

Inside Garrison Keillor's attempted comeback after his #MeToo downfall

By [Paul Farhi](#)

Today at 5:00 a.m. EDT



SELLERSVILLE, Pa. — Garrison Keillor seems right at home.

He's deep into telling a new Lake Wobegon story — a particularly absurd and convoluted one about a writer from New York who comes to the mythical Minnesota town to research a book about two local celebrities, a pair of once-conjoined twins named Peter and Paul. Well, there's this dog, see, and he doesn't much like this writer and . . .

Really, it doesn't matter, does it? The 79-year-old storyteller and humorist is getting chuckles on all the right beats from an audience of mostly gray heads. The vibe is nostalgia for the nostalgia of Lake Wobegon and a million Saturday nights gone by, when Keillor stood on a stage and told his wry, whimsical stories on "A Prairie Home Companion," the monstrously popular public radio program he created, wrote and hosted for 40 years.

Before the fall of 2017, that is. Before Minneapolis Public Radio cut ties with him after a female colleague accused him of sexual harassment at the height of the #MeToo awakening, and before other allegations of workplace affairs and inappropriate comments swept Keillor, then 75, into a rapid if fitful retreat from the spotlight.

He's spent the past four years trying to find his way back.

On a sparkling October afternoon, Keillor is freshly arrived from New York City, unaccompanied, for an appearance in this handsome little town in the exurbs of Philadelphia's exurbs. The 324-seat theater, a former stable dating to 1894, is almost full. Keillor talks for nearly two hours straight in his warm, familiar baritone, reciting limericks and poetry, reminiscing about growing up in Minnesota in the 1950s, about the joys and pitfalls of his advancing mortality.

He mentions nothing of his fall from grace; if you didn't know about it, you'd have no idea from hearing him. But after leading the crowd through an a cappella singalong of patriotic and religious songs — "My Country 'Tis of Thee," "How Great Thou Art," etc. — he does add a little coda.

"I have no regrets," he tells the room. "I have no regrets. I have enjoyed thinking about my mistakes, and the disasters. . . . It's all amusing at this point. Ambition is gone. Thank you, Jesus!"

The details of Keillor's alleged transgressions are still officially fogged by lawyers, settlements and nondisclosure agreements. Most of his accusers have not gone public, including the woman whose complaints triggered his dismissal. But some elements of the key allegations that precipitated his downfall — which involve the unnamed female colleague's accusation that he attempted to grope her — have spilled out, in part due to Keillor's attempts to defend himself with occasionally shifting accounts that minimize, blur or excuse his own conduct.

The news was at odds with Keillor's public persona as the gentle, avuncular satirist of Midwestern puritanism. But coming squarely in the middle of #MeToo movement — the accusations broke on the same day NBC fired "Today"

show host Matt Lauer — the fallout was swift and harsh. Minnesota Public Radio, Keillor’s longtime broadcast partner and “Prairie Home’s” distributor, announced it was severing ties with him, scrubbing all 1,557 episodes from its archives — decades of Lake Wobegon stories, Guy Noir sketches and Powdermilk Biscuit jingles. Keillor’s longtime publisher, Viking-Penguin, dropped him; The Washington Post ended his weekly column.

Soon, “Prairie Home” itself was gone, too. Though Keillor had retired and handed over hosting duties a year earlier, MPR changed its name to the amorphous “Live From Here.” The official statement was as cold as the Minnesota winter: “MPR will end its business relationships with Mr. Keillor’s media companies effective immediately.”

Keillor had once made the cover of *Time*, hailed as a latter-day Mark Twain or Will Rogers. But at an age when he might have kept busy accepting lifetime achievement awards, he was suddenly radioactive, a pariah.

“It was a cancellation,” Keillor says in an interview, one of the few he’s given in recent years. “It’s something you dread. The child in you dreads it. The ostracization.”

He quickly rationalizes: “If it happened in my 40s [at the peak of his success], it would have been horrible, devastating. But it didn’t. I was winding down, going back to the solitary life of a writer. And then covid came along. We’ve all been locked in.”

Keillor is sitting on a couch backstage at the Sellersville Theater. He’s a big, slow-moving man, with an owl-like face, an unruly spray of hair and eyebrows like tumbleweeds. He wears red sneakers over red socks, a kind of trademark.

“It’s unjust,” he continues, “but compared to what? I’m living most of the time in New York City. Every day, there’s something in the paper that breaks your heart. Kids finding used needles in the park, getting stuck and contracting HIV. A van carrying migrants crashes and kills innocent people. . . . What is my injustice compared to these things? Nothing.”

Regardless of what he says onstage, he does have a few regrets. But they are about family and friends he ignored when “Prairie Home” was reaching 4 million listeners a week and Keillor was being lionized as an American original. “I’ve made a number of wrong turns,” he admits. “When you’re 79, you can’t help it.”

