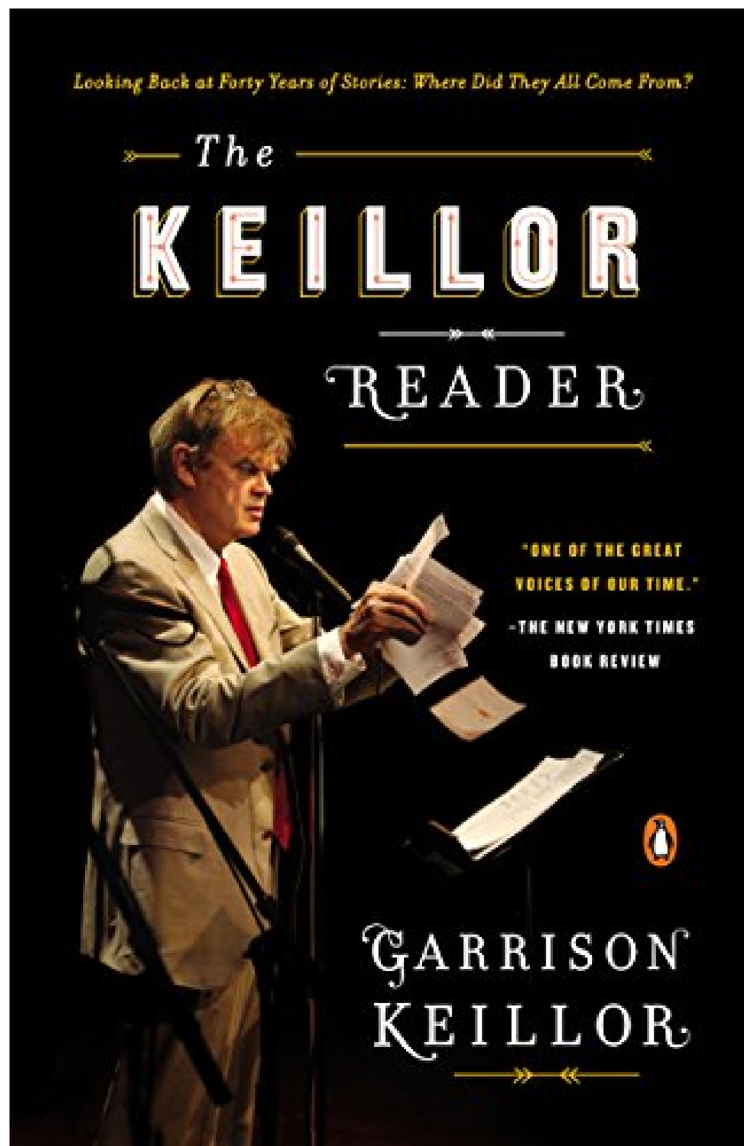
[Free download] The Keillor Reader: Looking Back at Forty Years of Stories: Where Did They All Come From?

The Keillor Reader: Looking Back at Forty Years of Stories: Where Did They All Come From?

Garrison Keillor

*audiobook | *ebooks | Download PDF | ePub | DOC*



#204036 in Books Garrison Keillor 2015-04-28 2015-04-28Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.40 x .80 x 5.50l, 1.00 #File Name: 0143127187400 pagesThe Keillor Reader Looking Back at Forty Years of Stories Where Did They All Come From | File size: 75.Mb

Garrison Keillor : The Keillor Reader: Looking Back at Forty Years of Stories: Where Did They All Come From? before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Keillor Reader: Looking Back at Forty Years of Stories: Where Did They All Come From?:

56 of 56 people found the following review helpful. The StorytellerBy woganI sat down, curled up and read this book as soon as it was put into my hands. What can one say? Some are stories I've heard before, some I haven't, some such as `Pontoon Boat' are old standards. If you enjoy Prairie Home Companion or listening and reading stories and recollections, or the Midwest this is the book for you. This is for those who love the printed word, the tangible to hold and read and reread.There are 44 stories in here, also a few photos of Garrison and mainly his mother. There is an introduction to each story, where the idea came from -what it is about.The radio show, the live appearances, (if you are fortunate enough to see them) or the CD's have their place - to listen to that sonorous voice..."It's been a quiet week in Lake Woebegone". I'm sure Garrison Keillor would scoff at being called a national treasure, but he is. He captures a time and place and most of all a spirit about a people. The people that make up this country with stories that are comforting, funny and at times poignant. They are what was and is still the heart of America.17 of 18 people found the following review helpful. A Very Welcome CompilationBy Gallura GattoI got an email Sunday night from 'A Prairie Home Companion - I am a listener to the show via repeat broadcast online - announcing publication of this book. Included was an opportunity to listen to 'Chickens' which dates from 1986. Listened laughed my head off, one-clicked my order, which instantly arrived I began reading.For those, like me, who are already fans of Garrison Keillor his long-running live radio show, or have seen Altman's film, American Radio, it won't take much urging from me to buy this book. But for any of you who might be reading this are unfamiliar with Keillor's work, here is a chance to immerse yourself in the comings goings of the inhabitants of Lake Wobegone, read his poems, his musings in pieces published in various magazines, etc. over the years. It's a marvelous very welcome compilation by a great raconteur of Americana. I put him right up there with another favorite, Mark Twain.5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. This is a "must-have" book for Keillor fans!By WordchipperI've been listening to Garrison Keillor tell stories on public radio's A Prairie Home Companion for 40 years. Like millions of his fans, I never tire of the yarns the sage of Minnesota, America's modern day Mark Twain, weaves every week. His books have all been winners and so is this new one. I bought it for my Kindle PaperWhite.Some of stories you may have heard before if you're as great a Keillor fan as I am. However, the "Old Scout" adds prefaces to previous published or aired material