

## Straight Talk



By Jeffrey Zaslow

# Garrison Keillor: The author and radio storyteller says that to embrace the past, it helps to escape the rat race.

**T**HOUGH RADIO RACONTEUR Garrison Keillor lives near the Mall of America outside Minneapolis, he has never been there. "To me, a mall is a mausoleum. People go crazy in malls, like rats in a coffee can. Some run screaming to the parking lots. Others go into a fury of purchasing."

Keillor, 55, talks slowly, dryly, just as he does on his celebrated public radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*. His story is building now. "I went to a mall three years ago. The place was filled with horrible tunes like *The Little Drummer Boy*. It was pure dementia: children screeching and weeping, parents dragging and striking them. It was like an insane asylum, and you could never see the sky."

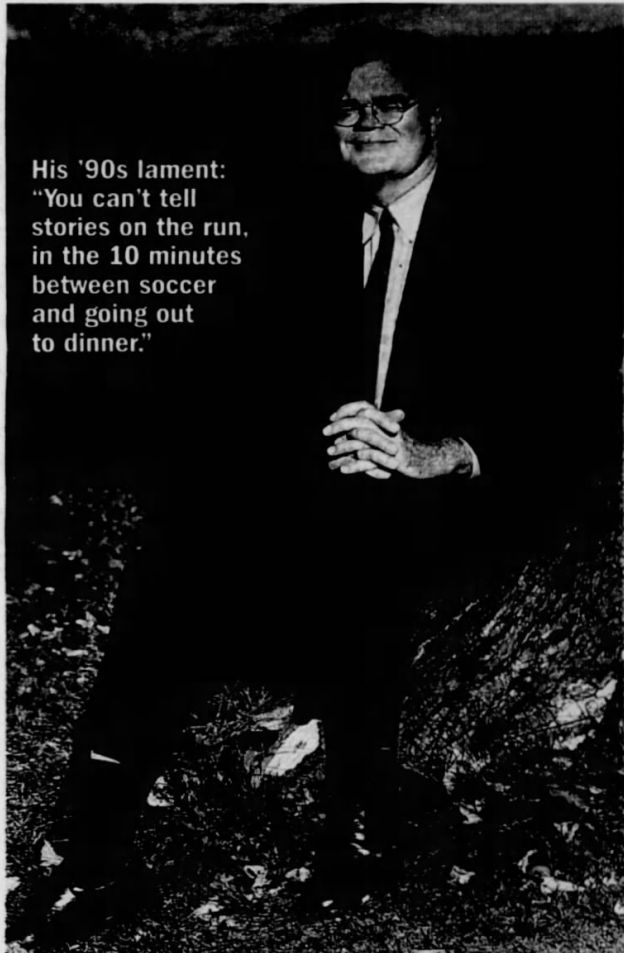
If you must venture out for holiday gifts, Keillor concludes, "go to a place with a plate-glass window, so you can see if it's snowing." Or better yet, create a personal gift. "Write someone a poem."

Keillor turns experiences such as his mall visit into overstatements that ring like absolute truths. In the new *Wobegon Boy*, his first novel in 10 years set in mythical Lake Wobegon, he yearns for the days when "you didn't smart off to elders, and if a lady you didn't know told you to blow your nose, you blew it."

Keillor has just walked five blocks from his office in St. Paul to a sushi restaurant. It's a cold, drizzly day, and he could have strolled through the enclosed skyway that connects downtown buildings. But he prefers to walk outside, the way Minnesotans walked in his youth.

We need to remind our kids how life used to be, he says. We all have riveting family histories. "But you can't tell stories on the run, in the 10 minutes between soccer and going out for dinner. Pack up the children and go camping for a week, away from telephones, TV and home itself. Get children to the point of boredom, and they'll really want to listen. Then step into the gap as the person with stories to tell." **WZ**

**This week:** Keillor is touring to promote his new novel, *Wobegon Boy*. Sunday, he'll be in Dallas and Houston; Monday, Nashville; Tuesday, Dayton and Columbus, Ohio.



His '90s lament:  
"You can't tell stories on the run, in the 10 minutes between soccer and going out to dinner."