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Out&About

Keillor is turning from restless life to contentment

BY JEANNETTE BATZ COOPERMAN
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Garrison Keillor's voice is as sweet and slow as a vat of molasses, and it pulls you in so surely you don't mind drowning. Might as well die happy in a place with beginnings and endings, shared jokes and old-fashioned values. "A Prairie Home Companion" has been a public-radio success for three decades, and frenetic Americans still skid to a halt to listen, rapt, to the man billed as "today's Mark Twain."

Usually he braids bits and pieces of himself into other people's stories, telling them with warmth and the gentlest hint of irony. But when he sat down to write his most recent book, "Love Me," Keillor was prepared to make it a frank memoir.

"People felt that was a bad idea," he says ruefully, "and they were concerned for me." He headed the advice, and, instead, created a fictional character more insecure than such a mellow-voiced, convincing storyteller could ever be. Keillor exaggerated Larry Wyler's ambitions and angst and put him into a series of predicaments often predicated on the unpredictable ups and downs of "Mr. Penis." Then he turned him into an advice columnist.

Now, Garrison Keillor did write "Dear Mr. Blue: Advice for Lovers and Writers" for salon.com from 1999-2001. And, like Wyler, he did split his life between the smart, sophisticated, sexually restless world of The New Yorker (which started publishing him when he was 27) and the folk world of blue-collar and rural Minnesotans, earnest, plain and compassionate. But he swears that the tension of shutting between the two worlds — a tension that, in the novel, leads to all sorts of comical disasters — never bothered him.

Although he admits that, like Wyler, he's "terrified of monotony," "I think it's one of my great weaknesses," he says. "I've had this since I was a child: the fear of boredom. The fear of stability, maybe. It results in a lot of bad behavior: restlessness, uprooting yourself just because you are afraid of being settled."

It also breeds envy, which he's felt, sharp and pure, for "gosh, practically any writer I can think of I have no difficulty understanding where plagiarism comes from. I have envied people to that point."

Wyler is struggling with writer's block when a friend gets a novel published by Random House. "I wanted him to choke on a bratwurst and fall down and hit his head," confides the character,

"so that he'd be in a wheelchair, steering it with a pencil between his teeth, and I could do a benefit for him, to raise money to pay for his colostomy." Humor exaggerates what's true.

In high school, Keillor was "very skinny and very quiet, a well-behaved, religious young man. People have a hard time remembering me," he says. "I was practically invisible." He wanted desperately to be a writer and "to have friendship and affection and eventually loving and sexual relationships with women. But I had no idea how to do this."

The contrast was a kid named Peter Benizan. "He was a halfback on the football team, he came from a well-to-do family, he was movie-star handsome and genuinely nice, and I envied him with all my heart," Keillor says. Now an attorney in San Diego, Benizan says he never dreamed Keillor felt that way.

"I guess Garry was shy, and tall and kind of gawky," he concedes. "But he was an editor for the school paper and helped found a literary magazine, and he was in band and chorus, and everybody respected his cleverness. And there was this Danish exchange student, very lovely — she and

hard work: "I had all the qualms of conscience one should have, and real fears that I'd give some lighthearted advice and someone would go and kill themselves. But I had a great time doing it."

His editor at salon.com, Ruth Henrich, says she barely had to touch his clean, elegant copy. "I was always impressed with how revealing he was about himself," she says, "and how seriously he took the column. He was very generous with his responses, never glib. Although occasionally somebody would get on his nerves, and he'd unload on them in a very funny way." The trigger? "A certain arrogance that he detected."

Keillor despises arrogance; he sees a moral duty "to find your own arrogance and to be ashamed of it, to be embarrassed by it." As for his own celebrity, he says, "It hits you hard at first because it is such a surprise, and it feels so unnatural. You just almost don't know what to do, and in your confusion you often wind up behaving badly." Then he insists he's not a celebrity, because as a writer he's not visible (shades of high school) and doesn't get recognized.

Asked the source of his compassion, Keillor talks about his mom, how she baked peanut-butter

at leaving out what I should leave out, at simplifying and paring down, which I now believe is the purpose of art."

In "Love Me," the famous New Yorker editor William Shawn berates Wyler for "that detached ironic tone. The perpetual precocious adolescent flitting about, mothlike, creating trifles, feuilletons, elegant piffle. That's the root cause of writer's block! The source of all true art is simplicity! Stripping away! Making plain!" Then Shawn slaps Wyler on the back and tells him to stop feeling sorry for himself.

It's hard to imagine Keillor's resonant voice thickening with self-pity. Yet he has ready advice for those he calls, in tones of familiarity, "wounded woodchucks." "Realize you are not the only wounded woodchuck around," he says. "There are other people who are lying in the underbrush sobbing into their paws."

"An Evening With Garrison Keillor"

What: A reading from his novel "Love Me," sponsored by Left Bank Books, KWMU-FM (99.7) and the St. Louis Public Library

When: 7 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Sheldon Concert Hall, 3648 Washington Boulevard

How much: Free

More info: 314-367-6731 or www.left-bank.com

A book signing will follow the reading, but Keillor will only sign copies of "Love Me" purchased from Left Bank Books (bring receipt if purchased in advance). There are no tickets for the event; seating is first come, first served.

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— Garrison Keillor

Garry were close friends. I think it was largely platonic, but there sure was some envy from the rest of us."

The exchange student came back for their 25th class reunion and became Keillor's second wife. He doesn't tell that story when he reminisces, though; he says only, "I had a late adolescence, a kind of prolonged innocence. There were girls in high school who were fascinating — and frightening — to me. To sit in a room, and you are writing, and a woman walks in and kisses you and says how are you — that just seemed like heaven."

The only reference he makes to his second wife is to insist he moved from St. Paul to New York — a move fans saw as near betrayal — to please her. Now back in St. Paul with his third wife, Keillor has slipped in and out of heaven often enough to gather plenty of "Advice for Lovers and Writers." He misses writing the column, he says, although it was incredibly

cookies and sold them door-to-door in brown paper bags during the Depression, and got to know the sufferings of all sorts of people. He injects his stories with that open-hearted ease, transforming strangers into fellow human beings. Lake Wobegon, he says, was inspired by central Minnesotans "whose friendship was very simple and very true. The moment I'm with them, I slip into a comfortable person. I'm not that person all the time."

He is, however, increasingly content. Six decades have calmed the restlessness, and what he wants now is "to be generous and useful to younger people. I used to be more detached, more of a satirist. But I feel I have things to impart that can save people time and are not simply a lot of moralizing." He also hopes to "get better

