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Based on the enormously popular "Prairie Home Companion", Keillor's show on public radio, this collection of stories of modern Midwestern life skyrocketed to the top of the bestseller lists in the mid 1980s, and remained there. In this small Minnesota town, "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average". The book won the collective heart of the country, and critics found it impossible to refrain from quoting sizable portions of it in their reviews.

Lake Wobegon Days Details

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Author : Garrison Keillor

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From Reader Review Lake Wobegon Days for online ebook

Kaitlin says

Putting this one on the "I don't get it" shelf. I've never read Keillor before, started here, and likely will not try again. It seems like the people who enjoy his writing are those who grew to love him on the radio, and I've never heard him speak.

This isn't a novel, so much as a bunch of facts and stories about a fictional American town. It's a long rambling reminiscence with few recurring characters, no coherent trajectory and no discernible point whatsoever. There are some giggle-worthy sentences, but this just isn't funny enough to be considered a satire, which explains why some people see this as a cozy read and miss Keillor's point, which was...um...

Paul Bryant says

Ah, I miss the old days, those innocent Goodreads days of pretzels and beer, Wittgenstein and Gertrude Stein, and of course, Celebrity Death Matches. So I'm reviving one of my personal favourites. I call it...

CELEBRITY DEATH MATCH No 83.

BOY GEORGE : Willkommen, bienvenue, welcome Meine Damen und Herren, Mesdames et Messieurs, Ladies and Gentlemen! Guten abend, bon soir, good evening! Wie geht's? Comment ca va? Do you feel good? Ich bin euer confrencier, je suis votre compere, I am your host! Leave your troubles outside! So -life is disappointing? Forget it! In here life is beautiful - the girls are beautiful - even the orchestra is beautiful! Outside it is winter, but here it is so hot every night we have the battle to keep the girls from taking off all their clothing. So don't go away. Who knows? Tonight we may lose the battle! Ja!

THE CHICAGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA : Taa-daaah!

BOY GEORGE : So, you have come to see the fighting, ja? Okay, we get on with it. Yes, you do not have to throw fruit or panties at me, I know what you want. Tonight we have one of our much loved Celebrity Death matches - 0 yes, haha, you think maybe somebody famous will die tonight? Huh? You like that? Okay, ja, so do we! Ha ha! So, tonight's bout is ...

Drum roll...

Between in the blue corner much loved genial American humourist Garrison Keillor

(the 6 foot 9 Keillor stands up and sways like an oak. He wears a suit and large red boxing gloves.)

And in the red corner, not one, not two, not three – okay, I'll tell you – five separate opponents all of whom believe for one reason or another that he should die a painful death! We have Michael Chabon, Jonathan Franzen, Brett Easton Ellis, Don (the Don) De Lillo and, making a surprise comeback, Carson McCullers!!

(Mild applause)

Chicago Symphony plays a quick burst of the theme tune from Circus Boy starring Mickey Dolenz

The five authors strut about the ring, all dressed in evil looking leather outfits. DeLillo leans over the ropes and glares at someone he recognises. Easton rushes over and says "Leave it, Don, it's only one of those crappy goodreads idiots, We'll get them later."

BOY GEORGE : Okay, Meine Damen und Herren, Mesdames et Messieurs, seconds away, Round One!

Bell : Ting!

GK : Well, it has been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, my home town, the little town that time kind of forgot to remember to forget. Turned cold around Wednesday, I'd say, kind of... colder 'n' it was in the two or three days it was before that. Monday, I should say, Monday wasn't terribly cold...

The red corner are working as a tag team one at a time against the towering midwesterner. First up, here comes Carson McCullers. She steps up to GK looking, may I say, very fetching in a kind of cut down Batgirl getup, I could bet that her friends of both genders are liking this a lot.

(Prematch dialogue :

Graham Greene : Miss Carson, I really don't know - you can see practically all the way to China!

