

**AN INTERVIEW WITH
GARRISON KEILLOR
22nd February 1999**

David Brady

Garrison Keillor was born in 1942 in Minnesota, in the Midwest of America, the child of Exclusive Brethren parents, and he now lives in New York. It was as host to the live radio show, 'A Prairie Home Companion' from 1974 to 1987 that he came to fame and he is an oral storyteller of great power (his talks are available in the UK as cassettes issued by the BBC). The novel Lake Wobegon Days (1985), a distinguished addition to the American humorous tradition, brought his satirical portrayal of Midwestern mores to a wider public. The book alludes to the Brethren, but the Protestant community with which it mainly deals is the Lutherans. David Brady met him when he was on a tour of Britain and interviewed him about his Brethren background and his attitude to faith and literature.

DB: Can you tell us something about your Scottish forebears and what may have been their religious adherence?

GK: My father's family was English, actually, and emigrated from Yorkshire to Nova Scotia in 1772, part of a large body of Yorkshiremen brought over to occupy land that the French had been driven from who then made their way to Louisiana. My mother's family, the Denhams, came from Glasgow, where grandfather was a bookkeeper for the railroad. He came in 1905, with a wife and four small children, and was a Brethren adherent when he came, though I'm not sure how far back it went. Once here, he attended an Open meeting for a year before he went to the Exclusive group that I grew up in.

DB: How far back does your family go in Brethren?

GK: My grandfather James Keillor and his father and other relatives established a meeting in Anoka, Minnesota in the 1880s, the result of work by an itinerant Brethren labourer. The family has roots in the Baptist church in Canada, and grandfather married a Methodist. In the early days of the Brethren in Anoka, they would accept grandmother's Methodist relatives to the table for the breaking of bread, until another labourer persuaded them not to.

DB: There are some different branches of Exclusive Brethren. Do you know to which group your family adhered?

GK: Our group was known as the Booth Brethren, to distinguish us from the Ames Brethren, after a particularly disastrous split in 1948. Most of my father's family went with the Ameses and we went with the Booths. It was the result of an argument over the Glanton Brethren, who were in fellowship with us, whom the Ameses accused of harbouring Raven tendencies, or at least of not proving themselves to be clear of Ravenism, and so when some Brethren refused to cast out the Glantons on the basis of these accusations, the accusers broke off with us.

DB: Why did you choose to refer to them as 'the Sanctified Brethren' in your fiction?

GK: Sanctified Brethren makes more sense than 'Plymouth Brethren'. In America, Plymouth is a car.

DB: Have you ever had acquaintance with any other kinds of Brethren, e.g. Open Brethren?

GK: I haven't, to be perfectly honest. Our Brethren had such a strong distaste for the Open meetings that it was a closed subject among us and I knew more about Lutherans or Anglicans or even Catholics than about Open Brethren. The elders found it painful to discuss the divisions that had taken place over the years, and so I never was clear about Ravenism, for example, what the Kellys believed that was different from our beliefs. And Openism was a vast mystery.

DB: The 'Lutherans' are frequently the butt of your humour. How often would you say you are using 'Lutherans' as a label for Brethren?

GK: I talk about Lutherans as a device for talking about the Midwestern character, and though I may have given them some Brethren tendencies, I haven't really tried to talk about Brethren much in my stories, simply because it requires too much explanation and I'm not sure if, once the scene was set, I'd be capable of telling the story anyway. There'd be no action, just a lot of very quiet people worrying about each other's souls. And there wouldn't be much of the sort of sin that makes for an interesting story.

DB: Are any of your relations still members of the Brethren?

GK: My parents are, and my younger sister has been in and out in recent years, drawn to the Brethren by her faith in their principles and her affection for them but repelled by the intransigence of older brothers on the subject of women's participation in Bible readings, for example. And resistance to change in even very small matters.

DB: If so, what are their attitudes to your productions as a broadcaster and writer?

GK: As you know, no self-respecting Brethren family would ever want a child of theirs to go into entertainment or literature. But they've gotten over the shame, for the most part, enough so that they can enjoy the performances, up to a point. They would never brag about me, of course. But they don't mind being seen at my shows now and then. And my mother seems to get a kick out of my reminiscences of childhood.

DB: Were you ever a recognized member of a Brethren meeting? Did you break bread?

GK: I was baptized when I was fourteen and did not do as my contemporaries did and ask to be received into fellowship. The thought of coming before a panel of elders to be examined in my faith was a fearful prospect, and also, I had a strong feeling that the Brethren was not a hospitable place for me.

DB: At what age did you leave the company of Brethren?

GK: I was twenty.

DB: Is there anything today you would say you miss about the Brethren meetings, or the Brethren way of life?

GK: I have many fond memories of growing up in the meeting. Of the gentleness of people, of the transparency of their faith, of their devotion to the Word and to Scripture study. I don't miss the humourlessness, the lure of legalism, or the snares of the invisible liturgy.

DB: Do you now have any kind of church connection or, more importantly, faith? Can this be stated in a number of propositions?

GK: I believe in the propositions in the Apostles Creed that we stand and recite Sunday morning in the Episcopal church. Or in the Lutheran church. I tend to be Episcopalian in Minnesota and Lutheran in New York, though now, having married an Episcopalian, it is easier to drift in that direction.

