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LORETTA WASSERMAN

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## Lake Wobegon Days

Lake Wobegon Days by Garrison Keillor, Viking Press, \$17.95.

Nineteen eighty-five saw the publication of an odd book of humor that was an astonishing success — astonishing at least to those of us who thought our fondness for Garrison Keillor's radio stories about Lake Wobegon, Minnesota ("the little town that time forgot"), marked us as members of a smallish group: not a cult (fanaticism of any kind not being a Wobegon trait), but still a distinct spectrum. Not so, apparently. At year's end *Lake Wobegon Days* was at the very top of the charts, where it stayed for several weeks, and had sold well over a million copies. Keillor was on the cover of *Time* and appearing on talk shows. Clearly he had struck a responsive chord in the public. Further, his style of humor was being treated seriously: he was being compared to some of the best writers of midwest humor, Peter Devries or Ring Lardner — even to Mark Twain. It is interesting to speculate about what makes the Keillor style appealing to the contemporary audience, and whether indeed he has something memorable to say.

*Lake Wobegon Days* is a pretty ambitious book (it is in the Wobegon manner not to aim too high — Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery being illustrative). It is longish (337 pages), especially for a book of humor, and, unlike Keillor's first book, *Happy to Be Here*, which was a collection of pieces previously published in magazines, the material is new, though some of it is expanded from the radio monologues. Its form is hard to describe. In part it purports to be a memoir, like Russell Baker's *Growing Up*. But Keillor is not really recollecting. For one thing he grew up in Anoka, Minnesota, a largish town just outside Minneapolis, not at all a Lake Wobegon. For another, Keillor keeps to the memoir form only fitfully, often writing as a chronicler or story teller. However, it is not a novel; characters reappear, but none whose fate we follow throughout. Looking for a literary ancestor to the book, I thought of *Walden*. Keillor mentions Thoreau at least twice, and four of his chapters are named for the seasons, as are Thoreau's. But the resemblance, if there, is an ironic one. Walden Pond is a constant, a source of serenity, whereas the very names given to their lake by Lake Wobegon residents attest to disappointment and uncertainty; Lac Malheur became Lake Victoria, then Mud Lake, and finally Lake Wobegon, which may mean in the Ojibway "place where we waited all day in the rain." I think the book is best described as mock sociology, a fabricated ethnographic study in the manner of the Lynds' *Middletown*. The town is central.

Early chapters deal with the founding of the town by New Englanders, who called it New Albion, and the coming of the other settlers, Norwegian Lutherans and German Catholics. Then follow chapters on separate topics (“Protestant,” “News,” “School,” and happenings in the seasons) covering the life of the town over, roughly, three generations — the old-timers, Keillor’s own generation, growing up in the forties and fifties, and the present time, struggling against modern encroachments. We move by a kind of free association back and forth through these times.

Keillor clearly has early literary-historical periods in mind in his parody of the transcendentalists from Boston who seek to found a city on the hill in the middle of Minnesota. Their very names suggest New England highmindedness. Prudence Alcott is the spiritual head of the group, all Unitarians. Having seen an Algonquin Rain Dance at the Boston Lyceum, Prudence realizes that worshiping the Supreme Being in English is dry and tasteless, and that she should go West to convert the Indians through interpretive dance. But reality erupts. The final entry in her journal, written after her first night in Lake Wobegon country, reads, “Would that I had brought warm clothing.” Other incidents from the early history follow a pattern: hard facts intervene. Having succeeded in erecting three log buildings and gathering a few students, the New Englanders inaugurate Albion College. At Founders Day Dr. Henry Watt (he was going to legitimize his title by granting himself a degree from the college) spoke in the transcendental vein. A student’s notes recording the address have been preserved, Keillor tells us. No teacher can read them without a tremor. They begin,

- a. Gratitude. Much accmp. Much rmns.
  - 1. Orpheus. Made Nature sing.
  - 2.
- B. How puny comp. to Works of Gdd. Moon, stars, Etc.

But alas Nature did not sing in central Minnesota. A three-day blizzard and a marauding bear frightened off the few students, and the great bell winds up as a watering trough for livestock. The New Englanders who stayed remember 1857 as the year “all false hope was lost” (p. 56). The Norwegians who came settled for second best, too. They had been looking for a huge placid lake in the area of North Dakota, unaware that the Lake Agassiz sketched on their map is prehistoric. No wonder that a sense of modesty of purpose becomes the Lake Wobegon hallmark. In a later day, the Lake Wobegon reception committee planning festivities for a visiting King of Norway decide that the king’s few hours in their town will feature time for a long quiet nap. Clearly the King would have profited from this unusual thoughtfulness, but he never arrived, having been brought low by six *lutefisk* suppers in Minneapolis.

