

In tradition of Thurber, Shepherd

Lake Wobegon, the novel, is another Keillor triumph

WOBEGON BOY
By Garrison Keillor
Viking, \$24.95, 365 pages

BY JOHN BORDSEN
English Editor, Newspapers

It just wouldn't do to have aliens, serial killers or '60s Live! Pate Shoppe descend on Lake Wobegon. That's not how life works in the Minnesota hamlet made famous on *A Prairie Home Companion*, or in places like Toast, N.C., or Peanut, Calif.

Or, for that matter, in the lives of most of us. Truth is, what passes for the strange reality you see on TV is reserved for distant relatives and folks you lost touch with after your last high school reunion. Your fears, dreams and difficult decisions are as universal as chickenpox or chickpeas.

It's how we deal with these matters that makes us interesting, and, over the years, Garrison Keillor's comic, laughing, bittersweet *News from Lake Wobegon* monologues have let National Public Radio listeners walk miles in an assortment of other people's shoes.

Wobegon Boy is Keillor's first trip to Lake Wobegon in novel

form. Two of his books from the '80s — *Lake Wobegon Days*, *Leaning Home* — were essentially radio tales retold into short story form.

Like his sharp-witted 1991 novel, *W.L.T.: A Radio Romance*, Keillor's new work is episodic and quasi-autobiographical.

John Tollefson fled Lake Wobegon for a career in public radio; now in his 40s, he manages a station in upstate New York. Yet he remains strongly steered by the cast-iron conformity that drove him away from home. Tollefson has a hard time unsnarling the knots woven into his life: a romance that has no resolution in sight; the bankruptcy of a dream restaurant that folds before it opens; the catty and politically correct world of broadcasting; his embarrassment for a long-winded and ridiculous acceptance speech for a variant of a Peabody Award (called a Wally here).

Recollections of Lake Wobegon, and a trip back there, only serve to point up the hollowness of his sophisticated lifestyle. Tollefson knows full well that a night in an ice-fishing shack reveals more about someone than a Myers-Briggs test ever could.

Powering all this are Tollefson's fears of appearing foolish to



Garrison Keillor's latest work is *Wobegon Boy*, the first novel about his mythical town.

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friends, relatives and colleagues . . . of wasting time and, therefore, life.

Fatalistic? You betcha. To Tollefson-Keillor, free will is an illusion . . . a rare moment when God allows B-4 to give you a winning bingo card — just to keep your life off balance.

Yet, in the Lake Wobegon way

of things, life is there to enjoy so long as you shrug off its unexplainable complexities.

As in the *Prairie Home* broadcasts, the delight of *Wobegon Boy* comes with seeing how people struggle to make do. That is where the affectionately comic touches abound.

Keillor remains firmly rooted in

the James Thurber and Jean Shepherd tradition of humorous Midwestern storytelling. And Lake Wobegon holds as many natural raconteurs as it does Jell-O molds.

Mr. Lindberg, the town undertaker, recalls the time an old farmer's burial was interrupted by a tornado. Afterward, "I went to close up the grave, and the coffin

lid had sprung open and his eyelids, too, and he lay there, hands folded, looking up at me as if he were hoping it was the resurrection and that somebody would buy him a drink."

And life goes on in Lake Wobegon, the little town its fans can't forget and Keillor's "memory" only improves.