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The affable host of NPR's 'Prairie Home Companion' has written a serviceable novel. But it lacks the warmth his wonderful voice gives his stories on radio.

By David Abel
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WOBEGON BOY, by Garrison Keillor. Viking; 305 pages; \$24.95.

Sometimes a writer's books translate well into films. Sometimes a movie star performs aptly on stage. And sometimes an orator with a weekly national radio show — whose voice provides half his message — can transfuse his whimsy into the printed word.

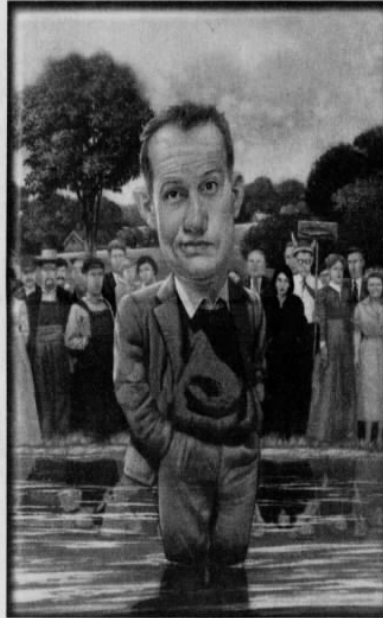
Garrison Keillor, who became famous for his Sunday afternoon comic sermons on *A Prairie Home Companion*, here ekes out a nostalgic novel, a weave of wistful vaudeville stories written in deadpan prose. But something's missing in these dense yarns — his voice.

A space between paragraphs doesn't carry the same weight as a pause in speech on radio. Intonation and accents escape print. And sentences that end with periods elude the straying, rambling intimacy of spoken stories.

While the cozy sputter of Keillor's voice warms like crackling wood in a fireplace, his prose lacks the same heartiness. But a raconteur can always tell a story, and Keillor's a master.

Byron Tollefson, the narrator's dad, posts little signs in crevices around the house. One Post-it over a light switch says "light switch." There's a \$200-an-hour therapist who tells everyone what he's going to do before he does it: "I'm going to ask you a question now," he says. And Clarence Bunsen, a tall and heavyset bald man, has a gut he lets hang out "like a mailbag."

Chapter titles include "Bankruptcy," "Defeat," "The Wake," "Mortality" and "Dark Lutherans." In the last, Keillor describes the



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main dividing line in Lake Wobegon: there are Dark Lutherans and Happy Lutherans. (Just about everyone in Lake Wobegon, Keillor's longtime wintry, stoic utopia set in rural Minnesota, is Lutheran.)

The Dark Lutherans, he writes, "throve in a cold climate, believing that adversity and suffering were given as moral instruction, and so was sickness . . . that the gods are waiting to smack you one if you have too good of a time." And the Happy Lutherans thought, in es-

sence, "God loves you and be glad that He does and can you please coach basketball this year?"

The story of *Wobegon Boy* is a slightly autobiographical account of a middle-aged man who finds love in the pit of despair.

John Tollefson, narrator and hero, has been doing well for himself: He wins a coveted award for managing a public radio station in upstate New York, has money and friends, and a home he paints a deep gold. Life is "nice people and a

wonderful vinaigrette dressing."

But things begin to unravel. Why can't his life have the same meaning as his great-grandfather's, who stole out of Norway and built a new, chosen life in Lake Wobegon? John's days are spent chasing wealthy, elderly women for donations, and bickering with his boss, who wants to replace the station's classical music with talk radio.

His dreams for his future — a noble farm restaurant serving fresh vegetables grown on the premises — crash when the contractor runs up bills too high for him to pay. His lover won't marry him. And then his dad dies.

But eventually love whisks him out of the claws of ennui.

"The stream of insults that life directs at you cannot be vanquished by skill or cunning," says Tollefson. "You can't fight your way clear. You can't outsmart life. The only answer is to be loved so that nothing else matters so much."

It's an extended, if not more coherent, version of one of Keillor's Sunday "Tales from Lake Wobegon." Sometimes the stories lead nowhere, a pleasant stroll with no apparent direction. But it's what you take in along the way that's important, not the destination — a moral of some sort.

Wobegon Boy drifts from accounts of Siamese-twin cousin baseball players who join the carnival circuit to a humdrum aunt who robs a bank in Lake Wobegon and flees to Argentina to an uncle who became a medicine-show politician with a talent for "rip-roaring, gaudy" speeches to flocks of bachelor farmers and academically challenged students.

All of it's vintage Keillor. Excluding the most important part, his voice. If you find that a critical lack, get the book on tape.