explaining when and/or where each tale was created. Despite having read nearly all of his books and listened to countless monologues on "A Prairie Home Companion," these renditions seem fresh and remain forever funny. Much is new, particularly when he goes into memoir mode.I always wondered how Keillor prepares his weekly monologue. He shares his technique and other behind-the-scenes detail, giving the book an autobiographical feel. As you read this auto-biographical anthology, anyone around you will wonder what's causing your belly laughs.

Stories, monologues, and essays by Garrison Keillor, founder and host of A Prairie Home CompanionThe first retrospective from New York Times bestselling author Garrison Keillor celebrates the humor and wisdom of this master storyteller. With an introduction and headnotes by the author, along with accompanying photographs and memorabilia, The Keillor Reader brings together a full range of Keillors work. Included are the Pontoon monologue, in which twenty-four Lutheran pastors capsize a boat as a parasail and hot-air balloon maneuver above; the Alaska adventures of professional wrestler Jimmy Big Boy Valenti; a new version of Casey at the Bat; an imaginative memoir of life at the New Yorker; and a set of precepts for life, What Have We Learned So Far?

Praise for The Keillor Reader: Our bard of small-town melancholy and nostalgia . . . Keillor is terrific, as always, at describing mans ability to wince in the face of hardship or boredom. Also winning in this book are the behind-the-scenes glimpses that Keillor gives us of A Prairie Home Companion . . . one is moved to beam back at Keillor the amount of charity he has beamed at all his characters.The New York Times Wry, wistful, nostalgic . . . by turns cheerful and fatalistic, homespun and outrageous.Chicago TribuneKeillor spin[s] his entire life experience into tales that may be fantastical but are always . . . true to life . . . honoring it, in all its wild permutations and possibilities. . . . This gem of a book will resuscitate you.Minneapolis StarTribuneWhat really appeal[s] about Garrison's work[s] . . . is that they're so human . . . so wonderfully specific and funny that they become universal, and manage to move across generations. MinnPostHeir to Mark Twain, James Thurber and E. B. White, Keillor offers more than laconic, sometimes-rueful, reports from the fictional Midwestern town of Lake Wobegon. Besides selectedPrairie Home Companionmonologueswritten in an adrenaline rush on the morning of each showthis collection contains poetry, fiction and assorted essays, each introduced by autobiographical musings. . . . Lovely.Kirkus s Praise for Garrison Keillor: Keillor is very clearly a genius. His range and stamina alone are incredibleafter 30 years, he rarely repeats himselfand he has the genuine wisdom of a Cosby or Mark Twain. He's consistently funny about Midwestern fatalism . . . and he's a masterful storyteller. Sam Anderson, Slate "Keillor has always been a great cataloger, equal parts Homer and Montgomery Ward, . . . as aware of life's betrayals and griefs as [he] is of the grace notes and buffooneries that leaven everyday existence. Keillor's Lake Wobegon books have become a set of synoptic gospels, full of wistfulness and futility yet somehow spangled with hope." Thomas Mallon, New York Times Book "A literary cartographer would find it necessary to trace, in forceful blue lines, tributary streams running from Mark Twain and Sherwood Anderson to the Wobegonian river of stories and novels that has issued from Garrison Keillor for more than 20 years."

