

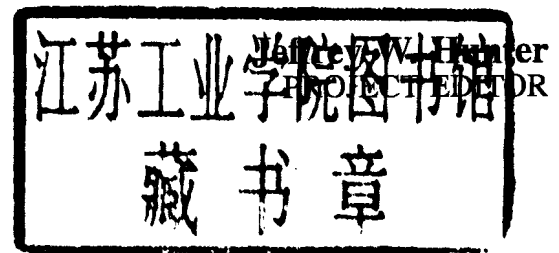
☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC 222**

Volume 222

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers



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## Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 222

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# Preface

**N**amed “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

## Scope of the Series

*CLC* provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

## Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

## Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language As-

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# Garrison Keillor

## 1942-

(Full name Gary Edward Keillor; also known as Gary Keillor and Garrison Edward Keillor) American broadcaster, novelist, short story writer, editor, poet, and scriptwriter.

The following entry presents criticism of Keillor's work through 2004. For further information on his life and career, see *CLC*, Volumes 40 and 115.

### INTRODUCTION

Keillor is best known as a humorist and storyteller and for founding the radio broadcast *A Prairie Home Companion* heard on American public radio and broadcast from St. Paul, Minnesota. In addition to his radio variety program, he is the author of several novels, short story collections, children's books, and the editor of two poetry volumes. He is also the host of the radio broadcast *The Writer's Almanac* and is a poet. His most popular book to date is *Lake Wobegon Days* (1985), an outgrowth of his radio show which features stories about his fictional hometown of Lake Wobegon.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born in 1942 to John Keillor, a railway clerk and carpenter, and Grace Keillor, a housewife, Keillor grew up in Anoka and Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. One of six children, Keillor experienced a strict upbringing due to his family's membership in the Plymouth Brethren, a loose affiliation of small congregations that arose in nineteenth-century England in opposition to the established church. Dancing, drinking, smoking, and entertainment such as movies, television, and card-playing were all forbidden by the order. Despite these rules Keillor was attracted to literature and writing as a child, interests fostered by his discovery of the *New Yorker* magazine at his library. He hid the magazine from his disapproving family and still has a copy of the first issue he bought in 1957. Credited with establishing newspapers at both of his elementary schools, Keillor published poetry in them under the pen name of Garrison. During the 1960s, Keillor attended the University of Minnesota and immersed himself in the cultural politics and the arts scene of the time. He contributed to the student literary magazine and worked as a disc jockey at the school's radio station, marking the begin-

ning of a lifelong relationship with the medium. In 1969 he hosted a morning program on Minnesota Public Radio and began submitting his writing to the *New Yorker*. In 1974 he travelled to Nashville on assignment for the magazine to write about the Grand Ole Opry and his experience inspired him to create the public radio program *A Prairie Home Companion*, based on ideas and characters he had already presented to listeners of his St. Paul morning show. *A Prairie Home Companion* expanded on the characters and also included musical guests and fake sponsors. The show was broadcast from 1974 to 1987 when Keillor ended it and moved to Denmark with his wife, partly due to difficulties maintaining privacy in America. After two years abroad, he and his wife divorced and he returned to the United States. Keillor took up residence in New York and worked as a staff writer for the *New Yorker* until he resigned from the magazine in protest when Tina Brown was appointed editor. Keillor then launched a new radio program called *American Radio Company of the Air*, intended to be *A Prairie Home Companion* "with a New York accent," but listener feedback convinced him that his audience wanted to hear more about Lake Wobegon. In 1993 he changed the name back to *A Prairie Home Companion* and returned to Minnesota. His book *Lake Wobegon Days* won a *Los Angeles Times* Book Award nomination and a Grammy Award for best nonmusical recording. Keillor has received the George Foster Peabody Broadcasting Award, the Edward R. Murrow Award from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Ace Award, the Gold Medal for spoken English from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a National Humanities Medal from the National Endowment for the Humanities. He was also inducted into the Museum of Broadcast Communications and Radio Hall of Fame. *A Prairie Home Companion* is heard by more than four million listeners each week on more than 558 public radio stations, and is heard abroad on America One and the Armed Forces Networks in Europe and the Far East.