Carson : Why Mr Greene. For one night only no mannish tweeds. I'm gonna *strut my stuff!*)

But alas, the mountainous Keillor, orating blindly, obviously, flails his arm in a gesture to emphasise how felchingly cold it is in Lake Wobegon and he catches McCullers a glancing blow on the side of the head. It's Ali versus Liston 1965 all over again. The Southern gothic pinup girl hits the deck and is counted out. A disappointment for the feminists in the audience. But she was never in the best of health and I don't really think it was a wise idea to include her in the tag team.

GK : ... not that record breaking cold that er gets you in uh National geographic and all of that and the tv comes out to interview you and see how you're taking it, just a kind of regular Minnesota cold, kind of a fact of life in the month of January, nothing to complain about, like the fact that it's flat out here, really kind of uh flat. Yeah. Don't complain about that. But gee I dunno maybe some people do they come into the house and they say Well it's kind of too flat out there, I never seen it so flat out there. As it is today. Too flat. Somebody else 'll say Yeah but I hear it's suppose to incline a bit on Wednesday.

Next up, Jonathan Franzen – he squares up to GK who never stops talking and stares gloomily towards the audience, pretending not to notice any of his opponents, or actually not noticing them. Franzen winds up and socks Keillor as hard as he can in the solar plexus. Anything to shut this guy up.

GK : Ooof! So by Wednesday there was a little more snow on the ground which kind of absorbs sound and since Wobegonians are kind of quiet and don't really roar so much it makes for well a sort of dull uh dreary kind of existence even though below zero temperatures are if I remember physics that I was once taught makes sound travel better uh faster and yet it's still kind of real quiet here because

Franzen walks back disconsolately to the red corner. "This is not cool, you know," he says. "In fact this is even less cool than being on Oprah. I'm out of here." And he leaves in his Franzmobile.

GK : there aren't so many people out and those who are aren't in the mood to make much of it. Sound that is. And also should they have been in the mood still they would have had trouble because they're kind of all bundled up, swaddled if you will, and pretty much unable to emit any kind of cry. Light synthetic fabric such as Goretex has not yet found its way to Minnesota. People up there still believe in layers, a great many layers.

Don "The Don" DeLillo steps into the ring. He hurls a copy of Underworld at GK's enormous droning head but like that scene in Awakenings Keillor expertly catches the heavy volume with one huge mitt. Without breaking from his tedious Lake Wobegon yarn, he reaches down and cuffs DeLillo like a great grizzly bear and DeLillo's head flies off somewhere into the far corner of the room. The doctor climbs into the ring and checks his pulse. Yes, he's dead.

Michael Chabon is taken ill at the sight of DeLillo's head hurtling past him, so this means that Brett Easton Ellis is the last author of any literary merit still standing now. As he enters the ring he throws off his leather cape to reveal a flame thrower strapped on his back. He unhooks the hose and fires it up. Great gouts of flame shoot out.

GK : Of course something which can keep even a cold person alive and even warm em up a little bit, fend off death if you will, is a whole basketful of ancient creaking sentimental parlour ballads such as Love's Old sweet song.

(sings in beautiful clear baritone)

*Once in the dear dead days beyond recall,
When on the world the mists began to fall,
Out of the dreams that rose in happy throng
Low to our hearts Love sang an old sweet song;
And in the dusk where fell the firelight gleam,
Softly it wove itself into our dream.*

By now GK's right leg is completely on fire, Ellis is cackling madly and fighting off the ringside officials who are clambering into the ring.

Referee : Ellis, you're disqual---urgh...

I can't tell you what Ellis does to the referee.

BOY GEORGE : Well well well meine Damen und Herren, Mesdames et Messieurs, it is my humble duty to declare that Garrison Keillor's unique ability to keep on talking in the face of considerable naughtiness means that tonight, he is our champion!