But no regrets about *that*. And as he’s made clear since 2017, he’s not apologizing.

Two things become immediately clear in talking with the fans who've come to hear Keillor speak in Sellersville. One is that they're not really sure what his public shaming was all about. The second is that whatever it was, they forgive him.

"I'm glad he wasn't canceled too far," says Collin Klamper, a Keillor fan who drove three hours from Washington's Maryland suburbs. Klamper, 49, said he "never understood the details" surrounding Keillor's disgrace, but "it felt silly to me. It seems like an overreaction. It's a sad state of affairs."

Trish Sneddon, 64, was puzzled, too. "It didn't really make sense to me," coming so late in his long career, she said. Sneddon began listening to Keillor in 1980 when "Prairie Home" went on a national satellite uplink. Now she's here with her son, Ozzie, 25, who started listening to Keillor at 10. "For us, in a way, Lake Wobegon became real," she said. And so the details of what he was accused don't seem very important. "Does what happened negate an amazing body of work over a lifetime?" she asks. "It doesn't for me."

If his fans remain hazy on how Keillor got himself in trouble, it may reflect the passage of four years since the accusations first made news — and Keillor's effort to subsequently present his own highly sanitized retelling of the events that brought him down, in his 2020 memoir, "That Time of Year."

In his account, he was the victim, not the villain: His accuser — a woman who had done research and written for the program for 13 years — conspired against him with a former writer and director of the show, he wrote. He alleges that both sought severance payments after Keillor retired from "Prairie Home" in 2016 and his successor, musician Chris Thile, replaced them with a new creative team. Keillor claims that both wanted more money than they were offered — and found common cause in a conspiracy to soak him and MPR.

"They drew up a list of allegations against me and MPR, demanding cash and confidentiality," he wrote.

Keillor cops to nothing more than a long-running consensual email "flirtation" with the woman. Among the thousands they wrote to each other, he acknowledges that he once confessed a desire to "lie in a hammock" with the woman, a chaste and particularly Keillor-esque image. As he describes it in his memoir, "We were just two aging adults having an adolescent fantasy."

There was "no unbuttoning," he writes, no physical contact — except once, which Keillor describes as a fleeting and misunderstood gesture: When the woman sought consolation from him one day in 2015, he said he placed his hand on her bare shoulder to show his support. She winced, he apologized and that was that: "[We] stayed friends until her attorney demanded the money."

Except it's not that simple.

Keillor writes of his shock at finding himself on the front page of the New York Times along with other men felled by #MeToo allegations, baffled that "the writer of flirtatious emails" could be equated to "rapists and brutes who exposed themselves and threw women up against walls."

Yet his version of events ignores or elides many of the crucial details previously made public, many of which challenge his self-portrayal as wronged and misunderstood.

In 2018, an internal investigation by MPR concluded that Keillor engaged in "dozens of sexually inappropriate

incidents” with his accuser over several years. The woman, who has never been publicly identified, described instances of “unwanted sexual touching,” according to MPR’s then-president, Jon McTaggart. He declined to enumerate them.

McTaggart acknowledged that a former employee — a “Prairie Home” writer and director later identified as Dan Rowles — had brought the woman’s allegations to MPR’s attention as he was leaving the program. But McTaggart denied Keillor’s assertion of a conspiracy. (Under a later settlement with Keillor, MPR restored online access to the “Prairie Home” archives; a spokesperson declined further comment).

Joni Thome, the Minneapolis attorney who represented both Rowles and the woman, also disputed Keillor’s suggestion that her clients had conspired against him. “That did not happen,” she said firmly.

In the wake of Keillor’s departure, reporters at MPR News — an outfit owned by MPR — interviewed dozens of former colleagues and subordinates and found several women who felt “mistreated, sexualized or belittled” by him, including a college student inspired by a class he taught only to have him proclaim his attraction to her when she inquired about an internship with his production company.

“It was a bigger blow to my confidence than I realized at the time,” Lora Den Otter told MPR. “It made me sort of more easily give up on wanting to be a writer because that self-doubt became a lot stronger.”

The MPR report also stated that Keillor, who is married, had at least two extramarital relationships with women on his staff. (Keillor has acknowledged one such relationship but denied others.)

MPR News also uncovered an instance in 2012 when Keillor wrote an off-color limerick, referencing (though not naming) a young woman who worked at a bookstore he owned in St. Paul. Keillor rhymed her alma mater, Macalester College, with the lines, “the way she is built/could make a petrified phallus stir.”

Keillor posted his creation on a whiteboard behind the cash register. Employees said they were taken aback by the verse but feared Keillor’s disapproval if they removed it. Instead, they covered it up with books and a portrait of St. Paul native F. Scott Fitzgerald. Eventually, a manager erased it. (A friend of Keillor’s said he wrote the limerick after suffering a mild stroke and doesn’t remember the incident but has apologized for it.)