Chicago TribuneAbout the AuthorGarrison Keilloris the founder and host of A Prairie Home Companion, author of nineteen books of fiction and humor, and editor of the Good Poems collections. A Minnesota native, he lives in St. Paul and New York City.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.***This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected proof.***Copyright 2014 by Garrison KeillorIntroductionWhen I was twenty and something of a romantic, I considered dying young and becoming immortal like Buddy Holly (twenty-two), James Dean (twenty-four), and Janis Joplin (twenty-seven) so that people could place bouquets on my grave and think what a shame it was that I never fully realized my enormous talent. But I didnt have enormous talent. Some people believed I did because I wrote poems and was shy, didnt make eye contact, kept to myself. (Nowadays youd say high-functioning end of the autism spectrum, but back in the day oddity was interpreted differently.). Anyway, death didnt occur. I never needed to charter a plane in a snowstorm as Buddy did, and a car like James Deans Porsche 550 Spyder was way beyond my means, and heroin was not readily available in Anoka, Minnesota, so onward I went. I had a lot to think about other than immortalitysex, of course, and how to avoid going to Vietnam and dying young in a stupid war, and then I started a radio show called A Prairie Home Companion, which ate up all my timea man has to work awfully hard to make up for lack of talentand suddenly I was forty, which is too old to die young, so I forgot about it and headed down the long dirt road of longevity, and thus arrived at seventy, when I took time to sit down and read my own work and see what is what.I started out with No. 2 pencil and pads of paper, then acquired an Underwood manual typewriter with a faint f and a misshapen O. You had to poke the keys hard to make an impression. I set it on a maple desk in my bedroom, which looked out onto a cornfield across the road, and I wrote stories about tortured loners who stood at a distance from the crowd and observed their comings and goings with envy tinged with contempt. Or contempt tinged with envy. My parents did not encourage literary aspirations: I was the third of six children of John and Grace, a young Sanctified Brethren couple in Anoka, Minnesota, on the Mississippi, a farm boy and a city girl who eloped and married secretly against opposition from both their families. We have a premarital picture of them on a summer day in a backyard in Minneapolis, looking very dreamy. The Brethren did not read novels or poetry and were wary of history, except what was in Scripture, but they offered a rich supply of contempt. They were the Faithful Remnant, maintaining the pure flame of Gods Word abandoned by the rest of Christianity. I grew up along the river in Brooklyn Park township, where we moved in 1947 into a house Dad built on an acre lot with room for a big garden. All around us were vegetable farms, fields of corn, peas, onions, potatoes. My brother and sister and I attended Benson School, a handsome three-room country school, where I had Estelle Shaver and Fern Moehlenbrock for teachers. In first grade, I was slow to read, and Miss Shaver kept me after school to read aloud to her, which she made me believe was not for my sake, but for hers, to keep her company as she graded papers. She said to Bill the janitor, Listen to him, doesnt he have a lovely voice. In time, I turned into a bookworm and a good speller. At age eleven, after I dropped an easy fly ball during recess, I asked Miss Moehlenbrocks permission to spend recess in the library, reading history books, a turning point in my life. Instead of vying for the respect of other boys, I sought out the company of old uncles and asked them about the war and the thirties and why did Grandpa Denham come over from Scotland in 1905 and why did Grandpa Keillor come down from New Brunswick in 1880? The old uncles were very grateful for a boys interest. All I had to do was ask a few questions and sit and listen. They thought I was definitely gifted. It was so much easier to ingratiate myself with them than to impress my peers. My peers thought I was strange. I didnt mind. I won the class spelling bee that spring, beating out Billy Pedersen on the word veracity.The summer before eighth grade, I walked into the office of the Anoka Herald, a down-at-the-heels weekly around the corner from the junior high, and asked the editor, Warren Feist, if I could write sports for him, assuming hed laugh and say no. It was an act of reckless bravery by a fearful young man, and Mr. Feist was very kind. He smiled and said, Sure. So I got to sit in the press box at football games, high above the crowd, and look reporterly as I took extensive notes on each play. Back at the officethirteen years old, I had an officeWhitey and Russ sat at the keyboards of their monster Linotype machines, with a little flame in back keeping the melted lead hot. Line by line, they clattered