Keillor rescues love from sentimentality

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Norbert Norlander, an octogenarian oil man from Tulsa, puts in motion the plot of "Pilgrims," Garrison Keillor's latest Lake Wobegon novel. Norbert is dying — and he's wracked with guilt. He has never made good on his promise to his mother to go to Rome and place a photograph on the grave of Cpl. August Norlander, his brother, who died there in 1944. So Norbert deputizes Margie Krebsbach, Lake Wobegon's high school English teacher, to consecrate the war hero's final resting place. He gives her $150,000 to take her husband and 10 friends on an Italian holiday.

The first Wobegon novel set on foreign soil, "Pilgrims," for better and worse, is vintage Keillor. The narrative arc — a stale marriage, a seduction, a scam, and a resolution — is pretty darn predictable. And Keillor's decision to include himself among the pilgrims is a mistake. References to "Gary" Keillor's drinking, addiction to Bach organ chorales, and his "quiet monotone murmuring on about the weather and gardening and how he once threw a tomato at his sister," are, as he himself recognizes, "false humility covering enormous self-regard."

Nonetheless, Keillor remains a masterful storyteller. Even when you can't hear his sonorous and seductive voice. Or digresses. Or opines about the (not always so) "Good War," in which tens of thousands of Americans were blown up and bayoneted "to win a rocky peninsula of no strategic importance." At his wistfully wise and bittersweet best, Keillor helps us see ourselves a little more clearly.

Keillor manages, sometimes just barely, to rescue his theme — true love in all its permutations and combinations — from the land of sentimentality. In small town Minnesota, he suggests, with just the right amount of comic exaggeration, a woman worked from a small pool of appropriate partners. If a man wasn't "an incipient drunk or child molester, she didn't dismiss him, which was the Lake Wobegon equivalent of falling in love."

That's why middle-aged Margie wonders whether Carl Krebsbach, the man in blue pajamas next to her reading yet another book about the Civil War, ever really loved her, "in the sense of searching high and low for her and crying out, 'I want to be with you for the rest of your life."

Asked on her anniversary to explain her happy marriage, Margie is able to say only that "it's a sort of miracle when two people get together." She'll soon learn an even more important, and deceptively simple, lesson. "Everybody wants more than they're entitled to," she tells her friends.

Although the other pilgrims are certainly not "idiots on parade," Margie is, alas, the only fully-realized character in the novel. But you can't help suspending disbelief to root for her.

Pilgrims: A Wobegon Romance
By Garrison Keillor
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