

Citizens' Voice, Wilkes-Barre, Pa., Monday, December 22, 1997 - 22

Books & Authors

# Garrison Keillor spins more tales

## Author/radio personality/humorist returns with a follow-up to his best selling novel, 'Lake Wobegon Days'

By Jeff Baenen  
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ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — Garrison Keillor eases his lanky frame into a chair, crosses his legs and reveals — just below the pant leg where moments ago he had spilled “about a quart” of coffee — his trademark red socks.

“With guys, clothing is pretty drab. And it's nice to have one little flash of color, like a red-winged blackbird,” explains Keillor, who picked up the red-sock habit from a University of Minnesota professor, Mulford Q. Sibley.

“Most guys would do it with a tie. But I like a little flash of the socks, because they're covered up. You cross your legs and suddenly the room comes alive.”

Whether he's wearing a tuxedo for a performance or a gray suit and sweater for an interview in his office at Minnesota Public Radio, Keillor favors red socks. They're comfortable, folksy and somewhat quirky, like the characters who populate his fictional hometown of Lake Wobegon (“The Gateway to Central Minnesota”).

A self-described shy person, Keillor nonetheless is open and affable during a recent interview. He hums in his famous sonorous voice while waiting for a tape recorder to be set up, and when he answers questions, his graying eyebrows wiggle like hairy caterpillars.

Twelve years ago, Keillor hit the top of best-seller lists with his book, “Lake Wobegon Days,” based on his popular radio show, “A Prairie Home Companion.” Now he returns to his roots with a follow-up novel, “Wobegon Boy.”

“Wobegon Boy” is the story of John Tollefson, a young man who leaves Minnesota for an upstate New York college. There he starts a public radio station and, as he nears his 40th birthday, has what Keillor calls “a little epiphany.”

“He realizes that his life is all too shallow and predictable and without any real magnificence,” Keillor says. Then, he meets Alida, a willow (“five feet, 12 inches tall”) historian from New England, and they become an item.

How much of the story is autobiographical? “I've been in love. But never with a woman who is 5 feet, 12 inches tall or a historian,” Keillor says. “And I have never been a radio station manager. I've never been in management of any kind. It's one of the promises I made my mother that I've kept.”

For someone who gained an audience on public radio (his show is produced by Minnesota Public Radio and distributed by Public Radio International), Keillor takes a lot of shots at public radio in his book, particularly talk shows. But he ascribes the opinions to Tollefson, his main character.

“He sees them (public radio talk shows) as a vehicle for a particular kind of political piety and political correctness and narcissism and self-pity that, growing up in Minnesota, we were taught to avoid as if it were poison ivy,” Keillor says.

But Keillor doesn't see himself as biting the hand that feeds him. “As a writer, I don't surrender my license. I'm free to write about anything that I want and to represent my characters as they need to be represented. I do a frothy entertainment show on public radio, and I'm not in the business of talking about victimization, except as a crude joke.”

He adds, “Public radio has been wonderful to me, and I have no complaint against it.”

Growing up in a conservative religious household, Keillor did not watch television until he was in high school, although he did listen to radio. His family belonged to the Plymouth Brethren sect, which associated television with the motion picture industry.

“And we were not allowed to go to movies because they glorified worldliness. People drank in movies. They drank like fish. They smoked cigarettes. They danced. And we did not do those things,” Keillor says. But radio was acceptable. “I don't think people smoked as much on radio,” Keillor says, laughing.

In 1967, Keillor quit “A Prairie Home Companion” amid much fanfare. He had married a Danish woman, Ulla Skarved, who was an exchange student in his Class of 1960 at Anoka High School. The two got married in late 1965 after meeting again at their 25th school reunion. Keillor tried to settle in Denmark, but soon he had moved to New York City and within two years of quitting “A Prairie Home Companion” had



Garrison Keillor rehearses for his show

Garrison Keillor is an author, humorist and well known for his radio show on National Public Radio “A Prairie Home Companion.” Twelve years ago, Keillor hit the top of the best-seller list with his book “Lake Wobegon Days” of which he has now wrote a sequel.

started another radio show, “American Radio Company.”