away at the stories, pulling the lever that poured the hot lead into the mold to make a slug. I banged out my stories and handed the yellow copy paper to Russ, who typeset them. He and Whitey were both heavy drinkers, pasty-faced with purple noses, and the paper languished in the shadow of the competing County Union. But I was thrilled to be there. Mr. Feist edited my stories gently, removing paragraphs of crowd description, drawing out the action on the field. The Herald was printed on Wednesday afternoon and I made a point to be there to watch. Whitey stood on a platform over the flatbed press and, though he was drunk, he could take a sheet of paper the size of a cafeteria table, shake it loose from the stack, and then flip it up and onto the flatbed, where the roller rolled over it with a whump and a shwoosh and the folder cut and trimmed and folded it, and a copy of the Herald slid down the chute with the sports page and my name, my story about the Anoka Tornadoes ready to be read by dozens, if not hundreds, of subscribers, men and women in kitchens all over Anoka absorbed in my account of the game. It was thrilling then and still is, years later, seeing your own words in print.My parents were dismayed by newspapering. My mother said that writers were a bunch of drunks, meaning F. Scott Fitzgerald. As a young woman, she had lived near his old neighborhood in St. Paul and heard stories. She also knew that Hemingway, Faulkner, ONeill, Tennessee Williams, and Dylan Thomas all drank a lot. People went to Thomass readings to see if he could remain standing and not drop a cigarette down his pants and set himself on fire. She had

read about that somewhere.As Sanctified Brethren born and bred, they were not sympathetic to the writing life. They cleaved to the literal truth of Holy Scripture and pored over the Word, trying to discern the Lords Will. That was the writing that mattered and everything else was vanity and horsefeathers. The Lord wanted us to be watchful, waiting for His Glorious Return, not making up stories. We sat in the Gospel Hall on Fourteenth Avenue South in Minneapolis, perusing Deuteronomy, led by my Uncle Don, who felt that Gods instructions to the Jews wandering in the wilderness had relevance for us. The Bible was awfully exciting to read if you believed it was entirely trueas great literature, it was not bad, but as revelation, it was a wild ride. I was a devout young man, at least in my own heart, and asked to be baptized when I was fourteen, and waded out into the waters with Brother John Rogers as the Brethren sang a hymn. When I was twenty, I abandoned them. I thought that probably they were right, that it was sinful to want to be a writer, but I wanted to do it anyway. It was all I really wanted. A good Christian was supposed to sacrifice his desires to the Lord. I chose not to.In 1960 I went off to be an English major at the University of Minnesota, where John Berryman, James Wright, and Allen Tate taught. My parents were not pleased, but I didnt ask for their help and so they had no say about it. I owned three cardboard boxes of stuff including a Websters Third Unabridged and an Underwood typewriter. Hiking around campus in blue jeans, white shirt, corduroy jacket with elbow patches, Red Wing work boots, and a broad-brimmed hat, with a pack of Camels or Marlboros in my pocket, I felt obliged to smoke at least one pack of cigarettes every day, two if I could afford them, and drink coffee by the gallon, because thats what writers do. Back then, a cup of coffee was two bits, a pack of smokes cost 35 cents, and a drink was a dollar. I supported myself by washing dishes and parking cars, both of them formative experiences. You work the morning shift in the heat and steam of the scullery and you feel clean and contented the rest of the day. You stand on a gravel parking lot on the high bluff of the Mississippi, the wintry blast sweeping down the valley, and you direct a stream of cars to their correct spots in straight lines, tolerating no dissent or diversion, stomping out individual preference wherever it occurs, and you discover the fascist storm trooper within yourself. Good to know ones own capacity.Mr. Tate was sixty-eight when I took his poetry seminar. A slim, elegant man with a Southern patrician accenta pal of Robert Penn Warren and Hart Cranehe chain-smoked in class, so we did, too. The whole English Department reeked of tobacco smoke and was proudly alcoholic anyone who wasnt was considered an interloper, possibly a Mormon. James Wright chain-smoked through his lectures on Dickens and Whitman, which he delivered through a haze of hangover. He always looked pale and haggard. His line Suddenly I realize that if I stepped out of my body, I would break into blossom was written by a man with smoke coming out of his mouth.My hero, Saul Bellow (The Adventures of Augie March), had recently taught at the U and I liked hearing about him from his pal, my advisor, Joe Kwiat, a big, hearty guy with a great bark of a voice. Snowy-haired