A return trip to Lake Wobegon

By Glenn C. Altschuler

Special to The Baltimore Sun

August 24, 2008

Liberty: A Novel of Lake Wobegon

Garrison Keillor

Viking / 257 pages / $25.95

Clint Bunsen lost his liberty when he was 23. "Good-looking, able to run up and down stairs two at a time, put away a 32-ounce porterhouse and baked potato and banana cream pie and go to sleep with no regrets," he planned to enroll at St. Joseph School of Art in Santa Barbara after he mustered out of the Navy. But he drove to Minnesota to say so long to his mom and dad, married the high school sweetheart he planned to leave behind and took over the family's used-car repair business.

Sixty years old when Liberty begins, Clint has visions of himself "shuffling around the Good Shepherd Home in pee-stained pants, trying to remember the route to his room." To add insult to anxiety, he's been sacked as chairman of the Fourth of July celebration, even though CNN covered the previous year's parade. Determined to die under the palm trees, "with several sweet tall women in swimsuits" sitting at his side, Clint gets his chance. While standing stark naked at the Communion rail at the Lutheran Church, psychic Angelica Pflame, Lake Wobegon's Lady Liberty, invites him to join her and light out for the territories.

Like A Prairie Home Companion, Garrison Keillor's new novel supplies the sights, slights, smells and swells of Lake Wobegon with a stir-fry of satire and sentimentality. On the air, screen and page, Keillor's plots and preoccupations are much the same. His characters, including Clint, are well-meaning, melancholic, misguided missiles, asking, with the singer Peggy Lee, "Is that all there is?" They stare into the abyss, then look away, more resigned than resolute. They stray, but they stay. Though they're well worth winning, Keillor implies, community and family are their consolation prize.

As chairman of the Fourth of July celebration, Clint burns just about everyone in town. He won't allow those old geezers, the Sons of Knute, to march in the parade. He bars the Ladies Sextette from climbing aboard the firetruck to yelp "It's A Grand Old Flag" into megaphones. He cancels the yokelish Cowpie Bingo, where contestants win a hundred bucks if a heifer defecates on their numbered square in a fenced-off section on Main Street. And he insists that Mr. Detmer, who for 30 years has droned the Declaration of Independence, drop the long list of grievances against George III - or give the
Declaration a vacation.

And then Clint discovers he's 58 percent Hispanic. No longer Norwegian, he need not wear those dumb knee pants or eat lutefish and pickled herring. The discovery, alas, is more alienating than liberating. Clint lingers on wrong turns and roads not taken. Like "some loner living in his camper at an abandoned farm site," Clint "inhales" dark thoughts as they float on the breeze, imagining for just a moment that he might "load up his AK-47 and hang two bandoliers over his shoulders to make a big X on his chest and hook some smoke grenades to his belt and blacken his face and head over to Lake Wobegon."

He doesn't, of course. Lake Wobegon, where all the kids are above average, has neither villains nor violence. Clint realizes - surprise! - that he should be happy because he can "sit outside, listen to the crickets, look at the stars," chat with the neighbors, keep in touch with his kids and pop popcorn with his wife. Was he right to retreat? With his flame for Pflame put out, Clint Bunsen "is locked up in a lovely memory, her arms and legs wrapped around him."

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

Copyright © 2008, The Baltimore Sun