



Issue Date: December 2007, Posted On: 11/30/2007

Pretty Good Story

John Nemo



Garrison Keillor, one of America's most famous radio personalities, reflects on his formative Minnesota upbringing, "A Prairie Home Companion" and his new Lake Wobegon novel.

Rain falls softly on the city of St. Paul. Inside a small, dimly lit office, one of America's greatest storytellers spins an intimate tale - his own. Garrison Keillor stretches out his lanky frame on a chair. Wearing a black T-shirt, jeans and sandals, the 65-year-old best known for his "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show and movie of the same name reflects on the stifling childhood that shaped him, and the years before he created the mythical Minnesota town of Lake Wobegon - the symbol of small-town Midwest living for millions.

He also talks about his role as a famous author who has published more than a dozen books, including his latest Lake Wobegon novel, "Pontoon," released in September.

"I was always going to fall short."

Keillor closes his eyes and leans back in his chair. He scrunches up his face as he recalls the early 1950s in Anoka, Minn., at that time a small community north of Minneapolis that consisted mainly of farms and open space.

Easing into the breezy, baritone delivery that has made his voice one of the most recognizable on the planet, Keillor talks about growing up in a small, fragmented sect of Christianity known as the Plymouth Brethren. The group lived in anticipation of the second coming of Jesus Christ and renounced worldly activities.

"[They] lived in perpetual expectation that at any moment - if not right now, then ... *now* - the world would come to an end," Keillor says. "And the world would be turned upside down. People who were postal workers and carpenters and dug ditches and farmers would become princes of heaven, and people who were powerful and wealthy and famous would be cast down into everlasting torment. I grew up among people who truly believed that. And it makes a very deep impression on you that I don't think one is necessarily aware of.

"Now, in my case, I had a feeling early on that despite everything that I might do or profess or say or try to believe, that I was always going to fall short," he continues. "That I was not as good as the other people. I grew up among some very saintly people. I grew up among these saintly women, and I just felt that I was full of all of these wicked impulses ... And so you go through your life with a sense of impending doom. Which is not a bad thing."

Keillor pauses. His memories reveal the quiet defiance of a young boy convinced his fundamentalist parents were wrong about life.

"When they told me that it was wrong, that it was a sin to make up stories ... I disagreed. And I was quite small. I *disagreed*. And for me that was a parting of the ways."

Keillor did not completely part ways with God, however, saying "some days I'm a Christian and other days I'm not sure. The Episcopal Church is very welcoming to people like me. We stand up on Sunday morning and we say the Nicene Creed, and some people believe it more than others. But we try to believe. 'Lord, I believe; help my

unbelief.' That's where I am."

"I was prepared to be lucky."

In the 1960s, Keillor was at the University of Minnesota, where he worked at KUOM, the University radio station, wrote essays and graduated in 1966 with a bachelor's degree in English.

He spent those early years bouncing around the Twin Cities, working for Minnesota Public Radio and writing for The New Yorker. "I remember living in St. Paul on Grantham Street, across from Murray High School," Keillor says. "I sat in the [public] library and wrote on a legal pad. Just down the street is where the St. Anthony Park State Bank used to be, and one fall day I walked in to talk to a loan officer - who I bet still remembers this. I was a freelance writer, and I wanted to borrow money using an outline of a novel as security. Nobody had ever asked him that before. He was kind of tickled. Of course he said no ... and I guess I sort of expected he would, but I was prepared to be lucky."

Little did the loan officer know that the young college graduate sitting before him would go on to sell more than enough books to pay that potential loan back. Keillor describes his latest effort, "Pontoon," as the tale of an old lady in Lake Wobegon, and the secrets of her life that come to light after her death. "The underlying message of the book is that the secrecy of the parents is a curse on the children," he says. "And once that curse is lifted, then we can start to live a normal, healthy, honest life. That's a tough thing to say, and I'm trying to say it in the course of writing comedy."

"It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon."

As Keillor grew into his radio and writing careers during the early 1970s, his experimentation with live programming evolved into "A Prairie Home Companion," which broadcast its first show before a live audience on July 6, 1974.

