

MICHAEL PERRY

Sharing Wisconsin's originals with the rest of the world

BY LISA SCHMELZ

From his northwestern Wisconsin farm, bestselling author Michael Perry writes the words that create the memoirs that make so many of us want to raise chickens and pigs, plant a few rows of corn or otherwise just make hay. Mostly, though, he makes us want to get to know our neighbors better — no matter where we live.

The people who populate his books — be they a cross-eyed butcher or an octogenarian who makes and fires his own cannons — are reminders that everyone has a story to share if only we'd pay attention. Fortunately for us, Perry is.

"I feel like a lucky knucklehead. I stumbled into this writing thing," says Perry. "I never set out to do this, and to be able to do this in the place I'm more comfortable in than anyplace else in the world makes me even luckier."

His journey to publishing certainly wasn't traditional. He graduated from nursing school at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire in 1987, worked for a while as a registered nurse, and then followed his heart into the writer's life. Like most freelancers, his resume is expansive. Before HarperCollins came calling and essays in *Esquire*, *The New York Times Magazine* and *Men's Health* were a regular gig, he ran a forklift, worked as a proofreader, answered a suicide hotline, and toiled as a Country music roadie in Switzerland.

Ultimately Perry's long and winding road led him back to Wisconsin, where his work evolves with his life. As a bachelor he wrote the essays in *Off Main Street*, off-beat reporting at its best and a must-read for anyone who's had a kidney stone or wanted to tell off the Ku Klux Klan. His critically acclaimed memoir, *Population 485: Meeting Your Neighbors One Siren at a Time*, is a narrative of his adventures as a volunteer firefighter. *Truck: A Love Story*, really is equal parts love and truck. *Coop: A Family, a Farm and the Pursuit Of One Good Egg*, is all those words and more. Married with two daughters, he balances all that sitting down and typing with farm chores, performing with his band, The Long Beds, and as a host for Tent Show Radio at Big Top Chatauqua.

His latest book, *Visiting Tom: A Man, A Highway, and the Road to Roughneck Grace*, chronicles the life and times of his cannon-making neighbor, Tom Hartwig, an 82-year-old who still welds and whose only immortalization requirement was a name change.

"What I enjoy more about this one," Perry says of the book, "is it focuses more on someone else, my neighbor Tom, and how much you can learn about someone just by being their neighbor."



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OFF THE BEATEN PATH WITH MICHAEL PERRY

Want to live like a Wisconsin volunteer firefighter/amateur pig farmer/celebrated writer? Then get off the interstate and check out Michael Perry's Wisconsin must-sees.

Anywhere small – Drive into any town under 1,000 and eat at the cafe and just listen. Don't try to act like you belong there because they know you don't. Just listen.

The Bohemian Ovens in Bloomer – If you just sit there and eat, you'll get the small town feel. Often there's a table of older fellows, opinionating and shooting the breeze. They're known as the Bloomer mafia.

ChaliceStream Dance Studio in Ladysmith – I write about Mike (Doran) and Barry (Lynn) in a couple of my books. Barry is in his mid 90s and had total knee replacement so he could keep dancing. They have an old converted barn in Rusk County that's used as a dance studio and for performances. It's just a wonderful surprise.

For more information on Michael Perry and his upcoming appearances, visit sneezingcow.com