

Keillor should radio for help

By ADAM HAUS

As a longtime listener to Garrison Keillor's radio programs, both the defunct "Prairie Home Companion" and the current "American Radio Company of the Air," I inevitably hear his warm, relaxed baritone as I read his writing. In this case as in others, I would rather hear him on the radio than read him on the page.

Radio station WLT, which stands for "With Lettuce and Tomato," owing to origins as a sales tool for a restaurant, is the focal point for Garrison Keillor's examination of greed, lust, failure and Midwestern values. Like other early radio stations, WLT evolves, rises and falls, and along the way carries many writers, singers, actors and announcers with it.

Francis With, the young boy whose career unifies the book, is a shy, withdrawn, ambitious, smart Minnesota farm boy. He desperately wants to be among the quirky and temperamental WLT air personalities, and, through luck and persistence, eventually makes it, only to find out that radio is a competitive business populated with odd people.

There are a number of familiar Keillor types at WLT: Dad Benson, the absent-minded star of "Friendly Neighbor"; Slim and Buddy Graves, the maudlin father and son singers; The Shepherd Boys, a lustful gospel quartet; Leo LaValley, Rotary Club

WLT:
A Radio Romance
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speechmaker turned announcer, and Patsy Konopka, spiritual and sexy soap opera writer. They are ordinary folks in an unusual business. Even Ray Soderberg Jr., WLT's owner, cares more for young women than he does for radio.

For an apparently autobiographical character, Francis With, like many of the other characters, is not very well-developed. His earnestness is balanced mostly by his lust, and he seems very self-centered. Is this the way that Garrison Keillor sees himself, or wants to be seen?

As in the previous "Lake Wobegon Days" and "We Are Still Married," Keillor has drawn heavily on his radio sketches and monologues for this book. On radio, however, his characters seem less one-dimensional; perhaps a listener's expectations differ from a reader's. In print, the characters exist, but they do not live.

Keillor's writing has always seemed flat to me, even for dry humor, and less clever than his radio work. He has a careful, deliberate writing style that asks to be taken seriously. Keillor is simply trying too hard.

He has also injected more overt lust, greed, deceit and selfish ambition into this story than in previous works. Perhaps Keillor is aiming for gravity, but the dark



Photo: Jonette Novak

Garrison Keillor, whose baritone is familiar to radio listeners, has trouble finding his voice as a writer.

emotions he has formerly only suggested he now reveals more openly. It does not, however, improve his work.

I am reminded of Mark Twain, whose writing progressively darkened. The latent satire of "Huckleberry Finn" evolved into the vituperative moralizing of "The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg," which condemns humanity for selfishness and idiocy.

This is not to say that Keillor is heading in the same direction, or that this book is not funny, be-

cause some of it is. But there seems to be too much conscious effort.

Minnesota-born Garrison Keillor, 49, has modified his folksy, Midwestern image over the past several years. Moving to New York, starting a new radio show, and writing more than before, he has matured as a storyteller and humorist. But his strength is still radio, and perhaps he has not fully accepted this. Recordings are no more ephemeral than books, but they do seem less substantial.

Ultimately, television overtakes radio as the primary medium, and this makes the book inherently nostalgic. It is quite readable, and certainly enjoyable, especially for Keillor fans. I hope that in the future, Garrison Keillor allows himself to write more naturally, without striving for significance. He has already shown that he can achieve it without trying.

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