### MAJOR WORKS

Keillor's radio show features a regular segment titled "News from Lake Wobegon," consisting of a twenty- or thirty-minute monologue on the recent happenings in his fictional hometown of Lake Wobegon, where "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average." Loosely based

on Keillor's own Minnesota hometown, Lake Wobegon is largely populated by homey Lutherans of Scandinavian descent, reserved people who attend church and care little for what is happening in the larger world. The show includes fake advertisements for the Café Boeuf, Powdermilk Biscuits, and Ralph's Pretty Good Groceries. A paean to the golden age of radio, *A Prairie Home Companion* utilizes a variety show format and employs actors playing multiple and recurring roles, low-tech but creative sound effects, and a band that performs original tunes and accompanies musical guests. While the show's music is eclectic and ranges from jug bands to opera singers, Keillor's fondness for folk music is evident. In the early years of the show Keillor prepared scripts but now largely creates his monologue onstage from a general outline. He tells stories of his hometown in a first-person voice, with casual language and a slow conversational pace. On the surface Keillor's monologue sounds like a condemnation of the town's populace as small-minded eccentrics, but underneath the jabs lies an undercurrent of respect and affection. The characters and stories that emerged from this ongoing monologue appear in his novels *Lake Wobegon Days* and *Wobegon Boy* (1997) and in his story collection *Leaving Home* (1987). He also wrote a multi-genre appreciation of love, *We Are Still Married* (1989) and the short story collections *Happy to Be Here* (1982) and *The Book of Guys* (1993). Keillor's background in radio influenced his novel *WLT: A Radio Romance* (1991) and autobiographical elements from Keillor's life can be found in his novel *Love Me* (2003) which features Larry Wyler, a small-town writer whose first novel achieves tremendous commercial success. Wyler moves to New York City to embrace his new literary lifestyle but his wife is content in Minneapolis and remains there. He eventually fails at his new life and returns home. Keillor employs political satire in his fictional memoir *Me: By Jimmy (Big Boy) Valente, Governor of Minnesota. As Told to Garrison Keillor* (1999), a parody of former Minnesota governor and professional wrestler Jesse Ventura. Keillor serves as an advocate for poetry as well: on the American Public Media show *The Writer's Almanac* he reads a poem each day, and he selected various poems from this show, collecting them in two poetry volumes titled *Good Poems* (2002) and *Good Poems for Hard Times* (2005). Keillor also wrote the screenplay for the film *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006), directed by Robert Altman.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics have lauded the use of oral narrative in both Keillor's broadcasts and his books. His poetry anthology *Good Poems* received two reviews in the April 2004 issue of *Poetry* magazine, by Dana Gioia and August Kleinzahler. Gioia discussed his surprise at his satisfaction with the collection while Kleinzahler

derided the volume and its editor, suggesting that Keillor be "locked in a Quonset hut and never allowed to stray from Lutheran bake sales into the Realm of Art." The differing opinions generated debate within the magazine and on the Internet, and David Lehman mentioned the opposing stances in his introduction to *The Best American Poetry 2005*. When discussing Keillor's radio shows, some reviewers compare his wit and humor to one of his acknowledged heroes, Mark Twain. Keillor's down-to-earth style has been deemed accessible and authentic, but David Orr pointed out the dual nature of his approach when he wrote, "Keillor may praise the homely world of Wobegon, but he is a sophisticated writer with *New Yorker* magazine credentials and possesses an angry wit rarely heard on Main Street." The longevity of Keillor's radio programs and his continued successes with written works signals the possibility that there is a permanent spot for Keillor within American letters. As a *Philadelphia Inquirer* critic pointed out, "What makes Keillor a special writer—one who likely will be heard from long after Lake Wobegon is a faint memory—is his capacity to examine the ordinary doings of life and somehow extract little stories that say more about human nature than an institute full of psychiatrists."

