

Garrison Keillor, for me, ranks high among American masters of spoken language. I put him up there with Mark Twain though not, of course, as a writer. Keillor's command of the story and the anecdote strikes me as superb, so much so that I love to listen to at least parts of his radio show.

Better than that, last evening I had the chance to hear him and to see him up close. That happened in the Unitarian church in Harvard Square. Sitting in the second row, I could watch his every move and listen carefully to his speaking and singing. Yes, he not only sang himself but coaxed the large audience to join him in hymns and other songs.

Keillor is much taller than I had realized. At six-four he stands high and makes his presence felt. At age 71 he is no longer young but has attained what he terms "the scriptural three-score-and-ten. So along with his humor, he does display a kind of wisdom about life.

I enjoyed the many limericks he recited from memory. And his stories about growing up were entertaining. He claims to have sent word to a monastery in Iowa asking for admission. Fortunately, he received no reply so enrolled in the University of Minnesota which nurtured his writing skills.

Taking the opportunity of being in the front I was one of those who asked him a question. I expressed pleasure at his account of becoming a newspaper reporter and told him I had long ago been a copy boy at the Boston Globe. Did he think newspapers would survive, I asked?

Yes, he believed strongly in their importance to society and felt confident they would endure. This response evoked applause from the large audience.

Another person asked if Garrison experiences writer's block. No, he said, never. That's because, in his view, what a writer does is write. You don't find a dentist feeling dentist block, he said.

At the end of the presentation we sang again (not tuneless I, that would have been blasphemy). Then people formed a long line that snaked through the length of the church while he, standing, autographed the his new book of poems.

An evening to be remembered.