Robert Frost came and filled Northrup Auditorium, 4,700 seats, and recited his greatest hits by heart. I was in a crowd of students who stood by the back door and watched him emerge and shuffle down the walk and climb into his limousine. Our great drunken genius was John Berryman, the poet and wildly brilliant lecturer, a man of such towering intellect that I was afraid to be in the same room with himone caustic word, even a disapproving glance, and I wouldve gone up in flames. He wore a big beard that made him look like he was eating his sweater. He gave readings of his Dream Songs at which his speech was slurred, he slumped against the lectern, lurching into flights of reminiscence, muttering asides to friends in the audience, a man on the verge of collapse. His greatness and his affliction seemed intertwined, a true artist engaging with dark forces in his own body in full public view. Fate had driven him to this condition, just as it had driven him to create poetry, and he could no more give up one than he could stifle the other. And I, fearful of embarrassing myself in public, was clearly incapable of this greatness.If the true sign of brilliance is to be seriously screwed up, stalked by livid demons, fatally wounded, then I was, compared to Berryman, a dullard and a dolt. My dad had not committed suicide with a shotgun outside my bedroom window when I was twelve. Berrymans had. Mine simply worked hard. My boyhood may have appeared strict and narrowno dancing, drinking, smoking, moviegoing, card playing, no rough talk or profanitybut my Brethren were people of great kindness, most of them related to me. I was quite at home among them.So I accepted that I would never be a true artist and that my future lay in being amusing. For the campus literary magazine, The Ivory Tower, I wrote stuff that owed much to Benchley and Thurber, A. J. Liebling and E. B. White. My journalism teacher, Bob Lindsay, encouraged this. He was a Marine Corps captaina veteran of two wars, his bald head had a noticeable dent in it, as if a mortar shell had bounced off itand he was a no-nonsense teacher. In his class, one spelling mistake on a writing assignment, no matter how elegant, earned you an F. We were horrified to hear this. But we learned to copyread, a skill that sticks with you for life. Mr. Lindsays office was on the first floor of Murphy Hall, and whenever I walked down the hall, I slowed down, and if his door was open and he didnt have a visitor, I stuck my head in. He was brusque, not given to b.s., and when he said I should try to catch on at The New Yorker, that was pure gold. And then, unbeknownst to me, he sent the magazine a few pieces of mine from the Tower and a letter attesting to my good character.I had not told him that I had written to my draft board and said I would not report for induction into the U.S. Army, as Id been ordered to do. Vietnam was on every young mans mind and I waited for the FBI to knock on my door and they didnt. Evidently someone at the draft board office stuck my file in a dark place and thereby put herself in dangerit is a felony to conceal or otherwise impair the availability of a governmental recordand whoever did that deed was braver than I. I owe her a large debt and wish I knew who she is.In 1966, I spent July and August in New York, holed up in a boarding-house on

West Nineteethth Street in a poor Hispanic neighborhood near the Episcopal seminary, and thought about staying permanently. The boardinghouse was cheap: breakfast and dinner along with a room for $75 a week. The clientele was about half recent patients from mental hospitals, doped up on Thorazine, a quiet bunch, who sat in the garden under ailanthus trees listening to the nuns in a nearby convent chanting in Spanish. I was supposed to marry a girl in September, a big wedding in a Methodist church with four bridesmaids in bronze taffeta and country-club receptionit was all plannedand I wanted to escape. I felt like a jerk, abandoning her and her family, who had been so good to me, but I was hearing warning bellsthere was a large vacancy between her and me. New York seemed like a good move, what with marriage and the FBI way on my trail. I knew an artist named Irving who drove a cab by night and shot photographs by day, and I hung out with him. He was screwed up, as a true artist should be, he dropped acid, smoked dope, and lived in a one-bedroom fourth-floor walk-up on the Lower East Side with his wife and two baby girls in such poverty as I knew I hadnt the strength of character to endure. Tiny dim rooms, summer heat, city clangor, sink full of dirty dishes, weeping infants, a bitter wife. New York was a dark swamp where a man could walk deeper and deeper into the muck and disappear and nobody would notice. But what was waiting for me back in Minnesota? I tried to write a piece for The New Yorker that romanticized life on Nineteenth Street as operatic, flamboyant, exotic, people yelling at each other in Spanish, and took it to their offices on West