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

- G.K. the D.J.* (short stories) 1977
- The Family Radio* (recording) 1982
- Happy to Be Here* (short stories) 1982
- News from Lake Wobegon* (recording) 1982
- Gospel Birds and Other Stories of Lake Wobegon* (recording) 1985
- Lake Wobegon Days* (novel) 1985
- Leaving Home* (short stories) 1987
- A Prairie Home Companion: The Final Performance* (recording) 1987
- More News from Lake Wobegon* (recording) 1988
- We Are Still Married* (short stories and poems) 1989
- Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company: The First Season* (recording) 1990
- WLT: A Radio Romance* (novel) 1991
- The Book of Guys* (short stories) 1993
- Cat, You Better Come Home* (juvenilia) 1995
- The Old Man Who Loved Cheese* (juvenilia) 1996
- The Sandy Bottom Orchestra* [with Jenny Lind Nilsson] (juvenilia) 1996
- Wobegon Boy* (novel) 1997
- Me: By Jimmy (Big Boy) Valente, Governor of Minnesota. As Told to Garrison Keillor* (fictional memoir) 1999
- Good Poems* [editor] (poetry) 2002
- Love Me* (novel) 2003

*Good Poems for Hard Times* [editor] (poetry) 2005  
*A Prairie Home Companion* (screenplay) 2006

## CRITICISM

**Philip Greasley (essay date 1987)**

SOURCE: Greasley, Philip. "Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon: The Contemporary Oral Tale." *Midamerica* 14 (1987): 126-36.

[In the following essay, Greasley examines Keillor's *Lake Wobegon Days* within the context of an American literary tradition that reflects spoken language and populist values.]

American fiction and poetry written to reflect spoken language and assert the values of common people constitute a major continuing tradition in American literature. Elite writers from Twain to Faulkner, from Whitman to Sandburg and Langston Hughes, to name only a few, have relied upon the qualities of oral expression to convey their deepest values.

While appealing primarily to elite audiences, this "oral" literature has remained consistently populist. These writers measure worth in individual integrity and fullness of life, not wealth, power, or position. Furthermore, American oral literature is consistently apolitical or anti-establishment, making the Rousseauist assumption that individuals in the state of nature are inherently good while societally based greed and ambition regularly corrupt the elite.

While celebrating true social and technological advance, oral literature aggressively confronts negative implications of social, economic, and technological change. It is—for a form often branded as radical and revolutionary—essentially conservative, looking, with immense specificity, at the effects of social and technological change on common people. Increasingly, oral literature has asserted the unproductivity of movement to larger-scale, more mobile, highly sophisticated social orders and advanced technologies because these innovations can destabilize the social order and destroy the individual.

Just as the message of American oral literature has remained constant, so have its stylistic techniques. As literature celebrating common man amid life's difficulties and uncertainties, oral literature regularly assumes the form of first person vernacular narrative, rich in sensory specifics, apparently rambling and unformed,

but in reality rigidly and rigorously structured. More important, oral literature provides the raw *experiences* of common life rather than distanced, intellectual statements about it. Repetitive syntax and non-standard diction typically symbolize virtue amid exploitative elite glibness. Time after time in oral literature, the lower-class, often rural, vernacular-speaking apparent-rube is shown to be far wiser and more attuned to enduring values than his more sophisticated, eloquent, urban counterpart. Using and recording slang, colloquial, or dialect language, the narrator moves toward affirmation of life.

In short, America's oral tradition in literature is experiential, populist, value-laden, and possessed of characteristic techniques.