GK : *Just a song a twilight, when the lights are low,
And the flick'ring shadows softly come and go,
Tho' the heart be weary, sad the day and long,
Still to us at twilight comes Love's old song,
comes Love's old sweet song.*

Steve Hersh says

I first came across Garrison Keillor when I saw Robert Altman's fictional film version of *A Prairie Home Companion*. The movie led me to the radio show, which was always great fun when I had the time to listen. This book, about the fictional Lake Wobegon that Keillor created and would talk about in monologues during the radio broadcast, is a great trip into small town, Midwestern life. Keillor gives a history of the town, but aside from that there isn't much plot. Instead, there are individual segments of the book that look at the history and goings on in the town through the eyes of its residents. What I like about the book is its honesty. Keillor pokes fun at small town life, but never in a mean way. He is rarely cynical. At the same time, he doesn't idealize it either. While Keillor may be off the air now, I'm looking forward to reading more of his books.

Adam Oster says

I really wanted to love this book. Me and Garrison Keillor have spent a great deal of time together on the road, as I would listen to him ramble on about his times spent on the shores of Lake Wobegon during the fantastic radio show that is *Prairie Home Companion*.

Of course, I had a feeling that a book dedicated to these long winded tales of days never-existing would find themselves to be too long for their own good, but I had really hoped things would be different.

I spent several nights trying to get into this book and be excited for where it was going, while struggling to keep my eyes open after only a few pages.

Now, I will admit, the book has its highlights. Just like the stories told on the radio show, there's little pieces that will make you smile, giggle, and/or think. But they are just too few and far between to make the idea of reading this novel from cover to cover enticing.

If you absolutely love Keillor's tales of Lake Wobegon, then perhaps this book is for you (judging by the multitude of positive reviews in existence for the novel). If you find them only mildly amusing, you may want to look elsewhere for your reading pleasure.

Shai Sachs says

I read this book over Thanksgiving break in Minnesota; it seemed like a very fitting time and place. And with a fair amount of expectation, too - Lake Wobegon is a famous symbol of salt-of-the-earth rural life, populated by simple folks who are the very incarnation of heartland values, and so on and so forth. I wanted to see what all the fuss is about.

As far as that goes, I think this book is too long by a fair stretch. Where a handful of short stories would have illustrated this charming little universe (and it is charming, after a fashion), we have instead a whole book of vignettes, and I must say, I found it to be quite a slog toward the end. Perhaps that's a comment on the format more than the writing - I'm just not partial to plotless books like this one. The characters and scenery are well-drawn, the idea of a landscape imbued with honest simplicity and comic averageness made plain. (I believe the best known expression about Lake Wobegon is that it's a town where all the women are good-looking and all the men are above average, though I don't know where that's from - it's not in this book.)

I will say, I found the political and religious commentary kind of interesting, and I think Keillor (whose attitude to people who don't share his own religious views ranges from poking-fun-but-not-in-a-nice-way to just-short-of-bigoted) walks a very fine line. On the one hand he clearly admires his subjects and has a deep well of affection for rural Minnesota life. On the other hand he does take pains to critique this life, albeit in a sort of backhanded way: as when he suggests that the Lake Wobegon economy is not about enterprise and free market at all, but rather a sort of neighborly socialism; and as when he suggests, in a detached footnote that goes on for something like 25 pages, that traditional Lutheran values can actually be pretty repressive and cruel to those who don't fit in. Whether Keillor is a liberal or conservative is perhaps besides the point; if I had to guess I'd say he votes Democratic most of the time but shakes his head disdainfully at modern politics. I think it's fairer to say that he's a ruralist who is not exactly blind to the dilemmas of small town life, but not exactly willing to see that life change very much.

I found this book charming, but really, not worth the time to read the whole thing. Probably it's better to read to page 50 and then skip to that 25-page footnote I mentioned above, it's kind of a doozy.

April says

If you like Garrison Keillor's radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*, then you'll like this. It's essentially the same thing, but in writing — a lot of meandering vignettes with very good descriptions of small town characters and small town life, much of it universal, quirky, humorous, and sad, a very nostalgic feeling sprinkled throughout.