The Minneapolis Star-Tribune later reported that the MPR staffer at the center of the original complaint had complained about Keillor’s advances to managers and colleagues at his production company on five occasions starting in 2011; she also reported three instances of unwanted physical contact. Among them was an allegation that Keillor had placed his hand on her leg during a 2015 car ride, and that in 2011 he had “trailed his fingers up and down her left thigh” in the show’s production office. No remedial action was ever taken by the company, the paper reported.

The Star-Tribune also quoted several emails Keillor and the woman exchanged, paradoxically supplied by Keillor himself in an effort to defend himself. Keillor’s emails to the woman became more “threatening” the longer she rebuffed him, a “close family friend” of the woman told the newspaper.

“I have sent an e-mail to GK just now,” she wrote to a co-worker in 2011, according to the paper. “He will understand, upon reading it, that I want nothing to do with him apart from a working friendship. . . . I feel sad and nervous.”

Kate Gustafson, managing director of Keillor’s production company for two decades, denied last week that she received any complaints about his behavior from the woman. She maintains that Keillor’s “MeToo moment” was “blown out of proportion” in the news media, though she said she’s not at liberty to provide a blow-by-blow defense. She called him “the most generous person I know.”

Keillor is dismissive if not outright contemptuous of the reporting about him. “MPR News got a Sigma Delta Chi Award for locating five women who left the show feeling unhappy,” he wrote in his memoir. “Somebody could write the same story about former MPR employees and win a Pulitzer Prize.”

It was Keillor himself who related the incident in which he said he placed his hand on his staffer’s shoulder to console her. But his account of that moment has changed over time.

Keillor told the Star-Tribune in 2018 that he touched the woman’s shoulder and then “my hand slipped under the leading edge of her blouse,” suggesting inadvertent contact. She recoiled, he said, and he apologized.

But in an email sent to the woman in 2016 and revealed by the Star-Tribune in 2018, he acknowledged that the “slip” wasn’t an accident. He wrote that he was sorry he “impulsively put my hand under your shirt.”

Two years later, Keillor’s memoir airbrushed all of this. There’s no mention of blouses or wandering hands, only a little story of consolation and forgiveness — for him. “[I] put my hand on her bare left shoulder by way of comforting her, and she winced,” he wrote, “and I wrote her a note of apology the next day and she forgave me.”

And now, like Al Franken and Louis C.K. — two other humorists whose highflying careers hit a brick wall in 2017 amid sexual-harassment accusations — Keillor has embarked on a comeback tour.

Early last year, though, news of his return to live performances ignited pushback on social media. Minnesota’s Feminist Justice League announced plans to picket a scheduled appearance in Duluth, arguing that Keillor “never took accountability for the ways he made female co-workers feel sexualized and harassed.” Keillor’s booking agency canceled the show. A benefit performance for the Woman’s Club of Minneapolis was canceled, too.

When a Twin Cities magazine, Mpls.St.Paul, ran a cover story about Keillor’s would-be comeback in late 2019, a columnist quit in protest: Famous men, Nora McInerny wrote, “get to be multidimensional in a way that accusers and

survivors do not.”

Some event promoters have had trouble getting out the word about Keillor’s shows. A few public radio stations declined to accept ads promoting him for fear of alienating listeners and donors, Gustafson said, which cut him off from his most avid fans.

But judging by the enthusiasm in Sellersville, some of the heat may be dissipating. Bruce Ranes, the theater’s general manager, said he had some qualms about booking Keillor but encountered no dissent — and the show was a financial success.

Keillor’s 14 bookings this fall are taking him to such small towns as Menomonie, Wis. and Jim Thorpe, Pa., and small venues near bigger cities, such as the Birchmere music hall in Alexandria, Va., on Wednesday. (Birchmere management declined to comment on the show.)

Keillor professes to being oblivious to all of this. He says he spends most of his days writing, typically rising around 5 a.m. and working alone and uninterrupted until noon. He lives with his third wife, violinist Jenny Lind Nilsson, in New York and Minneapolis. He is writing a twice-weekly column that he publishes through the Substack email-newsletter service and two books he will self-publish next year — one on “the beauty of getting old,” and a new Lake Wobegon novel, “Boom Town.”

The plot involves the changing complexion of what Keillor dubbed “the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve.” But time has no longer forgotten Lake Wobegon: Millennials have moved in, as has a company that makes a health remedy extracted from tomatoes, transforming the wheat and soy fields into vast tomato patches attended by Mexican farmworkers. Several of Keillor’s familiar characters, who’d never aged in all the decades he’s told stories about them, finally meet their end.

Keillor recognizes that the story reflects his own advancing age. But another theme breaks through: Even in a self-constructed world, you can’t stop change.

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