Garrison Keillor's fictional reminiscence, *Lake Wobegon Days*, fits well within the American oral tradition, even adding new refinements to the mode. As with almost all oral literature, *Lake Wobegon Days* emphasizes the dominating, low-mimetic first person central narrative voice. In fact, Keillor's form is deliberately open, freeing the narrative vision to take any turn and assume any guise it wishes. The result is a narrative tour de force. Keillor's narrator freely crosses time and space, making forays into memory and reminiscence, offering boyhood and mature visions, repeatedly passing between reality and imagination, myth and history, romanticism and pragmatism. The narrator assumes multiple fictitious voices, including those of the state geographic survey, a 19th century historian, the Federal Writer's Project, and several family members presenting multiple discordant perspectives on the family's Thanksgiving holiday. Even the normally clear distinction between author and narrator is blurred by references to *The Prairie Home Companion*, older kids who played mean tricks on him as a child and never write to him about the show now, and Keillor's failed first marriage.

Keillor sets the book's tone in the "Preface," suggesting that "it was a story given to me as in a dream, [in which] people . . . might discover something they too were looking for all these years." With this beginning, he alludes to his personal search for roots and identity, permanence, and movement from rejection to acceptance and affirmation of the past.

The deliberately unassuming nature of Keillor's narrator and his willingness to recognize his errors, laugh at his pretensions, and assert that he is nothing special endear him to the reader and lend credence to his vision. Keillor opens the preface with the story of his first big sale as a writer and the ensuing expansive family vacation to San Francisco with what he would later find out were almost his entire earnings for the year, riding first-class in Pullman compartments, eating big meals in



the diner, and lounging in the club car, luxuriating in the role of the “successful American writer who provided good things for his family” (vii-viii). Within the first paragraph, his expansive romantic balloon is burst by reality and self-critical introspection as the train derails and he and his family are transferred to “an old bus that smelled of engine fumes” (viii).

My wife dozed next to me, the little boy lay across our laps and slept, and I sat and thought about the extravagance of this trip, the foolishness—one stroke of good luck, the Opry story, and I was blowing a big wad of the proceeds on what? False luxury, which was now derailed.

(viii)

This anecdote and many others, laced with slang, dialect, and mild vulgarisms, reinforce Keillor, the narrator, as an unthreatening presence, one we can relax and enjoy while retaining our smug sense of personal superiority. Using this strategic ploy, Keillor’s humor and self-deprecation lead us to lower our guard and critically consider experiences closer to our own personal and collective memories, values, and prejudices than we might otherwise willingly confront.

The same technique is used in presenting Lake Wobegon. Repeatedly, Keillor maintains that the town and its people are nothing special. Indeed, the personification of the town, the statue of the unknown Norwegian, stands, full of uncertainty, the daunted victim of everything from artistic ineptitude to the vicissitudes of the elements, civic budgetary constraints, and, above all, the ever-dominating pragmatic considerations of mower blade damage.

A proud figure, his back is erect, his feet are on the ground on account of no money remained for a pedestal, his eyes—well, his eyes are a matter of question. Probably the artist meant him to exude confidence in the New World, but his eyes are set a little deep so that dark shadows appear in the late afternoon and by sunset he looks worried. His confident smile turns into a forced grin. In the morning, he is stepping forward, his right hand extended in greeting, but as the day wears on, he hesitates, and finally he appears to be about to turn back. The right hand seems to say, Wait here. I think I forgot something.

Nevertheless, he is a landmark and an asset, so it was a shame when the tornado of 1947 did damage to him. . . . it blew a stalk of quackgrass about six inches into the Unknown Norwegian, in an unusual place, a place where you wouldn’t expect to find grass in a person, a part of the body where you’ve been told to insert nothing bigger than your finger in a washcloth.

Bud, our municipal employee, pulled it out, of course, but the root was imbedded in the granite, so it keeps growing out. Bud has considered using a pre-emergent herbicide on him but is afraid it will leave a stain on the side of his head, so, when he mows, simply reaches

up to the Unknown’s right ear and snips off the blade with his fingernails. It’s not so noticeable, really; you have to look for it to see it.

