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Lake Wobegon Summer 1956

Garrison Keillor

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Perhaps of all his publications to date, the present novel has most to say about Brethren, in particular Keillor's personal experiences among the so-called Booth Brethren in the American state of Minnesota in the 1950s. One naturally wonders why a man approaching 60 years of age should, at this stage in his life, continue to masticate over experiences which have clearly coloured his life and his earlier fiction. But we will return to this question after describing the book and the picture it presents of Brethren life and people. That picture is by no means flattering.¹

The opening passage of the book seems an intentionally constructed pastiche of the sentient and nostalgic prose of James Agee's prologue to *A Death in the Family*, 'Knoxville, summer 1915',² but in Keillor's version, instead of the overshadowing comfort and reassurance of a 'father who is good to me', there is the furtive image of Daddy 'who pretends to be reading C.H. McIntosh's *Commentary on the Ephesians*' (the author behind the thin mask is evidently the much-read Brethren writer Charles Henry Mackintosh, who, however, in actuality does not seem to have published any discrete work on Ephesians). Meanwhile, Garrison (or Gary, his real name) is feigning to read *Fox's [sic] of Martyrs*, a large and solid tome used only as means of concealing an erotic magazine concealed within its pages (p.2 f.). In this way the scene is set for an intentionally

¹ One is surprised by Michael Fedo's comment that 'persons who have been in his presence and assumed his religious remarks were satire have been caught short by Keillor's insistence that he has not departed his Brethren roots and has no intention of doing so' (*The Man from Lake Wobegon* [New York, 1987], p. 129). But, of course, this was published fifteen years ago.

² Aged 14 in this novel, we may be forgiven for wondering if Keillor, born 7 August 1942, does not also view himself as a 'biological product' of that other bildungsroman, Herman Raucher's *Summer of '42*.

humorous tale of an American adolescent straining against the apparently hypocritical manners of a family Brethrenism to which he refuses to conform.

As previously in his fiction, Keillor refers to the religious group with which his family is associated as 'Sanctified Brethren' because, as he stated in an interview printed in this *Review* (Winter 2000), this title makes more sense than 'Plymouth Brethren' in the USA, where Plymouth is a car. (But I would have thought that to the American mind Plymouth also had religio-historical connotations.) Describing these Sanctified Brethren, he tells us in this book that they are literalists in Biblical understanding and that they major on the principle of separation from the world (a principle to the mockery of which Keillor devotes a whole chapter: ch. 28), the main evidence of which is that they do not have TV (6). They love the King James Version, while they are opposed to human literature with 'its godless drunks and wastrels' (17). Oddly, however, Christmas seems to be tolerated (18). They have Bible plaques on their walls (51) and they make long expository prayers in the language of the King James Version (82). They break bread weekly (44), apparently in the home of one of Gary's aunts (197). While the Second Coming and the threat of being left behind is a constant source of anxiety to the children (20, 106), Daddy tends to ignore junior's questionings of this and other attitudes as he 'is good at shutting out matters he prefers not to address'. To Gary he is a ludicrous man, sitting in his domestic swing on Taft Street and reading 'from Deuteronomy and Leviticus and all about sacrificing calves and what was an abomination unto the Lord and how many cubits long the Temple should be' (7). To make matters worse, Gary's sister, the hated 'prize-winning born-again Christian' (24), is constantly quoting at him scriptures in condemnation of his sinful proclivities. The older Gary's literary response is to make her look morally very shabby indeed.

We must, of course, wonder how Keillor's own family members will react to this book. His siblings are by no means intellectual duffers whose views and feelings can be lightly regarded. He has a sister presently working for the University of Minnesota in the fund-raising department requiring her to fulfil speaking engagements all over the

USA. His brother Steven is a leading historian of the state of Minnesota, on which he has published several books and articles, and he has also published a book in which readers of this review may well be interested, a history of the USA from a Christian perspective: *This Rebellious House* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1996) Keillor's father died in February 2002 and so he did not wait for his decease before publish this less than flattering caricature of the man (if we may assume the character portraits are not complete fiction, and no disclaimer is included in the book to deny likeness of characterization to anybody now living or dead).

