

Radio's Keillor puts it together in Manchester

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MANCHESTER—Listening to Garrison Keillor, it all makes sense and the line that connects a Burr and Burton Academy gymnasium to a homecoming queen in a Sherman tank leading to the banana cream pie that separated a husband and wife and on to Meryl Streep's deceptive girliness seems clear.

Maybe you had to be there. For the audience of about 800 people who came to see Keillor on Wednesday night, courtesy of the Northshire Bookstore in Manchester, the storytelling was something that commanded rapt, silent attention and occasional laughter.

Keillor is the host of "Prairie Home Companion," a radio variety show with roots that go back

more than a quarter century and is broadcast every Saturday on National Public Radio.

He is touring the country to promote his latest book, "Pontoon: A Novel of Lake Wobegon" with Wednesday's appearance the only stop in Vermont.

On Tuesday, Northshire marketing director Marie Leahy said Keillor may sing during his

appearance or tell stories or possibly read from "Pontoon."

Leahy was pretty close. Keillor did all three and pretty much in that order.

Beginning by asking the audience to stand and join him in singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" because he said that was the way he remembered most events in a high school gymnasium started off, the author went

on to describe his own student days.

"I simply couldn't do the rope climb so I grabbed the end of the rope and hung there for a bit. And that was the end of that," he said.

Keillor told the audience that his nostalgia for his school days was as much because of the

See Page B6: Keillor

Keillor

Continued From Page B5

weather as the location.

"Beautiful fall days, you get more of them in Vermont than we do in Minnesota. ... There's an eagerness in the air and the smell of apples, the smell of fall, a cool, crisp, clear smell," he said.

The approach of the fall season makes Keillor appreciate his teachers, he said, especially the one who praised him for his spelling talent.

"All you need is one teacher that loves you and that will last you almost through the rest of your life," he said.

During a question-and-answer session, Keillor displayed what could be considered a liberal side when responding to a question about what he would inscribe in a book for President George W. Bush, Vice-President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

"Probably just some old piece of scripture — 'Blessed are the peacemakers.' Something inoffensive. 'Thou shalt not bear false witness.' 'Go forth and sin no more,'" he said, earning a round of applause.

But Keillor also showed a strongly conservative streak, condemning Henry David Thoreau's advice about letting a person march to the beat of a different drummer. Keillor said the purpose of school was to teach people about the "joy of community and team."

"Thoreau said the mass of people live lives of quiet desperation. How would he know? He never talked to anyone," he said.

Children may even learn from being part of a losing team like the team Keillor said he belonged to in Lake Wobegon, Minn., the fictional town where many of Keillor's books and radio stories are set.

From there he talked about how the town's homecoming queen would ride around on the night of the big dance in a Sherman town.

"Seeing this beautiful woman in white organdy in the forward hatch of a tank with a big cannon over her shoulder. It changed your feeling about women somehow," he said.

The stress of the tank's meeting with a hayride tractor hauling an old septic tank — a long story — led to a headache that made an older couple go for a long trip and stop for a piece of banana cream pie. Through a series of circumstances, the husband left

his wife behind in the diner, but it all worked out in the end, part of the nostalgic lure of Lake Wobegon.

At the prompting of an audience member, Keillor praised Lindsey Lohan's professionalism, described Streep's outgoing and girlish qualities and talked about how much he enjoyed making the movie, "A Prairie Home Companion," a fictionalized version of the radio show that was the late director Robert Altman's last film.

"Let me tell you a secret, making a movie isn't that hard. You get many chances and they take the best one. How can you fail," he said.

Keillor earned some impressed gasps and murmurs by recalling that he broadcast a 1991 radio show in Burlington from the Flynn Theater.

He also found some time to promote his book, although he asked an audience member if he could borrow a copy of "Pontoon" to ensure his description was accurate. He described a scene in the book with the titular pontoon boat and the woman who rents it.

"A flying Elvis is involved in her wedding and a hot air balloon piloted by her ex-boyfriend. It's a complicated story," he said.

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