The plaque that would’ve been on the pedestal the town couldn’t afford was bolted to a brick and set in the ground until Bud dug it out because it was dinging up his mower blade. Now in the historical society museum in the basement of the town hall, it sits.

(114-15)

Keillor’s choice of oral structuring further enhances the narratively induced sense of garrulously rambling oral amorphousness while in reality maintaining tight, highly efficient structure. Most central in conveying this impression is Keillor’s use of explanatory footnotes and regular parenthetical comment. The explanatory footnotes give rise to many voices and types of commentary. On the whole, however, they function as “sidebars,” or new perspectives, on stories presented in the main text. At times, the sidebars are quite lengthy—running as many as twenty-two pages on the bottom halves of pages—as the main tale continues above.

Beyond the appearance of apparently unself-conscious rambling, Keillor gains in other ways by using these footnote sidebars. Most simply, by including a second perspective, Keillor is able to explore the colorful characters and histories of individuals incidental to his major text. More frequently, his sidebars add a note of humor or contrast. Aside from the interest factor, Keillor’s humor functions regularly as a leavening, softening agent, easing the harshness of criticism and heightening audience acceptance of his social commentary. Since Keillor’s comments about himself and his “nothing special” town ultimately focus upon the reader’s values and sense of community, leavening humor and contrast are all the more important.

Keillor’s sidebars also provide contrast. The most major instance of this kind occurs in the chapter entitled “News” and includes a humorous commentary on the vicissitudes of running a small town newspaper. The chapter highlights hilarious parody “society page” non-coverage of wedding night misadventures.

Poor Ruthie. Bob got shnocked at the wedding dance, and she drove them to a \$50 motel room in St. Cloud and sat on the bed and watched a Charlie Chan movie on TV. “The bridal suite featured violet satin bedsheets and a quilted spread with ironed-on bride & groom appliques, a heart-shaped mirror over the dresser, a bottle of pink champagne in a plastic ice bucket, a bouquet of funereal red roses, and her husband sick in the john,” the Herald Star did not report. “The bride felt queasy herself. Reception was poor, and the picture kept flipping. She adjusted the brightness knob to sheer black and turned up the sound. The man in the next room, with whose flesh hers was now one, dressed in white cotton boxer shorts with blue fleur-de-lis and a yellow ‘Keep On Truckin’ T-shirt, sounded as if he was almost

done. Wave after wave of multicolored wedding food had come out of him, propelled by vodka sours, and now he was unloading the last of the wedding cake and cheese dip and the liverwurst snacks. The bride, whose personal feeling about vomiting is that she would much prefer to lie very quietly for three days, tried to occupy her mind with the pleasant memory of being class orator in blue ankle-length sateen graduation gown with bell sleeves and blue pumps and a mortarboard cap with a yellow tassel and reading five hundred words on the subject 'Every Conclusion Is a New Beginning,' but she wasn't sure she felt so hopeful about the conclusion taking place in the next room. And she needed to pee."

(324-27)

Keillor juxtaposes this hilarious story with an ex-resident's "dark night of the soul" attack on Lake Wobegon values. His "95 Theses" constitutes the most direct, hard-hitting indictment of the religious, conservative, work-guilt oriented values of the town, an attack which goes totally unanswered. The Theses assert, for example,

You have taught me to feel shame and disgust about my own body. . . . You have taught me to fear strangers and their illicit designs. . . . Your theology wasn't happy about the idea of mercy and forgiveness. . . . You taught me that . . . the world is fundamentally deceptive. The better something looks, the more rotten it probably is down deep.

(315-25)

The diametric opposition between the light-hearted wedding story and the sidebar's unrelieved hostility, sharing the same pages, reflects the narrator's early ambivalence toward the town while at the same time softening what otherwise would be a ponderous, difficult statement totally out of harmony with the ultimate values of the book as a whole. Together, these co-statements allow presentation of the honest attack on the negative aspects of town values leavened with humor, irreverent language, and some of the excesses which the author of the 95 Theses asserts to be impossible in Lake Wobegon.