There isn't any huge plot driving the book or overarching theme or message. It really does just meander. So if you're looking for a book you can't put down, something that keeps you on the edge of your seat with suspense or a dying to know how it all ends, you'll probably be disappointed. This book is just like driving through a scenic route in an unmapped town — you have no itinerary; you're just meeting people and sightseeing quite randomly. But, like you would any such trip, you're enjoying it. So long as you're not the type to vacation with a checklist and a strict plan, you'll like the journey through Lake Wobegon.

I'm not sure, but I believe Lake Wobegon is a fictional town, though based on the small town in which Keillor grew up. Keillor endows it with all the life and history of a real town, however, so it has all the flavor and quirkiness of an actual town. It has its founding stories and its odd little news articles about the founders and citizens. And while many of the descriptions are funny, there's never a sense that Keillor is making fun of these characters — they're presented with a lot of love, and faults become endearing. In the end, you come to love the characters Keillor grew up with, too.

This book is best read slowly, perhaps out loud to someone you love — probably an ideal waiting room read, as it's easy to put down when something else comes up and easy to pick up again when you're free.

Jacki says

I'm going to have to take a break on this. I'm only on page 148 & I'm totally bored with it. It's taken me 2 days to read that much. That's really unlike me. So. I'm going to start another book & read this one little-by-little I guess.

Alright. Well. I finished it. Finally. This book really did nothing for me. I pretty much had to force my way through it. I admit, there were funny parts, but getting to them was pretty painful. I kept reading because it came to me so highly recommended by my mom & we usually have fairly similar tastes. All I can figure is that she is from a different time than me, and so she "got" more of it. I don't know. It really bored me.

Cyndi says

Although I liked this book ok, I really wanted to like it more. The stories are cute, homespun tales of life in a small town in Minnesota during the 60's? 70's? I'm not actually sure and that's one of the problems I had with this book. I'm pretty sure the intention was to show the way life doesn't change much in small towns, but that's not actually true. The nostalgic eye may see it that way, but when you take off the rose colored glasses you can see changes. Whether we like it or not. A small town can only sustain so many people before it is forced to adapt.

Anyway, another problem I kept coming across other than the whip-lashing time line, was the changes of point of view from first person to third person by the narrator.

I suppose this may be one of those books that are more enjoyable in audio form. Garrison Keillor could probably save it for me with his voice over skills. ????

erin says

I'm amazed that Garrison Keillor is seen as the written equivalent of Norman Rockwell; His stories are only nostalgic if you aren't paying attention. The Lake Wobegone of his childhood is a dark, oppressive place, where the laughs are generally at someone's expense and everlasting embarrassment. For those of us who identify, the grim humour and beautifully rendered stories evoke not nostalgia, but a satisfaction that those years are long past.

Peter Monn says

Just amazing. The consummate storyteller. My full review will be on my booktube channel at <http://Youtube.com/peterlikesbooks>

Eric says

Dear Garrison Keillor,

I read your book and liked it a lot. It took me a while to get through it, though. First I started reading it a couple of years ago, but I got so confused in the first few pages' footnotes about how many meters apart everything in town was that I thought it was going to be a boring book and quit. I started reading it again around August, and when I realized that you were just being cheeky, I quickly picked up on the style and began my enjoyment. I try not to be an obnoxious reader, but I couldn't help laughing out loud every few pages. Then I would have to stop and explain to my wife why I'm laughing. You do a great job putting the awkwardness and beauty of growing up and life in general into words that any Midwesterner could relate to.

Thanks for spending all the time and thought it took to create this book. I'm sorry that I only spent \$12.00 on it; it was worth more than that. I'm looking forward to the next time you visit Kansas City. My wife and I saw you here the other year--not when it was 110 degrees, but the time after that.

Your fan,
Eric S.

Margitte says

I loved it. Although it made me smile a lot, sometimes laughing out loud, it also had a almost neurotic undertone, but it never gets the better of the reader. The community of Lake Wobegone is described in so much detail, it is amazing. I skipped most of the footnotes in the end, since it became annoying to remember where I was in the book after having to read yet another footnote that was a chapter in itself. The characters are so all-American, yet it could have been our own neighborhood in South Africa. We played the same games, did the same silly teenage stuff and made the same stupid mistakes, debated the same religious and political divisions. I just realized how very American we actually are! lolol.