In 1992 he returned to St. Paul and a year later reclaimed “A Prairie Home Companion,” named after a cemetery in Moorhead. The Saturday night show is heard by more than 2 million listeners on more than 420 public radio stations.

“This is the place for the show. This is definitely the place,” says Keillor, who lives in the St. Croix River Valley of western Wisconsin. More than half of this season's 33 live broadcasts originate from the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul; the rest are from four cities across the country.

“Tougher audiences here, you know. It's hard to make middle-aged Midwestern Lutherans laugh at anything.”

He pauses. “I'd say impossible, in fact.” Keillor said he quit the show because he was exhausted, and immediately regretted it. “My chin was dragging on the floor. I was producing the show myself and writing it. It was crazy. I should have taken a sabbatical.”

But he doesn't mind the pace now, crediting his staff and his producer, Christine Tschida, for making the show work smoothly.

At 55, Keillor is going to be a father again. His wife and sometime book collaborator, violinist Jenny Lind Nilsson, is expecting a baby around the first of the year.

Keillor quotes . . .

### Keillor on children, pen names, Lake Wobegon, JFK

Here are a selection of quotes from humorist Garrison Keillor:

- ▶ **On having children:** “It's difficult when you're younger because there's so many other things you have to do in life and your little fires of ambition are burning. So you cheat your child. And your little child is shunted off to the side as you go off in the sordid pursuit of fame and wealth. But my pursuit of fame and wealth is over, and so I'm now prepared to be a father and to pick a child up and not let her feet touch the ground until she's old enough.”
- ▶ **On having a pen name (Keillor's real first name is Gary; he has used the pen name “Garrison” since he was 13 or 14):** “I'm all in favor of them. Nobody uses them anymore. But it's good to keep your writing persona clear of who you are to your friends and family, because there is a difference.”
- ▶ **On Lake Wobegon:**

- “Lake Wobegon is in Minnesota. People elsewhere think that they grew up in Lake Wobegon if they grew up anywhere inside the Coasts, but Lake Wobegon is really a Minnesota town.”
- ▶ **On his relationship with his characters:** “I think about them. They're on my mind. And I'm curious about them. Because I know that I don't know them as well as I wish I did. They're Midwesterners, and so they're secretive. And they use language to conceal. They go to great lengths to avoid giving themselves away.”
- ▶ **On becoming a Democrat and his admiration for John F. Kennedy, who ran for president the same year Keillor graduated from high school:** “There was a great sense of transition from Eisenhower to Kennedy that struck people my age very, very heavily back then. We admired him so wholeheartedly that none of the debunking of the Kennedy Myth since then has had any effect on me at all.”

FYI . . .

### A sampling of Garrison Keillor books/recordings

- Some books and recordings by Garrison Keillor:
- BOOKS**
- “Happy to Be Here,” 1982
  - “Lake Wobegon Days,” 1986
  - “Leaving Home: A Collection of Lake Wobegon Stories,” 1987
  - “Don: The True Story of a Young Person,” 1987
  - “We Are Still Married,” 1989
  - “W L T : A Radio Romance,” 1991
  - “The Book of Guys,” 1993
  - “Cat, You Better Come Home,” 1995
  - “The Old Man Who Loved Cheese,” 1996
  - “The Sandy Bottom Orchestra,” 1996 (with Jenny Lind Nilsson)
  - “Wobegon Boy,” 1997
- RECORDINGS**
- “A Prairie Home Companion: The 2nd Annual Parewell Performance,” 1988
  - “More News From Lake Wobegon,” 1989
  - “Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company: The First Season,” 1990
  - “Local Man Moves to the City,” 1991
  - “Songs of the Cat,” 1991
  - “A Visit to Mark Twain's House With Garrison Keillor,” 1992
  - “The Young Lutheran's Guide to the Orchestra,” 1993
  - “A Prairie Home Companion 20th Anniversary Collection,” 1994
  - “A Prairie Home Christmas,” 1995
  - “The Hopeful Gospel Quarter: Climbing Up on the Rough Side,” 1997
  - “Garrison Keillor's Comedy Theater,” 1997