Juxtaposition of this kind is not limited to sidebars or parenthetical glosses. In fact, it appears on almost every page of *Lake Wobegon Days*. Several major juxtapositions recur consistently within the text—typically without transition. As in the sidebar above, Keillor regularly juxtaposes direct social attacks, moments of happiness, and poignant visions. Almost equally common is his pairing of massively idealized or romanticized fantasy against the realistic, excessively pragmatic, often debased actual. Keillor regularly slides in Walter Mittyish manner between the actual and the imagined, the romantic adolescent dream of glory and heroism and the actuality of shyness, awkwardness, acne, and the limitations inherent in small town life. Often too,

Keillor moves his audience between the present and the world of memory, of reminiscence. And more often than we might expect, his memories are unhappy, laden with fear of ostracism and burdened with the recurring specter of premature death.

Beyond juxtaposition, Keillor uses motif organization—fully developed individual variations on broad unifying themes—to organize his book. Each chapter presents a number of loosely related anecdotes with some applicability to recurrent themes on town history, Protestantism, *sumus quod sumus* (we are what we are, or real versus ideal), summer, fall, school, winter, and so forth. As a sole principle of organization, this very loose motif organization would be extremely weak. However, in conjunction with complementary organizing principles, it is strong and provides much of the texture—continuity within diversity—of the book. Moreover, loose motif organization allows Keillor to emphasize the individual, particular, and experiential. Motif organization involves readers in the hopes and fears of individual characters, allows us to internalize the town's collective value system, and encourages our emotional involvement in the stream of interactions which constitute Lake Wobegon life.

In fact, Keillor's exhaustive centering on the individual is his most central and important oral organizing principle. He gently sketches telling moments in the lives of very ordinary, superficially unappealing individuals, arousing our fullest sympathy through the sureness of his delineation and the poignance of the moment. Such is the case, for example, in his delineation of the old, perhaps cancerous, farmer and his '66 Chevy:

Florian pulls his '66 Chevy into a space between two pickups in front of the Clinic. To look at his car, you'd think it was 1966 now, not 1985; it's so new, especially the back seat, which looks as if nobody ever sat there unless they were gift-wrapped. He is coming to see Dr. DeHaven about stomach pains that he thinks could be cancer, which he believes he has a tendency toward. Still, though he may be dying, he takes a minute to get a clean rag out of the truck, soak it with gasoline, lift the hood, and wipe off the engine. He says she runs cooler when she's clean, and it's better if you don't let the dirt get baked on. Nineteen years old, she has only 42,000 miles on her, as he will tell you if you admire how new she looks. "Got her in '66. Just 42,000 miles on her." It may be odd that a man should be so proud of having not gone far but not so odd in this town. Under his Trojan Seed Corn cap pulled down tight on his head is the face of a boy, and when he talks his voice breaks, as if he hasn't talked enough to get over adolescence completely. He has lived here all his life, time hardly exists for him, and when he looks at this street and when he sees his wife, he sees them brand-new, like this car. Later, driving the four blocks home at about trolling speed, having forgotten the misery of a rectal examination, he will notice a slight arrhythmic

imperfection when the car idles, which he will spend an hour happily correcting.

(6-7)

Whether the picture is of an old, dying man meticulously caring for his venerable Chevy, an off-hand reference to giving away bags of tomatoes in August or the felt-impotence of trying to start the car in the coldest January weather, a vision of generation after generation of children escaping schoolwork's tedium to the freedom of imagination, or the delineation of a child walking through town, Keillor's memory and his unfailing eye for detail make his subjects come alive to emotion and memory. He describes the boy, saying,

Along the ragged dirt path between the asphalt and the grass, a child slowly walks to Ralph's Grocery, kicking an asphalt chunk ahead of him. It is a chunk that after four blocks he is now mesmerized by, to which he is completely dedicated. . . . The boy kicks the chunk at the curb, once, twice, then lofts it over the curb and sidewalk across the concrete to the island of Pure Oil pumps. He jumps three times on the Bunsen bell hose, making three dings back in the dark garage.