With sights set so cautiously within a middle range, Lake Wobegon Norwegians have no heroes. Their emblem, the Statue of the Unknown Norwegian, looks increasingly uncertain about his purpose as the afternoon sun begins to sink. More dramatically, researchers into the city's past discover that the very earliest settler, Magnus Thomson, whose blood flows in the veins of most present-day residents, was a deserter from the Civil War. Arriving in New York, he had confusedly accepted \$200 to take a conscript's place in McClellan's army, but when he found himself being shot at, he stole a horse and kept on going northwest. Keillor's own ancestors, he tells us, were on the wrong side in the Revolution. They left Boston for Halifax, being loyal to the king. Clearly heroics are not in the Lake Wobegon line, a fact that at least one reviewer, writing in a journal of politics (*The Claremont Review of Books*, Winter 1985), views with some distaste, holding that Keillor is making fun of honorable people and serious events. That may be argued. What is clear, certainly, is that the underlying virtues of the people of Lake Wobegon are the quiet ones, patience, endurance, and — most of all — loyalty. "The town runs on loyalty," Keillor tells us in his first chapter. That means shopping at Ralph's rather than at the mall in St. Cloud; it means driving a Ford, bought from Bunsen Motors, if you are a Lutheran, and a Chevy from Main Garage, owned by the Kruegers, if you are a Catholic. Given this character, Lake Wobegon political expression tends to be very local (Should Bud be allowed to salt the streets this winter?), or vague and symbolic. After D-Day Herman Hochstetter, who ran the dry goods store, bought red, white and blue caps, 200 of each color, and when they did not sell well, organized a Flag Day exhibition, the Living Flag, which has persisted to this day. With almost everyone having a position in the Living Flag, very few have seen the whole picture (visible from the top of the Central Building), a situation that seems to suggest the Lake Wobegon posture on large political matters.

The loyalty that Keillor invokes takes some spelling out, however. He tells of going off to college in his 1956 Ford with his old black dog along because he had come limping up at the last minute. When the dog dies, Keillor mourns: "My old black mutt reminded me of a whole string of allegiances and loyalties, which school seemed to be trying to jiggle me free of" (p. 19) Reading *Lake Wobegon Days* a second time, I was struck with how many times death — or more precisely burials, funerals, or memorials — figure in the incidents. One of the first is a quandary faced by the early settlers when an unidentified body was found in a ditch north of town. Finally Mr. Thorvaldson offered a gravesite and a stone, and the body was buried under the name "Oscar Thorvaldson" — a kind of posthumous adoption. The feeling, not articulated, seems to be that loyalty to the human race requires individualization and record. A

later incident describes Clarence Bunsen's burial of his Uncle Virgil. Virgil had moved to Nevada in 1925, when Clarence was a boy, and never returned, but when Denise, Virgil's daughter, called to ask Clarence to handle arrangements "because Burt and I have to go to Hawaii for two weeks," Clarence didn't protest. Denise spoke in familiar clichés: "I want to remember Dad the way he was . . . funerals depress me. I think we have to look ahead. Not look back. You know" (p. 195). Clarence drives to St. Paul for the body, helps dig the grave, and rounds up people for the funeral. Even the passing of a tree takes on importance. Old Bert Thorvaldson, living alone now, has watched his majestic elm, as old as the twentieth century, slowly die; now it has to come down. Pastor David Ingqvist visits the old man on the day set, reflecting that he had never before made a pastoral call in regard to the death of a tree. Nevertheless he recites the Twenty-third Psalm for Bert, who thanks him in Norwegian, "Tusen takk, tusen takk." Memorials, too, figure in the fabric of Lake Wobegon life. Luther Rognes donates a furnace to Lake Wobegon Lutheran and names it after his parents. A plaque is attached: "The Paul and Florence Rognes Memorial Furnace." "Not many people would do it," says Past Ingqvist, but he is grateful for the reliable heat. That Keillor attaches something of human significance to these efforts is borne out by a current magazine story ("End of an Era", *The New Yorker*, October 28, 1985), where in a satirical sketch he described the efforts of Sarah to gather friends for the funeral of Larry, who "had moved around quite a bit for about a decade, doing a variety of things, including joining the Sky Family, a communal operation where people came and went freely." Now when Sarah calls, responses tend to be tentative: "Larry. . . Larry. Larry?" Keillor knows the ways of the modern Sarah/Larry world while he records the ways of another.