Now in its 32nd year, the show features soulful, folksy live music (with guest musicians), comedy skits with elaborate live sound effects and Keillor's signature monologue, "The News From Lake Wobegon." He always starts his monologue with the phrase, "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, my hometown," and ends with his signature line, "That's the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average."

"A Prairie Home Companion" is broadcast on almost 600 radio stations around the globe, with an estimated 4 million listeners tuning in each Saturday night. "It started out as something fun to do with friends," Keillor says matter-of-factly. "But I have this problem of perseverance. Whereas I have bailed out of a couple of marriages and a couple of romantic relationships, I stuck with that show for reasons that are hard to explain. But they have something to do with the fact that I really wasn't any good at doing it."

"I think that's why I stayed with the show - just to sort of become decent at doing it," he says. "I went for 20-some years in search of adequacy, found a sort of adequacy, and then it started to become fun. And now that it's become fun, why would one stop?"

The radio show's success inspired the 2006 film of the same name. Keillor wrote the screenplay for "A Prairie Home Companion" and starred alongside Meryl Streep, Lily Tomlin, Lindsay Lohan, Kevin Kline, Woody Harrelson and John C. Reilly. Almost all of the film was shot at the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul, the radio show's home base on most Saturday evenings.

Keillor says he thoroughly enjoyed the experience - especially the freedom that late director Robert Altman gave him on the set. "When I discovered they would let me revise the script as we went along, that I could rewrite a scene by hand on a piece of paper and just hand it to Lindsay Lohan, and she'd go off to her [dressing room] and memorize it ... that was the peak for me," he says. "That's why I want to do it again. It was so much fun."

Keillor is working on a new screenplay about Lake Wobegon, with all the action centered on a Fourth of July gathering in the fictional Central Minnesota town. "People all come home to see the Fourth of July parade and be a part of the living flag," he explains. "The living flag is stars and stripes formed by red, white and blue caps on the heads of about 1,000 people all standing in formation. That's the center of the movie. There'll be a lot of extras in this movie - we'll need a lot of people who are willing to stand very quietly, very close to other people. That's not easy to find in Minnesota in a time of full employment."

"If there is a knack, I don't really have it."

Having grown up in a family of six children - four boys, two girls - Keillor doesn't bother with sentimentality or self-pity when describing the ups and downs of his childhood, which shaped his razor-sharp wit and powers of observation.

"I was the youngest child, the baby of the family, for six years. You know, I was the family pet, and I was their prize," he says. "And then the twins came along. And when the twins were brought home from the hospital, all of the air was sucked out of the room. I was just a little kid standing in a crowd of onlookers who had come to see this natural wonder - *twins*. And so I was thrust to the side. Not a bad thing for a writer, to be pushed aside and made an outsider. It's the misfortune that keeps on paying off.

"Being an outsider is a useful thing, a real blessing for a writer," he continues. "I was never a popular person in high school. We were not supposed to be [in my family]. We were not supposed to have worldly friends. We did not dance, we did not drink, we did not smoke, we did not go to movies."

That didn't stop the boy, then Gary Edward Keillor (he changed his name to "Garrison" in the eighth grade), from starting school newspapers and writing poetry to impress his teachers. Still, some 60 years after he started writing, Keillor is quick to dismiss suggestions that he has a gift for the craft.

"If there is a knack, I don't really have it. Talent - I really don't know what it is anymore," he says. "But I did have perseverance, and I think that's more important. I did have the ability to sit in one place for a long period of time and not get bored.

"This is a good thing for a writer," he says. "Because everything that I do starts out a mess. You'd be embarrassed to have anybody look at it. And you just have to sit with it and push it around - and throw half of it out, and take the other half and mush that around a little bit. It just takes time. Most people just give up."

"It just comes right out of his head."

Carol MacFarlane stands in a long line on a Monday afternoon, and she doesn't mind one bit. She is among the scores of fans waiting to talk with Keillor outside his St. Paul bookstore, Common Good Books.

Keillor opened the store in November 2006 near his St. Paul home because, he says, "I just missed the [independent] bookstores that had been in my neighborhood, and I thought our neighborhood would like to have one."