(2)

Keillor's oral emphasis on the individuals and particulars of Lake Wobegon evidences his dedication to common man and the diversity of fulfilling experiences marking "common" life.

In conjunction with his portrayed movement from adolescence to maturity, from rebellion to affirmation, Keillor organizes *Lake Wobegon Days* in a rising structure similar to those of Whitman and Thoreau. He moves from negation and rejection to acceptance and affirmation. Keillor's chapters trace the evolution of the town and people from their brutish, naive, often gruesome early days, through alienation from and subordination to dominant culture, through religious turmoil and the individual dark night of the soul in "Protestant," "Winter" and "News," to a satori-like experience of rebirth, peace, and acceptance in "Spring" and "Revival." Keillor's movement is almost zen-like, logically presenting individual and collective frustrations in this highly conservative rural town while seeking permanence, strong values, and consistent meanings in an age of impermanence, rootlessness, homogenous valuelessness, and absorption with potentially destructive technology. Finally, in a moment of unexpected openness, the realization comes that we live in a universe of divine wisdom, love, and goodness; that we are more blessed than we deserve; and that this overarching providence has protected us from our own misguided dreams and aspirations. Here in this detested actual is the answer to our fondest prayers, the fulfillment of our deepest needs. In describing a townsman, Keillor asserts:

What a lucky man. Some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted but getting what you have, which once you have it you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known.

(420)

Yet despite Keillor's consistent adoption of oral techniques, his almost book-long denigration of Lake Wobegon appears at first highly atypical of recurring oral norms. In early views of Lake Wobegon and its people, Keillor repeatedly undercuts the town and its people through strategic recitation of the most unsupportable Babbit-like puffery in combination with damning glimpses of the essential ugliness, narrowness, economic uncompetitiveness, and unappealingly anachronistic nature of the town living out its final years in a backwater bypassed by progress and technology. Thus, for example, Keillor's first description of the road into town includes "dark woods," "magnificent concrete Grecian grain silos," "the town's one traffic light," and "a few surviving elms" (1). In image after image, Keillor's portrayal of the town continues totally negative.

Further adding to our initial negative impression of Lake Wobegon is the ineptitude of local efforts to compete successfully with vital, growing economic centers of the region. Indeed, anything boosterish juxtaposed against the town's "Wobegon" name and character reaffirms the insurmountable gulf between the afflatus of unbased aspiration and the town's very limited potential for contemporary success.

Finally, Keillor's continuing identification of himself as one who escaped the town at the first possible moment and his constant differentiation of his personal values, interests, and goals from those of other town residents further lead readers to maintain an amused, condescending attitude toward the town and its people.

The key to understanding Keillor's early digression from the norm of oral literary support for common people and simple life lies in his combination of the oral tale with Bildungsroman. The movement here is that of growth and development of the narrator-protagonist. As such, Keillor's early felt alienation and superiority based upon misperceived personal sophistication, his impression of town limitation, and his adolescent yearning to escape Lake Wobegon's identity and limits become the antagonist, the worldview which he must work through and discard if he is to reach full maturity and wisdom. One failed marriage, many romanticized self-images, eleven big city apartments and three houses later, he sees the town, its people, and his own inherited identity in a far different, more charitable way. By this time, he has learned and seen the worth of oral values. The now-mature Keillor

recognizes the value of permanence, individuality, strong values, and independence from technological change.

The transition from rejection and escape to acceptance and affirmation is associated with his growth into a truer picture of himself, the recognition of time passing, and the impermanence of big city life and friendships. It must also be associated with the very mode of Keillor's oral experiential perception. "Common" individuals and memories live in his mind, moments give way to lives, and lives intertwine, creating the texture of life in the town that time forgot. The appeal of these moments and individuals is undeniable. Finally, two relatively minor incidents highlight the unattractiveness of rootless, disconnected modern life and the weakness of the technology upon which modern society relies.