DB: How many of the '95 theses 95' in *Lake Wobegon Days* are levelled specifically at Brethren?

GK: I didn't aim them at Brethren but rather at a fictional family in Lake Wobegon. If any Brethren feel struck by any of the 95 theses, then they should deal with it in their own hearts and not feel that I was attacking them.

DB: Do you find any encouragement toward humour in the Bible?

GK: I feel that comedy is based on the gospel, fundamentally. But there is a playfulness in comedy that is found, perhaps, only in some of the Psalms, in Proverbs surely, and in few other places. This makes me feel that it has been edited severely by men and that it may not represent God's final word. God's love of comedy is abundantly clear in life, it seems to me. God's creatures are endowed with it, even cats and dogs.

DB: You have been heard to justify the writing of fiction by reference to Jesus's use of parables. Is this seriously intended?

GK: Well, up to a point. Jesus chose to teach through the telling of stories that are understood to be not literally true. But the real justification of fiction, I think, is the admonition of James that we should confess our sins to each other. Brethren don't do that. They believe confession would weaken them. They believe in presenting a staunch countenance to the world. They were, I believe, the worst storytellers I ever met. Everything was heavily edited and much was suppressed. They aspired to a towering solemnity that was truly frightening to small children.

DB: In *Wobegon Boy* John Tollefson says, 'I grew up among pietists. I know how they kill the spirit.' Is this an accusation you would level against Brethren? In particular, have you ever found any Brother to hold the view that the arts are a gift of God, or have you found the reverse?

GK: I must point out that my familiarity with Brethren is rather antique at this point—dating back to the fifties in the Midwest, in an Exclusive assembly that was deeply depressed over a painful split and was slowly dying away—but, in answer to your question, yes, pietism is a constant strain. If the Pharisees were to come back, they'd come back as Brethren. Seeking the manners of godliness over the love of God, going through the motions, genuflecting in all the little ways Brethren do. This spirit of fearfulness is so contrary to the spirit of artistic freedom and joyfulness, whether in literature or music or painting, in which we aspire to transcend ourselves. I never met Brethren who felt that the arts were a gift of God. The Brethren I knew felt quite the opposite, that the arts were a pretense for individual pride.

DB: One gains the impression from your writings that you must have heard and absorbed a lot of Bible teaching in your childhood and youth. How did this come about?

GK: We didn't read the Bible much in our home—my parents had their hands full trying to raise six children and earn a living and keep things afloat—but we went to meeting every Sunday for the full Brethren programme, Sunday School, the Lord's Supper, the afternoon Bible study if a labourer was in town, Young People's, and an evening gospel meeting. And for a few years in my teens, I was an avid reader of Scripture on my own. So a great deal of

teaching got drummed into my head. Even today, in my doddering state, verses keep coming back to me, the Bible speaks in all sorts of situations.

DB: Do you think your knowledge of the Bible has been a good thing on the whole (a) for your writing; (b) for your life?

GK: Yes, certainly, and I don't divide writing from life. The Bible is the source of what spiritual life I have, and writing, as an act of the spirit, must be directed by that.

DB: Have you any thoughts about the Brethren's penchant for dispensationalism and charts of the ages?

GK: I have the Chart of Time from Eternity to Eternity hanging in my upstairs hallway and it's a comfort to have it around. It reminds me of a time when I was thirteen or so, attending a lecture on the Chart by a labourer, and while gazing at the Chart was filled with a great sense of certainty that I, a mere child, understood All Things That Ever Were of Will Be. I don't get that sense often anymore.

DB: What do you think when you hear people state, 'The Bible is the word of God?'

GK: Well, it is, of course, but it depends on who the people are. Usually they are trying to sell me their slant, and I am a resistant buyer. I edge away, with apologies.

DB: Can modern literature be to us in any sense the word of God?

GK: I believe that genius comes from God, and that it is up to men and women to use it well, and that we can each be the judge of that. I believe that when the human heart is poured out, when the anguish and sweetness and music and anger of life is lavished upon the page and when language is used artistically to bring us into the life of another, that this may be God's doing. I feel that Christians should read great literature. There are gifts to be found there.

DB: I believe you are now an attendee at a mainline church in New York. Do you ever feel, as many Brethren do, that a programmed service, with each part of the meeting orchestrated, gets in the way of real spiritual communion?

GK: No, I don't feel this at all. I love the simple liturgy of the church, absolutely formal, which serves to diminish the importance of any individual in the group and makes us all one before God. I remember Brethren prayers, for example, as being performances. Young men rehearsed their prayers in their minds and stood up and recited them. Older men when they prayed tended to fall into a style which became a sort of personal liturgy for them—

the unacknowledged liturgy of habit, posing as spontaneous. A Brethren prayer aimed to improvise Biblical-sounding speech and to do it at length and to be fervent in a rather literal way and to create a sort of sermon within it, all of which is so Pharisaical and antithetical to the idea of prayer. In prayer we are to simply come before the Lord and it helps if the vehicle of the prayer is formal: 'Lord have mercy', 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world have mercy upon us.' 'Our Father Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name.' We kneel in silence when we come into the church and we pray, and we say the names of our loved ones to ourselves, and when the sermon drifts off into coyness and whimsy, we shut it out and pray over and over. This happens often. Preaching is weak in the 'mainline' church, but people pray and not for show.