

Wobegon poets: A prairie poem companion

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Garrison Keillor's latest book is a collection of poems selected from the ones he has read on his daily five-minute show "The Writer's Almanac," which airs on public radio. These are poems, he says, that can make people "stop chewing their toasted muffins and turn up the radio." The range extends from classics (Shakespeare, Auden, Yeats) to a host of delightful discoveries among contemporary writers such as Hayden Carruth, Raymond Carver, Lisel Mueller and Donald Hall. Keillor is a powerful reciter of varied kinds of poetry, as we discovered when we heard him give a reading in Chicago as part of a recent book tour. That event also gave us the chance to ask him some questions.

What kind of poetry do they read in Lake Wobegon?

Inspirational poems, the sort of poems they tape to the refrigerator door or Mrs. Bunsen uses to fill space in the Lutheran church bulletin. "If I have just this day to live, let it be filled with ecstasy." "Walking toward my death, I give thanks my heavenly God to Thee." That sort of poem. The sort that seems to give a little thrill to the older and devout and that makes the young sophisticates grind their molars.

In school, all the grand old masters of literature are brought out for the children to study and to struggle with, with those dorky Questions for Class Discussion: What rhetorical device does the writer employ when he refers to "poems they tape to the refrigerator door"? In what other ways do poems remind you of food? Did you have breakfast this morning? What sorts of thoughts or feelings do you associate with refrigerators?

Clumsily, with good intentions, the teachers thrust poetry at the children—Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, Wordsworth, Keats, Whitman, Dickinson, Frost. And, just as in gym class, some children endure it in misery and others get excited.

Do high schoolers in Lake Wobegon really respond to Shakespeare?

My gosh, yes. “Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments” is a teenage anthem.

“When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes” is a poem that any 16-year-old can understand in a heartbeat. Disgrace is part of the daily life of a high school kid.

Dignity is everything, and pitfalls lie everywhere: you could have a bad hair day; your skin could break out in vicious red blemishes, like a leper; your outfit that was so cool yesterday could feel totally wrong today; you could be called on in class to solve a math problem or discuss the Gadsden Purchase or tell the name of Hester’s boyfriend and draw a blank; you could be caught in a lie; you could flirt with someone and be brutally put down.

And in this moment of horror and shame, your thought of a loved one could pull you back from the brink, exactly as Shakespeare says. And he says it with such spiky grandeur and gorgeous language and such a fine poetic arc, the lines rising and arching forward. Yes, they respond passionately to this. Being who they are, solemn and extremely cool people, they won’t say so, but they do, they really do.

Do pastors in Lake Wobegon ever quote poetry in their sermons? If so, is that a good thing? What kind of poetry is it?

Pastor Ingqvist frequently quotes from the psalmist. Not so much from the Proverbist or from the Song of Solomon, which is too easily misread. But the Book of Psalms is a staple of sermons.

Is it a good thing? Probably not. Depends on what’s happening in the sermon, of course, but usually the quotation of poetry is a clear sign that the pastor has floundered and is trying to climb out of the soup. He’s grabbed for a few lines of poetry as a dramatic device, like holding up a sign that says “Profundity Ahead.”

Maybe he quotes Ella Wheeler Wilcox’s “Laugh and the world laughs with you, weep and you weep alone,” or Emily Dickinson’s “Success is counted sweetest by those who ne’er succeed” or Frost’s “Some say the world will end by fire, some say by ice.” He doesn’t quote Cummings’s “Since feeling is first, who pays any attention to the syntax of things will never wholly kiss you.” No Oscar Wilde, thank you. No, no, no.

It's all very innocent, the sermon. Very few people are listening because usually there is so little to listen to. So he could quote almost anybody and it wouldn't matter. The doors of their attention slammed shut after the first humorous anecdote and the first reference to the scripture reading for the day. It's like reciting poetry to trees: go ahead, it can't hurt them.

Based on the preaching heard in Lake Wobegon, what books do you think pastors are reading?

They are reading good uplifting books, the sorts of books that one feels One Really Ought to Read. I, for example, am the father of a four-year-old girl, so I feel I really ought to read books about parenting that make you feel you can make a huge difference in your child's life by doing the right thing and being a good daddy. (I am thinking about writing a book about techniques of parenting, called *It Doesn't Work*.)

So Pastor Ingqvist and Father Wilmer are reading books about Islam and the Middle East and the environment and corporate farming, and mining these books for small inspiring anecdotes. I think they ought to read more fiction and forget about uplift, but I'm not them.

Has Lake Wobegon produced any notable poets, or any infamous ones?

It has produced a number of amateur limericists ("There was a young lady named Iris/ Whose bosom could truly inspire us") and many low satirists who enjoyed doing vulgar things with Marlowe's "Come live with me and be my love" and some writers of Christmas and birthday verse. Margaret Haskins Durber wrote some celebratory odes years ago that were published in the paper and now I forget what they were about, but I'm sure they were perfectly OK.

But there have been no poets who anybody would tape to the refrigerator.

Does it have a "Christian bookstore" yet?

Lake Wobegon has no bookstore, neither a Christian one nor a pagan one. The ladies of the Lutheran church have a little bookrack in the fellowship room where you can purchase pamphlets of an inspirational nature, but it doesn't do much business.

The first section of *Good Poems* is titled "O Lord." They are poems, mostly, of gratitude for sheer existence. Does gratitude seem like the fundamental religious dimension of life?

Yes, indeed. Gratitude is where spiritual life begins. Thank you, Lord, for this amazing and bountiful life and forgive us if we do not love it enough. Thank you for this laptop computer and for this yellow kitchen table and for the clock on the wall and the cup of coffee and the glasses on my nose and for these black slacks and this black T-shirt. Thanks for black, and for other colors. Thank you, Lord, for giving me the wherewithal not to fix a half-pound cheeseburger right now and to eat a stalk of celery instead. Thank you for the wonderful son and the amazing little daughter and the smart sexy wife and the grandkids. Thank you that I haven't had alcohol in lo! these many months and thank you that it isn't a big struggle to do without, as I had so feared it might be. Thank you for the odd delight of being 60, part of which is the sheer relief of not being 50.

I could go on and on and on. One should enumerate one's blessings and set them before the Lord. Begin every day with this exercise.

List your blessings and you will walk through those gates of thanksgiving and into the fields of joy. It is to break through the thin membrane of sourness and sullenness—though we should be thankful for that too, it being the source of so much wit and humor—and to come into the light and enjoy our essential robustness and good health.

Are there other categories of "religious" poems you might include if you were to put together another volume?

Yes, I'd put in a section of confessional poems. True confession is extremely rare in poetry, as in life. When a poet pretends to confess, usually he does it in a pretty heroic manner: Forgive me, Lord, that I have foolishly bestowed love on these raving idiots. You seldom hear someone cop to the real basic stuff: Forgive me, Lord, for being this self-righteous prick and walking around with a mirror held up in front of my face. Relieve me, Lord, of this stupid self-consciousness, this absolutely insufferable ego. God, it is making me miserable. I lust after recognition, I am desperate to win all the little merit badges and trinkets of my profession, and I am of less real use in this world than any good cleaning lady. I have written reams of high-falutin nonsense and it is nothing but fishwrap and a dog's biffy. You don't get this kind of honesty often from writers, and of course it ought to be encouraged.

Scripture tells us to confess our sins to each other, and I wish that the poets I know would do this more often. They could use a little more humility, frankly. We humorists can't do the whole job alone.