

CELEBARTING AMERICA WITH GARRISON KEILLOR

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It is the will of God that we must have critics, and missionaries,
and Congressmen, and humorists, and we must bear the burden.

—Mark Twain

[Keillor's] humor is polite, understated, and deliberately anachronistic;
it never breaks a sweat. When he speaks, blood pressures drop across the
country [and] wild horses accept the saddle.

—Sam Anderson

There was knackebrod and herring, and old Norwegian cheese
Strong enough to knock a bachelor farmer to his knees
And Svendson brought an aquavit that tastes like antifreeze,
You have a glass and you cannot feel your tonsils.

—A Sons of Knute Christmas

All those years I was a Democrat I did nothing but worry about trees, owls, water pollution,
world peace, hunger, and homelessness. Now that I'm a Republican, I don't have a worry in the
world, because Republicans are the party of self-responsibility. If you're in trouble, it's your
problem, it's not mine.

—Garrison Keillor

On the occasion of Mark Twain's death centenary I would like to celebrate Garrison Keillor, America's second best humorist, satirist, and essayist. When I told some friends that I was writing this column, there were howls of protests when I dared to reverse the ranking. One wrote to insist that both had to take a back seat to Ben Franklin. I just realized that I forgot Woody Allen, so let's just not doing any ranking at all.

Since 1974 Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion*, aired every weekend on 600 NPR stations with 4 million listeners, has become an icon of Americana. Sam Anderson describes the show as "remarkably invariable—its skits and songs cycle in and out of the program as predictably as the seasons. The highlight of every show is 'The News From Lake Woebegon,' a pointedly unthrilling monologue full of childhood tomato fights, Norwegian bachelor farmers, and sentimental rhapsodies about the precious things in life."

It is this last aspect that is the reason for Keillor's greatness. His keen observations of human behavior cut to core of what is not only to be an American but also what it is to be

human. Keillor makes us laugh about our vices, but he can talk about virtue and wholesomeness without anyone being embarrassed about it.

Keillor certainly has his detractors. Feminists complain about the lack of positive images of women. Instead there are housewives, who, during the long Midwest winters, draw the “noose of Christianity” so tightly around their men’s necks that they flee to their fishing shacks for days at a time.

There are also his babes, who, according to one mother, are the only thing that draws her son away from his video games—to the radio no less! It is not hard to understand why: “She wore a knit sweater and jeans so tight it looked as if she’d been poured into them and forgot to say When. When she moved, she seemed to undulate under her clothes in ways that took a man’s mind off the state of the economy.” The babes appear on the skit “Guy Noir,” a down-and-out detective who is reduced to finding lost keys and dogs. He never gets any of the babes, not even the vapid Sugar who finally runs off with another guy.

Keillor also got into trouble with gay men when he described a pair of them as “sardonic fellows with fussy hair who live in an over-decorated apartment with a striped sofa and a small weird dog.” In a rare response to criticism, Keillor said that his own gay friends could take this in stride, but he could understand why gays in general would be offended.

The critics don’t realize that Twain and Keillor are equal opportunity satirists, who ridicule everyone, including themselves. Attention feminists: there are no positive images of men either, except for perhaps the uncle who scolded his nephews for throwing pebbles at some hogs penned up for slaughter. (Keillor does get deadly serious some times.) Please note that Twain includes humorists among those whose burdens we all have to bear. Keillor’s put-downs of radio people—too clumsy and ugly to be seen on TV—are especially scathing.

When Keillor made fun of people with Tourette Syndrome on a recent show, some people thought he had gone too far. He received a stern letter from the president of the Tourette Syndrome Association demanding an apology, but none, as far as I know, has been forthcoming. When the tables are turned, however, Keillor is not so forgiving. His attorneys wrote to a business to “cease and desist” producing t-shirts with “A Prairie Ho Companion” printed on them. What ever happened to the satirists’ credo that “what is good for the goose is also good for the gander”?

Keillor offers babes for pubescent males men, and booger and fart jokes for the younger ones. Also focusing on that general area of the body is the skit “The Night of the Living Sperm,” in which 150 million are all lined up for action by their master sergeant. The mission is aborted when a mother knocks on the door of a basement TV room offering her daughter and boyfriend some popcorn.

I’m surprised that Twain did not include preachers in his list of acceptable targets. Given Twain’s strong criticism of religion, it is also deliciously ironic that he says that it is God’s will that we have to put up with these frauds. For Twain the Biblical God may well be one of those imposters. Keillor is kinder to religion than Twain ever was. In typical self-deprecating style, he described his own faith on some days as “so small that it would take a microscope to find it.” He compares himself to the Prodigal Son of the New Testament.

Just as all politicians are fair game—his Al Gore is as unctuous as his George W. is stupid—all religions come into his cross hairs. He claims that Unitarian missionaries from New England founded Lake Wobegon while trying to convert the Ojibwas through interpretive dance. Their failure must be the reason why we Unitarians gave up on proselytizing, and now take it has a badge of honor that our children remain indifferent to religion, even more virtuous for us, that they become Mormons or Pentecostals.