Forty-third, where a very nice woman named Patricia Mosher read it and told me to keep in touch. I took a bus to Boston to interview at the Atlantic. An overnight bus, to save on hotel. Got to the Atlantic office on Arlington Street an hour early and went to the mens toilet, stood at the sink, took off my shirt, and sort of bathed and dried myself with paper towels, and a man in a suit came in, stood at the urinal, and made a point of not looking at me. He, as it turned out, was the man who would be interviewing me. It was a brief interview and I was not told to keep in touch. I rode the Greyhound back to Minnesota and got married. The next year, Irving jumped out the window and killed himself.In 1969, I sent some stories to The New Yorker and one was bought off the slush pile by Roger Angell, who became my editor, and I moved my family to a rented farmhouse south of Freeport, Minnesota, in German Catholic country. The magazine paid around $1,000 a story, and our rent was $80 a month, not including heat and light. I sent off two or three stories a month and if they bought one, we were on Easy Street. It was a luxurious life for a writer, not so good for the writers wife and infant child, isolated among clannish country people suspicious of strangers. Sweden might have been better, or Bulgaria. I wrote in an upstairs bedroom on my Underwood typewriter on a slab of -inch plywood set on two filing cabinets, my back to a window looking out on the farmyard, the barn, the cattle milling in the feedlot, the silo, the granary, the pig barn, the woods beyond. I found that I could sit and look at a piece of writing for hours at a time and not get twitchy, a skill I had picked up in Brethren Bible study, and I was a good rewriter. Day after peaceful day, visitors on weekends, the occasional big check and encouraging letter from West Forty-third Street. My wife slipped into depression; she spent whole days hardly able to speak. We moved back to the city for her sake and I took a job at Minnesota Public Radio, the six to nine a.m. shift, played records and created a cheery on-air persona, the Old Scout, who rallied listeners to rise and shine and face the day with a smile. It was a good persona. I even started to believe in it myself. I was in an awkward marriage, I was absurdly self-conscious and timid and eager to please and arrogant, all at the same time, but I was lucky. On that early morning shift, I invented a town where the women are strong, the men are good-looking, and the children are all above average. Businesses in that town advertised on my showJacks Auto Repair, Bobs Bank, Bunsen Motors, Berthas Kitty Boutique, the Chatterbox Caf, the Sidetrack Tap, Skoglunds Five Dime, the Mercantileand I talked about the women, men, and children, and that town, Lake Wobegon, became my magnum opus, unintentionally. I just sort of slid into it, like youd go for a walk in the woods and fall into a crevasse and wind up in a cave full of rubies and emeralds. I labored in obscurity for the first few years, and then Will Jones, the entertainment columnist of The Minneapolis Tribune, wrote a big warm embrace of a story and that was the beginning of many good things. Will was an Ohioan and admired James Thurber, thought Lake Wobegon was Thurberesque, and his kind words in print were intoxicating.In 1974, after writing a fact piece for the magazine about the Grand Ole Opry, I started up A Prairie Home Companion on Saturday evenings, a live variety show with room for a long monologue by me (It has been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon. . . .), and found steady colleagues who did most of the work, starting with my boss, Bill Kling, and the producer, Margaret Moos, the engineer, Lynne Cruise, Tom Keith, Bill Hinkley, and Judy Larson, and down to the present day, Sam Hudson, Kate Gustafson, Richard Dworsky, Tim Russell, Sue Scott, and Fred Newman, not to mention fabulous guests, tech guys, good stagehands, and so we sail the ocean blue in pursuit of truth and beauty, sober men and true, attentive to our duty.Life can be good when you finally grow up. You find steady work you enjoy, buy a car that starts on cold mornings, look for love, sing along with the radio, beget children who nestle on your lap and put their little arms around your neck and kiss you. You mow your lawn, read history, learn to fry fish in beer batter, seek out comfortable shoes, converse with strangers on the bus. You find a hairstyle that suits you. Your taste changes, contemporary art strikes you as ditzy and you are moved by Hopper and Rockwell and Nordic painters of snowscapes. Young Sarah Songwriter only makes you wonder if she is getting enough exercise, whereas a Chopin tude carries visions of women in lamplight, the forbidden kiss, the whisper of silk, the nobility of the arts. You cross the line into your forties, the mortgage years, and the fifties, when you stand weeping at graduations and weddings, and then in the blink of an eye come your sixties and now youre on Easy Street.