On this September afternoon, dozens of fans wait in line, clutching copies of "Pontoon" and waiting for the author, who is standing outside the store's entrance wearing jeans, a black turtleneck and navy sport coat, and his trademark red tennis shoes.

"I'm getting a book for my sister-in-law in Edinburgh, Scotland," MacFarlane says. "When she told her fellow teachers that I had taken her brother to live in Minnesota, they all freaked out. They all started yelling, 'Garrison Keillor!'"

MacFarlane, who grew up in St. Paul and lived in California before moving back to the Twin Cities, says she enjoys Keillor's stories "because the way he tells a story, it seems like it just comes right out of his head, unrehearsed and unscripted. And his books are very conversational, like someone is speaking right to you."

While Keillor speaks to the growing crowd outside the bookstore, store manager Sue Zumberge scrambles a few feet away to open another box of books. "I'm so impressed with his patience with people," Zumberge says. "Maybe I shouldn't say this, but he will be here for six hours. He was here for 10 on opening day. He seems to really enjoy it, just talking and meeting with people."

Zumberge says her boss is not a micromanager, but that he does drop by the store a few times a week when he's in town to see how things are going. "I think he's really a pretty shy guy," she says of Keillor. "But he's a hard worker. We've had him in here when we get boxes of books, and he starts shelving them. This really is his neighborhood bookstore - this is where he shops."

A trip through the store reveals shelves loaded with Midwestern fiction and nonfiction, an entire wall of poetry and

an eclectic blend of books covering everything from the history of Spam (a notorious Minnesota product) to sports and religion.

"I feel comfortable here."

Keillor enjoys the short walk from his bookstore to the St. Paul home he shares with his third wife, violinist Jenny Lind Nilsson, and the couple's 9-year-old daughter, Maia Grace.

Keillor and his wife still have an apartment in New York City, but they moved back to Minnesota because, he says, "I wanted my daughter to have grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins. You could hire them in New York - you could hire professional aunts, but it would be hard to explain to an older child, let's put it that way."

Keillor says he loves Minnesota, though some of the changes - including the urban and suburban sprawl of Minneapolis and St. Paul - bewilder him. "I live close to the center of St. Paul, in a part of town settled just after the Civil War," he says. "We have lots of homes around us that are 100 and some years old. I feel comfortable here."

Over the years, millions of listeners and readers have found similar comfort in Keillor's tales of life in Lake Wobegon. Still, he says, his true pleasure comes from the task of trying to craft yet another story.

"I do the same thing now when I get up in the morning as I did in college," he says. "[I] sit down and try to make something out of language. And that's the pleasure. It really doesn't have much to do with saying anything. The point of it is to try and make something new and graceful on the page. And finish it. And then do another one."

Garrison Keillor Reveals His Favorite St. Paul Eateries

New Louisiana Café, 613 Selby Ave., 651-221-9140.

Known for its Cajun-flavored menu and open seating area, this breakfast and lunch spot is one of Keillor's favorites.

Nina's Coffee Café, 165 Western Ave., 651-292-9816.

Located directly above Keillor's bookstore, Common Good Books, Nina's offers a variety of coffees, sandwiches and pastries.

Muffuletta in the Park, 2260 Como Ave., 651-644-9116.

In recent years, the restaurant has moved to more global, chef-driven bistro fare, while keeping some of its traditional items - including its namesake New Orleans-style sandwich.

The St. Paul Grill, 350 Market St., 651-224-7455.

Housed inside the upscale Saint Paul Hotel and known for its seafood and steaks, the Grill has long been admired by diners for its high-end, gourmet experience. "The place to eat downtown is the St. Paul Grill," Keillor says.

- J. N.

How to Get There

Catch "A Prairie Home Companion" live on many Saturday nights at the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul. This month, "Prairie Home" will broadcast live from the Town Hall in New York City. For more information on the show and more things Keillor, visit prairiehome.publicradio.org.

Northwest Airlines and its Airlink Partners offer more than 480 flights daily to Minneapolis-St. Paul. NWA WorldVacations offers air and hotel vacation packages. Visit nwaworldvacations.com.

Minneapolis freelance writer and author John Nemo is a regular "Prairie Home" listener and Minnesota native.