Of course we do not experience the deep, dark, hibernating winters and I had a good belly-laugh for many of the descriptions in the book, like this one: *"Out on the country road, you can see Norwegian bachelor farmers have hung out their sheets. "When a bachelor farmer begins to smell himself, you know winter is over," says Clarence."*

And this one: *"One day it dawned on her (Mrs. Magendanz) that he must have an outhouse in the garage. The Dahls had moved off the farm into town only two years before. He had found that his bowels wouldn't budge on a flush toilet, so he dug a pit in the garage and was using it twice day."*

And there was Bud who found digging his grandmother's grave too tough a job, so he used one stick of dynamite to get it over and done with.

And Margaret who worried that her soon-to-be husband might be a little too dull since he was way too quiet. Then she decided to kiss him in the neck during their visit to the movies in 1957, at the exact moment that *Dracula* bend over a young girl. She *"found out that he had deep reserves of nervous energy. In one second, he distributed the box of popcorn over six rows of seats."*

The book is about a community of about 800 people living in Lake Wobegone, a non-existent town, describing their history, hardships, humor, religions, traditions, thoughts, idiosyncrasies, everything in a lot of detail. It probably is one of the best books to read for immigrants to the country. It depicts the very heart of the people of America and it was done splendidly! I loved the down-to-earthiness of the characters, their honest stories, unpretentiousness. It really feels like meeting the core of real people who makes up the great nation at last!

I really really loved it!

Listen to this **Podcast** with the author about this book

Amber says

Picture me sitting on a train reading this book, getting to the passage where the boys are in the classroom at lunchtime and the headteacher farts nearby and acts as if nothing happened. Gary makes his friend fall to pieces with laughter because the teacher demands to know what is so funny, and Gary says something like "it smells like a badger fart". The effect on his friend - I think he says something like: "I've never had such an impressive(explosive? Can't remember the line properly) effect on anyone." His friend goes all red in the face and 'yarks up' some pudding he is eating, out of his nose. In defending himself to his mum later, Gary says it wasn't fair, the headteacher 'stood there as if it was a bouquet of daisies'. I actually slid off my train seat practically under the table, with tears streaming, unable to breathe for laughing, as I was reading it. I had to close the book and stop looking at the phrase 'yarked up some more pudding' because every time I read it it set me off again. I'm doing it now.

Donna Davis says

This is sweet, funny, unbelievably poignant, from the man who began his career (I believe, at least to the extent of being well-known) on public radio, then branched out.

Because this is so purely American, and much of it set in the post-war years, I never tried to share it with my husband, because he was not born in the US and didn't move here or start learning English till the 70s, so I thought the retro nuances would be lost on him. However, when he heard a brief excerpt that Keillor recited on (somewhere other than YouTube, but like many things, it got there), he responded in a way that surprised me. The emotion of his work is not so intense as to threaten, only to tug gently at the heartstrings, or even once in awhile, inspire a good belly-laugh. My spouse could relate to all of that, and if you have a taste for vintage Americana, or think you may, and if for some reason you have not yet been exposed to Keillor's work, this is the very best place to start.

Darren says

I feel like I should either give this 1-Star for being boring/pointless/smug twaddle, or 5-Star for being a masterpiece of observation/eternal truth/great american novel, *buuut*... I can't get excited enough about it either way - there were some amusing/touching parts and some passages that I just skipped cos they didn't seem to add *anything*; impressed by the craft/ambition, annoyed by the mixed messages (repressive or idyllic - you decide... and no, it can't be both). So 3.

Leslie says

Garrison Keillor is a rambling kind of person/writer who just keeps spewing details and weaving threads in a fabric of Lake Wobegon. His somewhat satirical take on a small town, his own hometown - possibly, I still can't figure out if this is a work of fiction or not, and frankly I don't mind - reminds me of Stephen Leacock's sunshine sketches of a small town, nostalgia and humour, pride in one's hometown, made up or real. A book to be savoured, read in the right place.