Keillor's subtle humor stands in contrast to his outrageous tales. Did you know that one of the Wise Men was actually a Lutheran? We have always known what gold and frankincense are, but we were never sure about myrrh. Archaeologists from Minnesota have now proved that myrrh is originally a hot dish from the Middle West not the Middle East.

All the Lutherans of Lake Wobegon drive Fords and all the Catholics own Chevrolets, and woe be on the one who would dare cross the sectarian line. One of Keillor's stories deals with a Lutheran wife who is secretly attending Pentecostal services in another town and is also tempted to buy sleek new Chevy. Another story honors the "The Herdsmen," the Lutheran ushering team that had just won the national championship for the fastest and most elegant passing of the offertory baskets.

In his own stories Keillor describes his own religious heritage as Sanctified Brethren, but it was actually the equally fundamentalist Plymouth Brethren. No dancing or card playing was allowed, but gossiping about the sins of Lutherans and Catholics was encouraged. This served to warn their children about what they, except for being self-righteous like their parents, should never do.

One of my favorite skits is the one about cowboys Dusty and Lefty. Dusty is the one with a hard edge—preferring dance hall floozies and rotgut whiskey—but Lefty is the sensitive one who prefers to date librarians (her name is Evelyn Bibilow) and drink a good Chardonnay. Lefty would have liked the cowboy in a *New Yorker* cartoon who reserved one of the slots in his cartridge belt for his lip balm.

I also like the skit sponsored by the Ketchup Advisory Council, which claims that ketchup has natural mellowing agents. Growing up in Medford, Oregon with very few seasonings on the table, my brother and I smothered everything we didn't like in ketchup. Keillor has now confirmed why we were so well behaved.

Space does not allow me to retell my favorite stories such as "Truck Stop" about Florian and Myrtle Krebsbach's ill-fated trip to a Minneapolis clinic. Sure, he makes fun of them—a bumbling old codger and his nagging wife—but in doing so he reminds us of our deep and common humanity. Another hilarious tale is the one about 24 Lutheran ministers going on a ride on Carl Bunsen's new pontoon boat. After being forced into the water by a blazing charcoal BBQ, the ministers—all in sodden turtle-necks, earth-tone corduroys, and hush puppies—are led to shore by a guardian angel, a small boy who knows exactly where the shallow water is.

The people of Lake Wobegon are very suspicious of people who indulge in foreign travel. (Those curious about other cultures should subscribe to *National Geographic*.) The only trips that are proper are those where you can stay with relatives.

Speaking of impermissible travel, Keillor's and my paths crossed first when I was in Denmark for my second sabbatical in 1985-86. One morning I opened a Sunday paper and was surprised to find the wedding picture of Keillor and his new Danish wife, his second of three. (I settled for one Danish wife.) As I taped the clipping to my office door, I added my own comment: "The woman is strong, the man is good looking, and the children will all be above average."

The marriage lasted only five years and there were no children. I was reminded of an English professor I had at Oregon State, who had us rolling in the aisles nearly every class period. One day he stopped our laughter cold by reminding us that his first wife did not think he was so funny after a couple years.

When Keillor came to Pullman, Washington on the rolling hills of the Palouse just across the state line from my Moscow, Idaho, I was treated to not one but two live performances. The afternoon show sold out quickly, and he agreed to come back in the evening. Keillor had fewer musicians the second time, but he teamed up the sound effects virtuoso Tom Keith for some amazingly executed stories. What a consummate showman and what a national treasure.

There was a time in Lake Wobegon when the whole town would turn out for a special Fourth of July event. Inspired by a traveling cap salesman, the citizens would don various colored hats and shirts to make the Living Flag. The problem was that person after person would break rank and climb the highest building to admire their amazing creation. Then some people ran home to get their cameras, and it just became a big hassle rather than a patriotic celebration.

Garrison Keillor has only a so-so voice, but, as he says, if you have your own show then you can sing as much as you want. After hearing politicians of all stripes being criticized, it is easy to join in singing "God Bless America" and "The Star Spangled Banner."

Garrison Keillor makes us all proud to be Americans, and by cutting all of us down to proper size, he shows us the humility that should keep us from claiming qualities that we do not have. Keillor is a superb anti-dote to American exceptionalism, because all of us are just above average. At the same time he is the best promoter of a unique America, a flawed but dynamic country of hard-working natives and immigrants with basically good values.

In 2001 a BBC interviewer thought she had finally cornered Keillor when she suggested that he could not possibly continue to draw stories from Lake Wobegon in the same way as writers who had London or Paris as their inspiration. Keillor deals with this clueless presumption in characteristic style, answering that London may have St. Paul's and Paris may have the Eiffel Tower, but how many towns in the world can boast of having a statue of the unknown Norwegian?

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