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# The Out-of-Towner's

By Dan Cryer  
STAFF WRITER

**H**UNCHING his 6-foot-4 frame over a microphone, Garrison Keillor speaks in the mellifluous baritone made famous on public radio's "A Prairie Home Companion." He is wearing a gray suit and his signature red tie and socks. The bushiest of brown eyebrows join together to make a single continuous furrow, arching up and down in rhythm with his voice.

"I'm a real midwestern kind of guy," the Minnesota native tells an appreciative audience recently at a bookstore on Union Square in Manhattan. "I know what kind of leaves make the best toilet paper." Everyone laughs.

Whether talking off the cuff or reading from his new novel, "Wobegon Boy" (Viking, \$24.95), Garrison Keillor is a very funny man.

"All Norwegians are Lutheran, even the atheists," he says in response to a question about religion in his books. "It's a Lutheran God they don't believe in." More laughter.

Asked why he left Minnesota to live in New York, the thrice-married writer replies, "a woman" and shrugs, to more guffaws. Otherwise, he says, "I'd be living in a big double-wide [trailer]. I'd have lots of dogs."

Actually, Keillor divides his time between an Upper West Side apartment with a view of the Hudson and a Wisconsin cabin just across the St. Croix River from Minnesota. He and his wife, violinist Jenny Lind Nilsson, spend December and April in New York when "A Prairie Home Companion" is broadcast on Saturday nights from Town Hall. (This month's series — Dec. 6, 13 and 20 — is sold out.)

The show, which began on Minnesota Public Radio in 1974 and went national in 1980, operates most often out of St. Paul but takes to the road for part of the year. It showcases the musical talent of St. Louis or Albuquerque, say, while highlighting the show's centerpiece, Keillor's 20-minute monologue. "The News From Lake Wobegon" is a droll recounting of life in a small Minnesota town "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

The hero of "Wobegon Boy" is John Tollefson, a rather woebegone Minnesotan who has appeared in Keillor's monologues and in his best-selling first novel, "Lake Wobegon Days." Tollefson manages a college radio station in upstate New York and dates a woman in New York City.

The book is filled with delicious references to the Big Apple, each of which Keillor slyly milks for laughs — the eyebrows arching, the voice rising in a crescendo or falling to a whisper — for his Union Square audience.

"Panhandlers come and go . . . a thin black woman who will write and wail and keen and shake and make a scene so visceral and heart-rending that you'd gladly pay a dollar to avoid seeing it." The bookstore crowd roars its approval.

Garrison Keillor's latest, 'Wobegon Boy,' takes readers to New York — a place where he has no trouble finding humor

"New York offers the Young Punk's Dream — earn buckets of money, be attractive, have romantic dalliances with various inappropriate people." More laughs.

"The city breathes eroticism from noon on. Even in the subway, you can sense men and women angling, sizing each other up. That is why . . . everyone in the subway looks as if he is pondering a difficult math problem — it's to cover up a frank prurient interest in each other." Great whoops of laughter.

Keillor's brand of humor is low-key and generous, nice-guy Lutheran even when set in the big city. His bite is forgivingly gentle. Yet readers and listeners expecting a rube mentality are bound to be surprised. The author may have midwestern roots, but since his youth he has honed his laugh lines on a New York state of mind.

"I felt a romance about New York that I think is pretty common to midwesterners of my generation," the 55-year-old author says. "I grew up reading The New Yorker. I grew up reading A. J. Liebling, and when I went off to college I read Isaac Bashevis Singer and about a half dozen other writers whose work was set here."

"I came out here looking for a job after college [at the University of Minnesota], and I had a very strong

feeling that this was a city which I would not enjoy being poor in. I preferred being poor in the Midwest, being poor in a rented farmhouse and in a place where you could raise your own food. I preferred that to living in New York and spending a great deal to rent a tiny, dark place."

The day before the bookstore reading Keillor is interviewed at his apartment. He escorts a visitor into a large pleasant kitchen and offers tea. It's a room that reflects the man's sometimes underappreciated subtleties — it's fitted out with both the down-home (a photo of a hole-in-the-wall Minneapolis diner) and the exotic (a grimacing mask from Indonesia).

Keillor did not return to New York until about 10 years ago, after making "A Prairie Home Companion" into a public-radio hit, making a bundle out of "Lake Wobegon Days" and marrying his second wife, Ulla Skaerved, a Danish woman whom he had met when she was a high-school exchange student in Minnesota. (They have since divorced.)