Is the Lake Wobegon world always the better? No, not always. Although he often comes close to sentimentality, Keillor generally pulls himself up short. Mr. Berge, the town drunk, is just that, a boring, sloppy drunk. When Johnny Tollefson, just nineteen and home after a year at St. Cloud State, takes his legal-size notepad to the Sidetrack Tap in search of Life and Experience (it is a handicap for a budding writer to live in a place with no Bohemian section, no exotic, desperate or vicious people), he is defeated by Mr. Berge's boorish jollity. "Oh, it's a helluva deal, ain't it Chonny? *Ja*, we're having fun now, you betcha.'" Soon the musty smells and Mr. Berge's forced gifts of beer and whiskey take their toll (Johnny had intended to order a vodka sour), and Johnny staggers out with his notepad still blank. An explicit indictment of the narrowness of Lake Wobegon life is made in the chapter "News," specifically the town habit of bland denial of what it chooses not to acknowledge. Under Harold Starr's editorship, the Lake Wobegon *Herald-Star* smoothes over all city council quarrels and

family embarrassments. The practice pays off. Harold notes with pleasure that a large number of his subscribers are retirees or other ex-Wobegonians, who send him pastel colored checks from such addresses as Bonnie Brae Drive in Fresno. Recently, however, Harold received a peculiar submission: an ex-Wobegonian has sent him, anonymously, “95 Theses 95” attacking his Wobegon upbringing, specifying in individual items the inhibitions, fears, and xenophobic prejudices he still harbors, though now an adult, married, and living in Boston. The theses appear in a long footnote. One of the author’s major charges is that he was taught to fear sex. Liberated though he now is, however, he still has trouble speaking openly and we never do learn the grounds for his grudge:

80. This one I can’t say. It’s true and it’s important, having to do with sexual identity. . .

81. Another thing of the same sort.

82. Another.

(p. 271)

Johnny Tollefson, enumerating the Experiences he needs before he can become a true writer, leaves his item #1 a blank for fear his mother will find the list in his desk and read it. Clearly the heaviest layer of bland denial hovers over sexual matters, with some predictable consequences. The young Keillor suffers agonies of embarrassment with girls; even watching a girl remove skates and skating socks provoked blushes. “In the Age of Imagination, before the Age of Full Disclosure, the removal of any article of clothing was inspirational” (p. 238). Unwanted pregnancies are not regarded sympathetically. Father Emil, of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility, asks, “If you didn’t want to go to Chicago, why did you get on the train?”

It is interesting to compare the topics touched on by Keillor with those in a “real” work of sociology published last year. *Habits of the Heart* (edited, incidentally, by Robert Bellah, who was an early Synoptic Lecturer here at Grand Valley) explores the big questions — what is our character? how can we lead a morally coherent life? what is our relationship to the past? These, in my opinion, underlie Keillor’s amused backward glances. As might be expected, *Habits of the Heart* (the phrase is from Tocqueville, and denotes mores), describes a degree of self-liberation that would be alien or puzzling to Wobegonians. In the chapter on religion a young woman is described who has created her own religion, which she calls “Sheilaism.” Father Emil or Pastor Ingqvist, faced with “Sheilaism,” might listen patiently, hoping it would go away in time, like Johnny Tollefson’s prolonged sulk up in his room.

The last chapter of *Lake Wobegon Days* is called “Revival,” and it describes a week of meetings conducted by Brother Bob and Sister Verna, evangelists from the World-

Wide Fields of Harvest Ministry, headquartered in Nebraska. It is hard for David Ingqvist to permit the meetings in Lake Wobegon Lutheran, but his wife Judy's uncle is married to Bob's sister Beatric, who still lives in Lake Wobegon. The last meeting is well attended. Some old timers remember the swashbuckling preachers of their youth who roved through the old Norwegian Synod preaching hell and damnation, and they like the sound of Bob's voice and the rousing hymns. Mr. Berge is there, unstrung. Hymns make him "ill with grief," we are told, recalling as they do his mother, married to a drunkard, seven children, on a wornout farm north of town, who sang hymns to herself late at night. Two Catholics are there, Mrs. Mueller and Mrs. Magandez. After the meeting, everyone departs quietly, pulling themselves together. In the morning, Mr. Berge feels grippy, and needs a drink. Mrs. Mueller, aging, and with an increasingly tenuous grip on reality, wakes and thinks that the lack of stir in the neighborhood means that Jesus has come and has taken everyone but her away. She alone is left. The notion may have been planted the night before by Mrs. Magandez, who on the walk home had confided that she was sure the Book of Life, where the names of the saved are written, a hardcover book something like a telephone directory, is here on earth. She had concluded, "I know my name is written in it, I can tell you that for a fact'" (p. 330). But then Mrs. Mueller sees Father Emil come out of the rectory and walk into his garden, checking the cucumbers. He hands her a tomato over the fence. "The smell of warm dirt came up to her and the sweet taste of tomato." She is glad to find herself alive and in Lake Wobegon. And we are glad to be in Lake Wobegon, too, however, briefly. Mindful of the Wobegon preference for modest claims, I would say that *Lake Wobegon Days* is a Pretty Good Book.