"“Humankind knows no finer amenity than the screened porch. It is the temple of family life, and the sacred preserve of the luxurious custom known as “visiting.” Compare it to the barbarity of the “business lunch,” the hideous conversational burden of the cocktail party, and the prison that is the formal dinner, the porch visit shines with civility.”

Liz says

(4/8/08): Toilsome. That's a good word to describe this book, if it even is a word. (It ought to be, if it's not.) Four hundred plus pages and not much to it.

Yes, I understand there's not really a plot to it. In fact, I'd bet there's a particular term to describe the type of writing Mr. Keillor endeavors. I don't know it and I just don't care for it. Yeah, there are some interesting parts about how town life affects so many of its residents (one of the problems - too many characters to really keep track of), but they are few and far between, at least for me.

A few zingers, for you though, because if nothing else, Mr. Keillor can do a bang up job at making a point clear or making something mundane, funny (and hey, this way, you don't have to read the book):

- " . . . buck up, be strong, believe in God, and be about your business."
- "Faced with the lonely alternative, we'd marry a Lutheran, and then, dazzled by the splendid music and vestments and stained glass, we'd forsake the truth for that carnival down the street."
- "I could always cross my fingers and prevent a real conversion. God would know I didn't mean it."
- " . . . unconsciously, out of habit, she spat a little *ptui* in the hanky and rubbed my forehead. *Mother spit.* Our holy water, the world's most powerful cleansing agent.

(4/3/08): It's not all that light. I'm tempted to agree with Jess that Lake Wobegon might be best on the radio. I *struggled* through the first hundred pages - really, I didn't need to know what a fictional town was like in the 1600s! Heck, I'm really not even all that concerned about what the US was like in the 1600s! But, now I'm up to the almost-modern day and the book's now in first person, so it's better. But 100 pages?! People, please.

(3/24/08): It's Garrison Keillor. I need something light, after "The Liar's Club." This should do it.

Wayne Barrett says

This story is like something out of a Norman Rockwell painting. Even though there were some tidbits of interesting history here it was a little long and tedious. I much prefer these stories told in smaller portions over his live radio broadcast, 'A Prairie Home Companion'.

Michael Foley says

What is Lake Wobegon? Is it a place? Is it a state of mind? Is it nothing more than a nostalgic longing for times gone by? In his first Lake Wobegon novel, Garrison Keillor introduces us to his semi-autobiographical world of memory. He leaps between the present and past as he breathes life into his fictional Midwestern world. His characters are unique and interesting not because they are bigger than life, but because they could

be your neighbor, your best friend, or even yourself. Lake Wobegon's greatest success is that of its familiarity.

It would be hard to categorize Lake Wobegon Days as nothing more than a longing for simpler times. Often, Keillor's characters wage internal wars about progress and principles. The characters that leave Wobegon for college have a tendency to develop feelings of superiority over those back home. They view the small town way of life and their earnestness as being intolerant and anti-intellectual. Of course, this tension and mistrust works both ways. The Wobegonians view big cities as places of skewed moral compasses. Keillor does not take sides in the argument. Instead, you have a feeling that the author himself is just as torn between the two views.

Keillor's first novel carries all the trademark humor that fans of The Prairie Home Companion have come to expect. There are points where he loses his footing and gets lost in his own storytelling, but overall the novel is strong. Keillor has the framework in place, but he is still fleshing out the mythology that we have come to call Lake Wobegon - "where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average." His greatest gift is his ability to make you feel part of this "worn-in" community of characters.

Elaine says

As a child of the 60s, I have gotten used to books having to be dark and meaningful. Happy endings are rare and suspect. So it is with pleasure that I discovered Garrison Keillor's books. He makes me smile, sometimes nostalgically, but sometimes just out of clear enjoyment of someone saying what I've always felt but never knew how to put into words. I encourage readers to give this book a chance. How anyone can read about Lake Wobegon's citizenry and not love this book is beyond me. A church named "Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility"...you KNOW that's hysterically funny and right on the mark.