A decade in New York has not dimmed Keillor's enthusiasm for the city. In his own view, he still qualifies as a tourist. "New Yorkers make it an obligation to be cool about things," he observes, "and a tourist is under no obligation of hipness. I like that. A person has the freedom of his enthusiasm and is not obligated, as a true New Yorker would be, to talk about their troubles with plumbers and their encounters with evil cabdrivers and all. A tourist is a person who walks around with eyes in the sky and bumps into things easily."

Nor, after more than 20 years, is Keillor bored with "A Prairie Home Companion," for which he serves as writer, host and star. The show's numbers, according to Minnesota Public Radio spokeswoman Katie Reckdahl, are higher than ever — 420 public-radio stations and 2.3 million listeners in the United States.

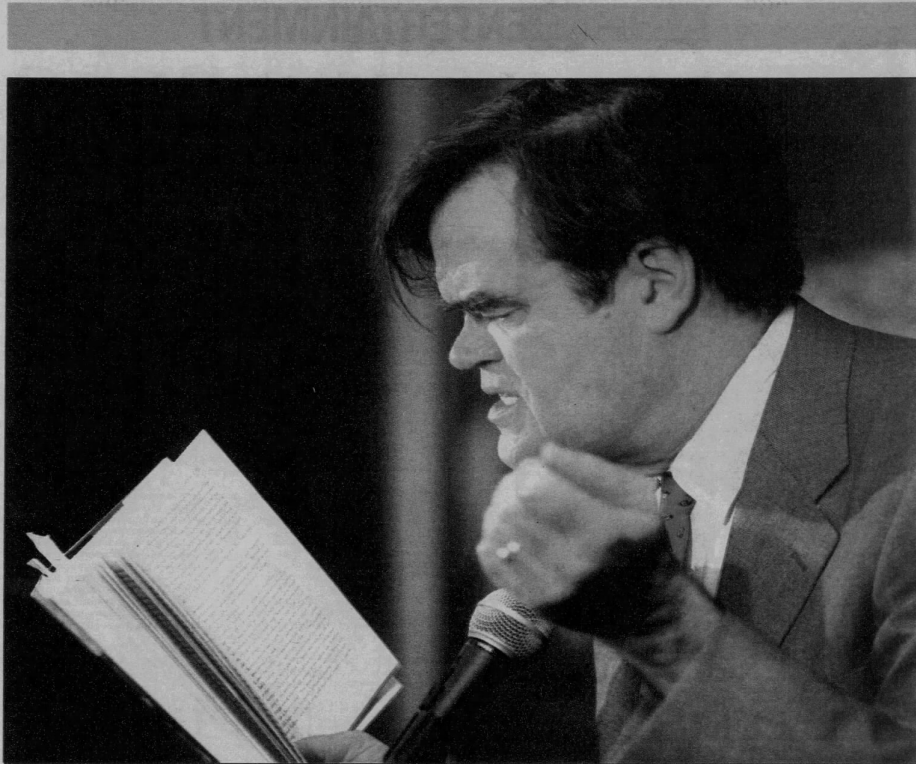
It's a refreshingly old-fashioned variety show with guest musical acts (nearly every style except rock and rap), a house band (The Guy's All-Star Shoe Band), silly commercials for fictional advertisers (Guy's Shoes, Cafe Boeuf, Bertha's Kitty Boutique, the American Duct Tape Council and Fred Farrell's Animal Calls) and the monologue. As a radio show, it's also a quintessentially aural experience, with Tom Keith providing the jokey sound effects. This result is at once old-time radio and camped-up self-parody.

"A Prairie Home Companion" is such an extension of Keillor's personality, of course, that it could not exist without him. He will continue to do the show, he says, "as long as it's fun to do."

**T**HE MONOLOGUE requires most of Keillor's attention. It is usually written out but not precisely memorized. With structure and punch lines well in hand, he has the confidence to perform. There have been times, though, when a lack of preparation has forced him to improvise. "Going out on stage and winging it," he admits, "is not a good thing."

Writing for the show is not a respite from writing his fiction but an integral part of the same process. "You sit down and start something, and you have an idea pretty close to the beginning which way it's

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Newsday Photo / Bruce Gilbert

gonna go — toward the radio or something else.”

In addition to “Lake Wobegon Days,” that something else has included another novel, “WLT: A Radio Romance”; two volumes of short humor pieces, “Happy to Be Here” and “The Book of Guys”; the radio monologue collections “Leaving Home” and “We Are Still Married,” and several children’s books.

One project seemed headed toward television. Several years ago ABC approached Keillor to write a pilot for a sitcom based on David Ingqvist, the Lutheran pastor in Lake Wobegon who is John Tollefson’s brother-in-law.