You become eminent and benevolent and learn to harrumph. And then seventy. Ah, seventy. A golden age. You are full of wisdom, you have embraced moderation and humility, your work is triumphant, you pee like a Palomino pony, and your imagination is more vivid than ever before. One cant wait to turn eighty and ninety.Having once anticipated dying young, I now look back on those times when I might have and did not. The time I dashed out onto a busy freeway to retrieve a heavy mattress Id foolishly tied with twine to the roof of the car and at 65 m.p.h. physics kicked in and it blew off. While I was dragging it off the road a truck bore down on me as if I were a raccoon and blew its air horn. I heard the Doppler effect up close and the whoosh of the draft made my pant legs go whupwhupwhupwhup and blew my hair back.One summer my brother Philip and I canoed into a deep cavern in Devils Island on Lake Superior, attracted by the dancing reflections on the low cavern ceiling. We steered into a narrow passage, ducking under rocks, and he took pictures of the formations, and after awhile we paddled out, a few minutes before the wake of an ore boat a mile away came crashing into the cavern, three-foot waves that would have smashed us into the rocky ceiling like eggs in a blender. Our mangled remains wouldve floated out and been found by fishermen days or weeks latertwo twin cities men perish in boating mishapbut instead we sat in the canoe and watched the waves whopping into the cavern and said nothing, there being nothing to say. He raised his Leica and snapped a picture of the crashing waves and dropped it into the lake and it got smaller and smaller as it plummeted to the bottom.Philip died a few years ago in Madison, Wisconsin, skating on a pond near his house. He who had survived the close call in the cave on Lake Superior fell and struck the back of his head on the ice and suffered serious brain injury and died. He was an engineer, a methodical man, a problem-solver, and I imagine that even as he fell, he was analyzing his mistakehe shouldve sat down on the ice and landed on his butt rather than his head. He tried too hard to remain upright; he shouldve collapsed. His family tried to keep his funeral as light as possible. There were three funny speeches and a rollicking gospel finish, and then we stood around the hole singing hymns as the gravedigger bent down, exposing a big slice of butt crack, and lowered Philips body into the ground, and then went to supper.After we buried my brother, he became a steady, flickering presence in my life, even more so than before. He was a man who strove to get along with people and try to accept them and not scorch them with ridicule, and now I try to be more like him and less like myself.When youre in your seventies, people die all around you, at a steady rate. A high school classmate collapsed at our Fiftieth Reunion while I was at the microphone nattering and died two days later. A man died in the audience at A Prairie Home Companion in Seattle; he was old and very ill but wanted to come to the show, and during intermission he simply leaned against his wife and expired. Tom Keith, who was on the radio with me for four decades, came to a post-show party at my house, felt fine, and three days later fell down deadthe man who played Mr. Big, the jowly incomprehensible man, and did the sounds of a golf swing, a man falling off a bridge into piranha-infested waters, a 350 h.p. snowmobile driven by an orangutang over a cliff and onto the ice of Lake Superior. He was a champ.The living wander away, move to Arizona or Colombiawe dont hear from them for months, yearsbut the dead move in with us to stay. They keep busy exhorting us to greater faithfulness, forgiving us, comforting us. My mother-in-law, Marjorie OBleness, is smiling from the doorway, holding a Winston and a Rob Roy, listening to a good joke that I cannot hear. My grandmother Dora is kneading bread on the counter, whistling a tune I cant make out.I think often of John Updike, who lovingly re-created the backyards and clotheslines of the 1940s small town and described a snowstorm as an immense whispering and wrote beautifully of his father bidding him goodbye on a train platform and astonishing him by planting a kiss on the sons cheek. I last saw John on the New York subway, riding from Broadway and 155th Street to 72nd, a white-haired gent of seventy-five grinning like a schoolkid. At 110th a gang of seminarians boarded and crowded around him, chattering, not recognizing him, and he sat soaking it up, delighted, surrounded by material.The film director Robert Altman is a hero of mineshooting a movie in St. Paul though he was eighty-one and in the throes of cancer and barely mobile. He loved his