The comparison made above between James Agee's prose and that of Keillor is worthy of closer consideration. As Keillor again demonstrates from time to time (e.g. on p.48), he too is capable of composing some truly lyrical descriptive passages. In a way his dilemma seems to be whether to pitch high or low in tone and this is, in fact, a dilemma which he himself recognizes as persisting from his youth (see p.69 f.). In the end, he seems to have taken the conscious decision to go by the low road. As he colourfully puts it, 'You cannot make a story of a nice guy and a canary.' On reflection, however, in the current climate of literary composition, this could well be set as a practical challenge to students on a creative writing course. We might then want to reconsider the assertion. Did Keillor not remember that one of the best short stories by a paragon in the field, Katherine Mansfield, was exactly about that and so bore the title 'The Canary'?

The present reviewer has long felt that Keillor's talents are best suited to that particular literary format favoured by Katherine Mansfield: the short story. The novel here under review is a prime example of one that rambles on far too long and, in the end, seems to simply peter out. Keillor is evidently gifted in wit, the trenchant remark, and a well-coined phrase. His creations are far more crisp and effective when contained within the short story, where there is, or should be, no padding or waste of words, the dross is removed, and the literary quality becomes gem-like. In this book, however, we find far too much repetition, meandering, and pap, a large degree of it of an unsatisfying scatological character (a value judgment, I know).

We must return to the question why Keillor, after so many years away from any direct connection with Brethren, should, almost aged 60, still find them gnawing at his gut (if I may use such language). One wonders if this is an attempt to get something off his chest and it may not be altogether insignificant that the book appears after a four-year hiatus in the author's novel-writing career. Did it prove long and painful to write, we wonder? I am told³ that Keillor raised some surprise at a family picnic three or four years ago at his home on the St. Croix by the freshness in his memory and thought of some of his childhood frustrations regarding church difficulties that had happened among his relatives. It would appear that these frustrations went very deep in the mind and heart of the man. Of course, we never escape the formative influences of our most impressionable years; hence the old Jesuit maxim. It is a general truth also that our latter years may be used to integrate experiences which we have fled from and yet which have nagged at us, dimly or insistently, during the course of life. If we are successful in this, we achieve a reconciliation. I wonder therefore if that is what Keillor is seeking to do in this book.

To bear with the book a little longer, possibly the only way we can view it in a positive light is to read it as a 'confession'. After all, Keillor himself asserted in the interview published in an earlier issue of this *Review*, that 'the real justification of fiction... 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.' Keillor's concern for confession, leading to self-acceptance (rather perhaps than to God-acceptance) is underlined again by Michael Fedo in his biography of Keillor, *The Man from Lake Wobegon* (p. 127). And so, against the secretiveness of his family members presented in this novel (171), Gary by contrast seeks to proclaim his sin loudly (see especially p.164). It is almost an attempt to purge himself by some sort of self-exposure, as becomes all too obvious in the closing two chapters of the

³ By John B. Lyman, the husband of one of Keillor's cousins and an active minister among Brethren. To him also I am indebted for previous notes on Keillor's family members.

book, where he finally makes an exhibitionist nude parade of himself in the middle of the ballpark.

Meanwhile, the present book might seem to suggest to the uninformed reader that Keillor is still, after so long a time, feeling sore at the frustrations he experienced as a child in what he felt as a restrictive religious climate, but he has elsewhere spoken very positively of the love and kindness of the Brethren he knew (see e.g. *Fedo*, pp.118-119). In fact, I have it on private authority that Keillor always loved his parents and did a great deal for them and I can well believe it. It seems a pity that this book should cast a public shadow on that relationship. We would like to see him develop this more positive theme in future books, even if he does not have to put a canary into it.

David Brady