Lake Wobegon Days Short Guide

Lake Wobegon Days by Garrison Keillor

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Characters

Of Lake Wobegon Days, Keillor said, "Most of the book is based on people I have known, and things that happened or things that might have happened to them. But I would have a hard time saying who, what and where. I don't believe I invent anything — everything comes from experience. But it all sits around for 25 or 30 years and simmers.

Marinates in its juices." There are many characters who seem fully and intimately realized in this book, but Keillor may be the main character.

Although he tells stories about his childhood and about visiting home in the present, his presence never seems obtrusive. The reader remembers most of the stories and sketches as being about other characters, Aunt Flo or Francis Watt or the descendants of Magnus Oleson, the original Norwegian settler. While each major character stands fully realized, each also seems chosen to illustrate the main social concerns and themes. The book as a whole reveals Keillor's voice and imagination, creating, believing in, loving, and criticizing, "the town that time forgot and that the decades cannot improve."

Social Concerns

Like much American popular literature, Lake Wobegon Days affirms widely held American values of loyalty and closeness within family and community. Keillor looks with a loving, yet critical eye at small town life in Minnesota. His portraits of the many characters with their foolishness, cruelty, absurdity, kindness, narrowness, and eccentricities ring true to readers who grew up, as Keillor did, in a Midwestern small town. Although his characters are Minnesotans of Norwegian and German descent, with distinctive voices and customs, they have recognizable equivalents all over America.

Listeners are drawn to A Prairie Home Companion and readers to Lake Wobegon Days mainly by this quality of "critical nostalgia."

Describing his purpose, Keillor said, "I tend to want to take lovely, ordinary things and raise them to a slightly brighter, more extravagant, elegant level, in order to express what I feel is the innate elegance, grace and beauty of ordinary life. And in raising the ordinary to the elegant, there is always humor, because I know that I am exaggerating." Here one can see a dual impulse in Keillor which contributed importantly to the popularity of this book. On the one hand, he wants to tell the "truth" about American village life, but on the other hand, he wants to emphasize its beauty. As several reviewers noted, this book attracts readers who value well-made humor and, especially, readers who treasure but do not wish to sentimentalize their experiences of intimate communities.

Techniques

That Keillor makes his characters live fully, yet also selects them and their adventures to paint a picture of a culture and another picture of his response to that culture, accounts for the unusual form of the book. Within a roughly chronological organization, Keillor groups stories by subject: an overview of the town, the history of the town, its eccentricities, characteristic seasonal activities, and a sort of summing up. Within these broad categories, the narrative seems to wander almost whimsically, although it never really abandons the themes. A major humorous technique which stands out from among many of the standard ones Keillor uses is that of the understated tall tale. There are many tall tales such as the stories of the Lundbergs' sleepwalking, of the man who was accidentally dumped naked out of his pick-up truck camper, and several of Carl Krebsbach's hunting and fishing adventures. Keillor finds ways of telling these stories, usually by concentrating on the feelings and thoughts of their central characters, which disguise the fact that they really are tall tales.

Themes

Keillor develops two main opposing themes, the nostalgic theme of how memory perfects childhood life in a small town, and the voluntary exile theme of how small town narrowness can be destructive of the spirit. Keillor as narrator fondly remembers both the fun and the terrors of childhood in Lake Wobegon, the fun of cat funerals, tomato fights, and the sleepwalking Lundberg family, and the terrors of walking to school in winter and of performing in school programs. On the other hand, he creates characters, many of whom are adolescents, who dream of a greater, more imaginative and adventurous life, a sort of life which is actively discouraged by the conservative culture of his town.

An unexamined puritanism pervades Lake Wobegon, leading its citizens to automatically disapprove of pleasure, comfort, leisure, imagination, and any kind of work which does not produce a tangible product. Although the people are beautiful, loving, and generous, they tend to discourage their children from believing in their own potential, so that most leave to become "finer persons than they were allowed to be at home." The town encourages its children to rebel as does the young man, who in angry imitation of Martin Luther, pens the "95 Theses 95," condemning the town for teaching him to value suffering over pleasure and to worship "a god who is like you, who shares your thinking exactly, who is going to slap me one if I don't straighten out fast."

This opposition between the beauty of childhood memories and the impossibility of living in Lake Wobegon as an artistic adult pervades the book in various forms. The history of the founding of the village develops the opposition between the fantastic dreams of its first settlers and the realities of climate, land, and economics.

Many individual stories emphasize gaps between what characters dream of being and their limiting circumstances.

This opposition may point to a larger theme: that the artist, at least, must leave the village of childhood in order to discover its value, because its value is in memory rather than in residing in the town.

Adaptations

It seems clear that there is significant interaction between Keillor's radio program and his published fiction.

Many of the episodes of Lake Wobegon Days were broadcast before they appeared in print. Many were recorded and sold on cassette tape by Minnesota Public Radio. Keillor retold and elaborated some stories from the book after it was published. It may be accurate to say that the book is an adaptation of Keillor's oral presentations, because he selected from these and arranged them.

However, he also invented new material and elaborated upon the old. The interaction between Keillor's use of oral and print media is a complicated but important aspect of his creativity.

This interaction is also important for thinking about Keillor's audience, because readers who have heard his oral delivery may hear his voice when they read. It may be that the stories seem quite different in tone and even in meaning if the reader must construct rather than remember Keillor's voice as narrator.

Literary Precedents

In Lake Wobegon Days, Keillor writes in a tradition of humor which might be seen as an amalgam of Mark Twain in such works as Roughing It (1872) and Life on the Mississippi (1883) and of Sarah Orne Jewett in short stories such as "The Guests of Mrs. Timms" and, especially, in The Country of the Pointed Firs. A more recent writer in this tradition is James Thurber, especially in The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze (1935) and My Life and Hard Times. This book shares with Life on the Mississippi and The Country of the Pointed Firs the roughly chronological, episodic form, the concern with eccentric and humorous characters, and the opposition of nostalgia and realism. Keillor is closer to Jewett in fully realizing the characters in his sketches. When he tells a tall tale, he never goes quite so far as Twain in "Grandfather's Old Ram," and he further subdues the broadness of such humor by concentrating on the inner lives of his characters. He may be seen to bring together characteristics of "Down East" and "Southwestern" humor.

Related Titles

The stories and sketches of Happy to Be Here (1982) show a variety of techniques and influences. One of his main thematic concerns in this collection is the influence of various specialized forms of discourse on American thought. Parody is a dominant form in this collection which, in the manner of S. J. Perelman, reveals the absurdity in the "languages" of areas such as popular social science, advertising, and selfhelp. There are several stories in Happy to Be Here which have the Lake Wobegon flavor, seeming to be about the same people and certainly about nearby places.

"Don, The True Story of a Young Person" is about a member of an aspiring, rural, punk-rock band; he confronts a moral dilemma when his band achieves national recognition for adding an attack on a live chicken to their act. "Drowning 1954," about "Keillor's" childhood swimming lessons, could be transported into Lake Wobegon Days without difficulty.

Some of these stories also show Keillor developing his tall tale technique.

"Local Family Keeps Son Happy" looks like a clipping from the Lake Wobegon Herald Star, but tells about a rural family's success in keeping their teen-age son out of trouble by hiring a live-in prostitute for him. Two of his stories about radio, "WLT The Edgar Era" and "The Slim Graves Show," contain understated tall tales. "My North Dakota Railroad Days" is a tall tale in the Southwestern humor tradition.

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