work and so put his mortality aside. If you have flown a B-24 bomber, that screaming unheated boxcar of a plane, on fifty missions in the South Pacific at the age of twenty as Bob had, there is not much left to be afraid of. I remember him sitting in a canvas chair at four a.m. on the corner of Seventh and St. Peter in St. Paul, on a Sunday in July, directing a scene in which Kevin Kline gets up from a stool in Mickeys Diner and walks out the door and scratches a match on the doorframe and lights a smoke and walks across a rain-soaked street. Bob was pushing to beat the sunrise but he loved studying that walk and lighting it, angling it, instructing the man with the hose, the man in the cherry picker with the spotlight, all the while offering running commentary to his audience of grips and extras. He was a happy man who refused to be seduced into being somebody else, even in Hollywood.My movie-star handsome teacher Reed Whittemore, author of a fine poem about the enormous silence that follows after a high school marching band finishes practicing on the football field in a small town, author of a fine rant against New York (Where the best and the worst and the middle / Of our land and all others go in their days of hope to be made over / Into granite careerists), proposed that literature is a defender of the individual against society and it is also a job of work, like planting a field or building a fence. I am grateful for my own workmore now than ever, the pleasure of scratching away on paper. I sit in my office and look up at a photograph over the fireplace of the old schoolhouse. He had been a carpenter in the shipyards of New Brunswick and came to Minnesota in 1880 to help out his sister Mary, whose husband was terribly sick, and soon after James arrived, the husband died of tuberculosis, leaving Mary with three small children and a 160-acre homestead. So James stayed on.

One spring day in 1902, about the time her children were raised, he walked across the road to speak to the schoolteacher, Dora Powell. He was forty-two, a farmer, and she was twenty-two, a lovely slip of a girl from Iowa. He had a strong tenor voice and knew many songs by heart and he always had a book with him and people often saw him reading while driving a team into town or sitting on a mower, cutting hay, reins in one hand and book in the other. We dont know what happened in the schoolhouse that afternoon, but when they emerged, she had agreed to marry him, and thus they became my grandfather and grandmother. They drove to St. Francis to be married by a judge and when they arrived home, James was so enthused, he forgot to unhitch the horses and they stood all night in the farmyard, their reins hanging down to the ground. He took Dora in his arms and carried her upstairs, a ritual he continued until he got old and feeble. In later years, the Brethren met in the schoolhouse and I sat with them and listened to their long silences, the ticking of the old Regulator wall clock, their prayers, the soulful drone of their hymns, and imagined my grandma, who was then almost seventy, as a young schoolteacher, very proper, hair tied up in a coil of braid, being urgently courted by the farmer from across the road. And now I am her age and the schoolhouse looks down from the wall. It is 1902, and she sees him cross the road, a handsome man with a full moustache, and he walks into her schoolroom and she sees that he has combed his hair and put on a cologne. He stands by her desk and talks about the weather and she sees his discomfort and guesses what he has come to do and she says, Im glad you came over because Ive been meaning to say goodbye. When the school term ends, I plan to go back to Iowa. And I want to bake you a pie to thank you for those times you came over here and lit a fire in the stove and warmed up the place before I got here, and I need to know what kind of pie you like, apple or blueberry. That is as far as she can go, and now it is his turn to say that he wishes she would not leave, that he would miss her, that he has taken a shine to her, that he has wanted to kiss her for several months now and didnt know how to manage it. She does not blink. They gaze on each other, not smiling, not frowning, and then he takes a step toward her and bends and kisses her. And kisses her again. He is forty-two and still innocent, locked up in loyalty to his sisters family, now free. His life is about to begin. He has thirty years left on this earth. He died before I was born. My father believed that he would meet his parents in heaven and recognize them, but Scripture doesnt say that. I can only meet my grandfather in imagination and there he is, wrapped up in a heavy jacket, frost on his moustache, enjoying his work.