We Are Still Married Short Guide

We Are Still Married by Garrison Keillor

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Characters

The only recurring character in We Are Still Married is the narrative voice of Garrison Keillor, a persona developed and maintained throughout his years as host of "A Prairie Home Companion" and writer for The New Yorker.

Keillor has acknowledged his debt to the lecture persona of Mark Twain; in fact, seemingly drawing upon the entire American comic tradition, he incorporates elements from a range of stand-up comedy, including the comic lecturers of the nineteenth century, twentieth-century social satirists such as Will Rogers and Mort Sahl, and deadpan comedians such as Bob Newhart. In his use of word play and incongruity, Keillor appears also to have been especially influenced by the concert persona of Victor Borge. The fanciful digressions and the pose of the underdog seem to reflect the style of James Thurber.

Social Concerns

W e Are Still Married is divided into five sections which differ slightly in form, tone, and subject. "Pieces," the first section, deals satirically with contemporary social trends and political issues. For example, "End of the Trail" is a desperate farewell message from one of the last smokers in America, written to her children just before her capture. "Lifestyles" describes the fad of renovating abandoned buildings for upscale living; the central characters are a yuppie couple who move into a remodeled schoolroom and trade away their children, who do not fit the new lifestyle. "Who We Were and What We Meant by It" is a founding member's disgruntled look back at the Momentist Movement, one of the legacies of the 1960s. "The Current Crisis in Remorse" parodies the numerous popular books of psychobabble. "Your Book Saved My Life, Mister" concerns the author's relationship with the reader and the current practice of frivolous lawsuits.

Playing on similarities in incongruously linked names, "Hollywood in the Fifties" pokes fun at newspapers' question-and-answer columns about the personal lives of celebrities. "A Liberal Reaches for Her Whip" begins with the premise that everyone excuses the bad behavior of jerks but pounces upon flaws in good people; an example is the long-suffering "liberal" mother who is abused by her sons, Ron and George, until she rebels and becomes the avenger known as "One Helluva Woman." In another political satire, "He Didn't Go to Canada," the Indiana National Guard is revealed as America's top-secret ultimate weapon, merely camouflaged as a group of carefree golfers. Likewise, when the barbarian Huns take over Chicago and demand ransom for the savings-and-loan institutions, President Bush coolly continues his vacation, measures public reactions, and eventually announces that the government refuses to pay ransom but will provide one hundred and sixty-six billion dollars of support for the savings-and-loan industry; in a Grant Park news conference, Bush expresses his opposition to barbarianism and explains "How the Savings and Loans Were Saved."

Sketches in "The Lake," the second section, are in some way related to the people of Lake Wobegon. "Letters from Jack" is continuing correspondence with a less than enthusiastic fan of Keillor's radio show. "Three Marriages" consists of letters loosely linked by the subject of marriage: in the first, a Minnesota woman describes her disappointing Texas vacation with her husband; in the second, a woman complains about her unpleasant experiences when she accompanies her husband on a series of visits with his war buddies; and in the third, a man away from home on a hunting trip confesses the jealousy that led him to read his wife's letter from an old flame. The glory days of Lake Wobegon sports are the whimsical subject of "Babe," an account of Babe Ruth's appearance against the best baseball team the town ever fielded. In "Who Do You Think You Are?" Keillor nostalgically recalls childhood episodes in which he was asked this question, then realizes that his identity as a Minnesotan was never really clear until his move to New York.

The third section, "Letters," is a group of short contemplative pieces written between 1982 and 1988. As he explains in "How to Write a Letter," Keillor believes a letter communicates better than a phone call, and supplies advice on how to make letter-

writing a pleasure, instead of a chore. "Sexy," his response to being included in Playgirl's list of the ten sexiest men in America, humorously advises male readers on how they too can achieve this distinction. In "Estate," Keillor recalls his days as a writer of unorthodox obituaries, then muses upon the way estate sales should remind the buyer that possessions sometimes outlast their owners. "Regrets" also deals with the subject of mortality, as emergency procedures during an airplane flight lead Keillor to think about the things he has done and left undone.

"Home Team" traces Keillor's developing pride in the Minnesota Twins as a link with his Minnesota identity. A touching, but not sentimental piece, "Autograph," describes the changes in Keillor's attitudes after his only personal acquaintance with a homeless person. In another effort to understand an unfamiliar philosophical position, Keillor visits "Gettysburg," mentally re-lives the battle, and tries to understand the source of rage which would culminate in a charge like that of Longstreet's men.

Most of the verse in the "House Poems" section is light, akin to the humorous verse of poets like Ogden Nash and Edward Lear. "O What a Luxury" describes the delights of urination. "The Solo Sock" explains that the independence and the restlessness of socks causes the breakup of pairs.

On a somewhat satiric note, "Lamour" chronicles the triumph of illusory infatuation over depressing common sense.

Although Louis Sullivan receives credit for the dictum that form follows function, Keillor suggests that "Mrs. Sullivan" is the true author. In "Guilt and Shame," a man can withstand the accusations of his father, his mother, and his child, but his cat's cool stare reduces him to tears of remorse — and incidentally gets the cat a meal of tuna.

A serious note is Keillor's elegy "In Memory of Our Cat, Ralph."

Items in "Stories," the final section, differ from the sketches by the presence of a more fully-developed plot, usually with an ironic twist. In "My Life in Prison," a man is captured and sent to prison for life, just three days before the statute of limitations runs out on his crime — hitting his cousin in the head with a pair of stilts. "The Lover of Invention" tells how the wheel brought isolation and destruction to its first, unheralded inventors:

the Promosians invented the wheel to avoid the bloodthirsty Walukas, who then used it to kill them more efficiently. "Lonely Boy," like Sherwood Anderson's "I Am a Fool," describes a young zoo employee's attempt to establish a phony identity to impress a young lady he meets at the beach; when she rejects him, he is convinced that he could still win her love, if only he could think of the right words to say. An equally unfortunate encounter occurs in "Meeting Famous People" when a devoted fan's attempt to express his admiration leads to personal injury lawsuits, destruction of his idol's career, and ultimately death for the famous singer; Keillor suggests that such misfortunes can be avoided if a fan follows common sense rules of coolness and disdain in dealing with celebrities. Especially ironic is the book's title story, "We Are Still Married," an account of

the devastating effect when the media are allowed to invade a couple's private lives, nearly destroying their marriage.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Keillor's humor involves the incongruities found in the everyday lives of ordinary people. The basis of this humor is a slightly skewed perception, which focuses upon the absurdities most people overlook. The Mark Twain influence is seen in Keillor's consistent use of understatement; also reminiscent of Twain is the indirectness of his humor, the rambling passages filled with minute details, which initially appear to be digressions but prove to be the essential elements of his stories.

Related Titles

In the variety of its contents, We Are Still Married most closely resembles Keillor's first book, Happy to Be Here (1982), but the consistent style and the recurring persona link all Keillor's works, and the Lake Wobegon characters and their attitudes are similar to those found in Leaving Home (1987) and Lake Wobegon Days (1985).

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