Keillor wrote some episodes and collaborated with writers at Wit-Thomas, the Los Angeles TV production studio, but the network never committed to go into production, and the idea for a series was apparently lost in the shuffle when Jamie Tarses was named head of ABC Entertainment last summer.

Editing an anthology of American comic writing was another recent project that went awry. Oxford University Press invited him to gather pieces from American humorists from the 18th Century into the present, but according to Keillor, he and his editors couldn’t agree on what to include.

“It’s hard to sit down across the table with people and argue for your idea of what’s funny. But you can only talk about it up to a point and then you just can’t. So the book is on ice.”

Asked whether much first-rate humor is being writ-

**Garrison Keillor reads from his new book at an Upper West Side bookstore.**

ten today, Keillor hedges. “I think it’s a good enough time, yes, I think so. It’s always a good time to write humor. But I had a hard time finding people to include.”

Young writers with a bent for humor, he fears, too often succumb to the lure of television. The money may be good, but the price is heavy.

“It’s a terrible mistake if you are a writer who has your own ideas, your own voice. If you just want to be part of a bunch of guys putting together something like the senior class sketch, then I think television is great. But you will never have created anything that you can point to and say that’s mine, that’s who I am.”

Talk of contemporary humor inevitably leads to The New Yorker, the weekly that nurtured Keillor, Calvin Trillin, Veronica Geng and such illustrious comic predecessors as James Thurber, Robert Benchley and S. J. Perelman. But since 1992, when Tina Brown was appointed editor and Keillor left the staff in protest, he has nothing but scorn for what he considers her preference for glitz over literary excellence. He insists that he rarely reads the magazine now.

“Wobegon Boy” was born two years ago when Keillor received an honorary doctorate at a college in the Midwest. “I was wearing a black robe and surrounded by faculty wearing black robes and I heard a very kind, surely too kind, man from the English Department read a citation about me and my work. I listened to him talk about my importance and I started to

shriveled in my seat.” Hence the novel’s college setting where, as numerous satirists have known, wisdom often consorts with foolishness.

For his hero, Keillor reached back to John Tollefson, who was best known to radio listeners from a monologue in which he was dropped off for his freshman year of college surrounded by well-meaning but embarrassing family members.

“I knew that I wanted to have a death and a wake and a funeral in it,” Keillor continues, “which I thought was to set the bar a little higher for a book of comedy. To write a comic novel in your 50s is different from whatever you might write in your 30s. To leave death out of it would be arrogant, willful nonsense.”

That the sections on the death and funeral for Tollefson’s father are lengthy and central to the story raises the question of whether Keillor has written a disguised version of the death of his own father. But, no, the author reports that his father, John Keillor, a retired railway mail clerk and carpenter, is still alive at 84.

John Tollefson finally quits his job at the radio station when he is faced with a frivolous sexual harassment suit and the college president is about to change the station to a politically correct talk-radio format. Throughout the book, Keillor makes fun of both talk radio and the culture of victimhood.

“I saw a poster on the bridge at the University of

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# Keillor in New York

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Minnesota," Keillor says. "It was a notice for a meeting of a group called 'Wounded Daughters of Distant Fathers.' And you thought if this is a support group, we should all be in at least one and probably two."

Lest he be misunderstood, the author stresses that his barbs are directed at people who put victimization at the core of their identity:

"When you make fun of the culture of victimhood, you are not making fun of the genuinely weak. You are making fun of a kind of Phariseeism — people who have stolen some of the language of the weak and the depressed and taken it onto themselves . . . We all are weak but to claim a special privilege is perverse."

Radio is the arena in which Keillor has won the big awards. He's won a coveted Peabody for "A Prairie Home Companion" and an Edward R. Murrow career award from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. And from the august American Academy of Arts and Letters, he received a prize not for writing but for *spoken* English.

Yet there's no question that in the long run Garrison Keillor aspires to make his mark as a writer:

"It's not that one wants to be remembered at all — that's not up to me — but I am interested in making books, and it is in the culture of books that there is an anticipation of some kind of permanence. In the case of most books, this is a forlorn hope. You can go down into the bowels of any library and find acres of forgotten literature. And probably I'll be in those acres of forgotten literature.

"But it's fun to try, to set oneself up to compete against one's betters and against one's progenitors and to imagine yourself in the same line of work with Thurber or Benchley or Perelman.

"If you didn't think that you could possibly be that good, then why would one spend one's life in this racket? A person would not sit alone in a small room for days at a time in order to become a mediocre writer." ■

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