.95.

Reviewed by Diane Fisher Johnson

Once knew a woman who would not go out on a Saturday night lest she miss a single episode of Garrison Keillor's public radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion." At the time, I thought her eccentric, but then I tuned in myself. Before long, I, too, was enthralled by Keillor's evocative tales of the little Minnesota town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve, tales that always began, "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon."

Keillor's new novel, *Wobegon Boy*, is a lot like those radio monologues — funny, folksy, and with a moral at the end — except that it's a 305-page novel, not a 20-minute parable. So here's a reading tip: Take a lot of breaks. They won't interrupt a fast-paced plot, because there isn't one, and the humor works better in man-



nerly servings. The narrator, John Tollefson, is the Wobegon boy who left home 25 years ago for upstate New York. He manages a public radio station at St. James College, an attractive campus for the academically challenged children of financially gifted parents. When he's not courting elderly benefactors with cats, or protecting his classical music format from craven talk-radio administrators, he pursues

Edwards makes smashing appearance in novel

In the novel *Wobegon Boy*, Louisville native Bob Edwards figures in this spoof in which John Tollefson speaks after he receives the Wally Award at an annual public radio awards program: "I felt thoroughly ashamed to be giving a speech this dumb and wasting everyone's time. I felt bitter shame rise in my throat, I was choking on it. I wanted to stop, if only I could find a stopping place.

"And then the woman with the gums passed a note over to me: 'Wind it up, thank you.' That was pretty disconcerting. I flipped two pages and looked for the paragraph about the funding crisis in public broadcasting — it was somewhere in there. I searched, I skipped another page, and I looked up at the audience and grinned and said, 'Almost to the end,' and then there was a crash, as if someone had dropped

a bowling ball.

"It was Bob Edwards' head. He was sitting at the main table, two seats away from the podium, and apparently he had rested his chin on his hand and closed his eyes and fallen asleep, and then his elbow slipped and his head whacked the table: cups and saucers bounced, and people thought coronary, the voice of NPR's popular 'Morning Edition' dead! — and then Bob Edwards raised his head and grinned, and people clapped! They practically gave him an ovation! I said, 'And thank you very much for this fine award,' and stuffed the speech in my pocket and turned and got out of there as fast as I could. Bob Edwards reached out to shake my hand, and so did the woman from 'All Things Considered,' but I couldn't bear to talk to anyone. I had talked enough."

the lovely Alida, a Manhattan-based historian who thinks their weekend arrangement is just fine.

His father's death takes him back to Lake Wobegon, but Alida brings a happy end to the story by unexpectedly following him to Minnesota for the funeral.

Tollefson knows it must really be love, because otherwise, why would she come all the way to Lake Wobegon in January?

"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."

Along the way, there are many weird and wonderful twists, including a restaurant investment with Alida's brother, a lawyer who "smelled of a powerful musk that lawyers spray on themselves to warn other lawyers away." The restaurant will specialize in farm-fresh corn, like the almost sacred corn

Tollefson remembers from his prairie childhood, but it's hijacked by a prima donna contractor who views cabinetry as a religious exercise.

As if Tollefson didn't have enough troubles, he receives a Wally Award for creative radio management. The Wally, he points out to a col-

league, is "a kind of relaxant for the doomed. They give you the plaque and then they tie your hands behind your back and lead you out to deaccession your head."

His acceptance speech is toe-curlingly terrible, its tedium finally broken by a stentorian crash — "as if someone had dropped a bowling ball" — when real-life public radio icon Bob Edwards' head hits the table in sleep. (Note to readers: Edwards says he never took this particularly memorable nap.)

Perhaps just a teeny bit surprisingly for a guy who has made his career — and quite a rewarding one — by talking on public radio, Keillor hurls his sharpest daggers at public radio talk shows:

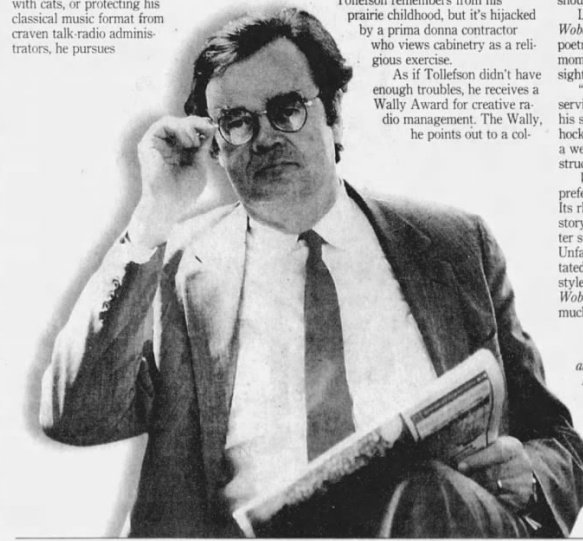
"Drowsy voices dithering and blithering, obsessive academics whittling their fine points," says the impassioned narrator, who'd rather listen to Beethoven or Mozart or Puccini. "Radio is capable of enlightening and amusing and touching the imagination. ... (it) should not be consigned to social work."

Like Keillor's Saturday night stories, *Wobegon Boy* features frequent quotations of poetry and song. There are many entertaining moments, often combined with helpful insights into human behavior.

"We believe that you work off guilt by serving on committees," Tollefson explains to his sister's girlfriend. "Your average peewee-hockey coach is a guy who is paying back for a weekend in a motel with an aerobic instructor named Trish."

Wobegon Boy is meant to be read aloud, preferably in Keillor's distinctive bass voice. Its rhythms and flow are those of a long, long story, told over many nights, on the porch after supper or maybe in front of a warm fire. Unfamiliar readers may find themselves irritated by the slow stream-of-consciousness style. But for Keillor's many devoted listeners, *Wobegon Boy* makes any day of the week as much fun as Saturday night.

Diane Fisher Johnson edits the alumni magazine at Centre College in Danville and hopes to make a pilgrimage someday to Lake Wobegon.



Radio personality Garrison Keillor hosts "A Prairie Home Companion," a public radio show.