The first is the death of an ex-townsmen. His rootless, uncaring family foist the responsibility of funeral and burial on a distant Lake Wobegon relative. He shoulders the responsibility without demurral, organizes a local lodge honor guard, and buries the man with dignity at a ceremony that the town attends. Here the values of family loyalty, permanence, and respect for the individual stand out.

A simple snowstorm is the second telling event. Coming in to Lake Wobegon for Thanksgiving, a California family of ex-Wobegonians luxuriates in technology's advantages, two glasses of champagne and lunch filling the time from California to Minnesota. But then, nature steps in with the snowstorm. The plane is rerouted and technology stands impotent. "Up in the air it was the twentieth century, but in the blizzard on the ground it was the Middle Ages" (257). Nature is the reality, "progress" and human control the illusion.

By the end of the reminiscence, Keillor, like another man he describes, makes clear how fortunate he is in his "common" small town heritage, identity, and the love of those around him. With this, recurrent American oral literary values and techniques come back into harmony. Now mature, Keillor stands with the underdogs, unworried about alienation or the taunts of the big city elite. He has found his home and in the process helped all of us "find something . . . [we] too were looking for all these years" (x). His conscious, contemporary oral tale reasserts the values fostered by American elite oral literature throughout our history.

#### Note

1. Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days* (New York: Penguin, 1986) x. All subsequent references are to this work. Page references appear in parentheses in the text.

#### Michael Kline (essay date 1988)

SOURCE: Kline, Michael. "Narrative Strategies in Garrison Keillor's 'Lake Wobegon' Stories." *Studies in American Humor* 6 (1988): 129-41.

[In the essay below, Kline explores the ways in which Keillor combines oral and literary narrative techniques in his stories about Lake Wobegon.]

Garrison Keillor's immensely popular Lake Wobegon episodes, recounted for thirteen years (1974-1987) on his *A Prairie Home Companion* radio show, constitute a comic soap opera masterfully crafted by an expert storyteller. Given its radio format, Keillor's humor is managed by the strategies of oral presentation, differentiating it from written versions of the tales in *Lake Wobegon Days* (1985), or even the modified radio monologues of *Leaving Home* (1987), since oral presentation entails different modalities of grammar and rhetoric, elements of style, and paralinguistic features such as voice quality. Yet, in our print-based, literate culture, so far removed from the artistic traditions of societies in which the oral mode predominates, it is unlikely that a story-teller would achieve popular success merely by adopting the techniques of the bard. Alongside oral narrative techniques there exist in Keillor's monologues narrative strategies that we usually associate with written texts by virtue of their complexities of voice and mode. One of Keillor's greatest skills as a narrator is to use both oral and literate discourse features in complement, a practice which supports the view that there is no absolute dichotomy between written and spoken forms of language. As Tannen has stated, "Both oral and literate strategies can be seen in spoken discourse. Written discourse is not decontextualized . . . it is possible to be both highly oral and highly literate" (Tannen 48; Chafe and Tannen 394).

While we would expect that in our literate society written strategies would influence oral form, it is also the fact that the features of literate style found in Keillor's oral narratives—sophisticated subordination, grammar dependency and a lexically complex relationship between ideas and expression—are frequently disturbed by oral structures that coexist with them incongruously, producing a discursive humor that is not totally dependent upon content. The Keillor monologues interlace oral and literate styles without homogenizing them to the point that they cease to retain their own character or fail to produce particular effect. The elements of oral and literate narration may be separated for purposes of contrast, but we should remember that they combine in the tales to form the complex strategies, developmental approach, and rich texturing of a composite narration which undergirds the deceptively simple humor of the town that "the decades cannot improve."