

GARRISON KEILLOR

Stories

“I listened to your stories driving across the country by myself a couple summers ago,” a woman told me once, “and I was glad to have them.” She said that she allowed herself two of my Lake Wobegon tapes a day, in the afternoon, driving into the western sun—“and then I drove on, thinking about all sorts of things.” It was a sweet compliment that somehow touched me more than flattery ever could, because I could imagine those long stretches of afternoon driving when a person would be grateful to hear someone tell her a story, and I was pleased to have been useful. Other people have told me that my voice is comforting to small children and puts them to sleep in a few minutes. A woman in New York said she always put on a recording of mine when she came home so the apartment didn’t feel so empty. That’s fine.

Of course, I had more in mind for these stories when I wrote them. I was an English major at the University of Minnesota, where they pumped you up on Milton and Shakespeare, Chaucer, Whitman, Faulkner, and sent you toddling out in the world to do great things. I was twenty-two and I didn’t have one modest ambition in my body. Writing stories to put children to sleep—the thought never occurred to me. It was my intent to write brilliant, killer stuff—to write so brilliantly, in fact, that nobody would ever dare write humor again, though this seems less likely now that I am almost eighty years old. I imagined people would be analyzing my stories for years. They came out one by one in magazines, and then later in book form—and some reviewers said I was *certainly among America’s very* and *a man who could be called the*

Captain Billy Fawcett of our time—and now, here they are, on CD. Stories intended to make my reputation now serve to get a woman across the Great Plains, to quiet a child, to banish silence.

Somehow, it is pleasant for an author, to feel *useful* and to enter a purely utilitarian medium, sound recording, which, unlike the book, is never purchased for display, only for use. There is, at least for us Calvinist writers, something self-indulgent about lounging all morning at a keyboard while honest people are doing the world’s work. Instead of healing the sick or helping the poor, we sit and make up things, and the difference between making up stories and outright decadence may not be so great as we’d like people to think. Unless, that is, your stories somehow help a woman make it across Nebraska, driving the Interstate at 59 m.p.h. As we say in Minnesota, that is something.

Reading these stories again for this recording has forced me to reassess them, and some stories that seemed pretty smart twenty years ago now strike me as unreadable, stale, yesterday’s coffee. So they weren’t included here, but I like these ones pretty well. Time has dimmed their brilliance severely, and oddly, this seems to have improved them. That’s my review of my own work: *Some of it is better than I thought it was going to be.* Thank you, dear listener, for your attention, and I hope the stories serve your purpose, whatever it may be. If you are looking for the secret of happiness, I hope these stories tell you something about that, and if you only need my company for a while, then of course you have that. Happily.

— GARRISON KEILLOR