"Part portrait of a place, part rescue manual, part rumination on life and death, *Population: 485* is a beautiful meditation on the things that matter."
—*Seattle Times*

Population: 485

Meeting Your Neighbors One Siren at a Time

Michael Perry

Author of *Truck: A Love Story*

P.S.
INSIGHTS, INTERVIEWS & MORE...

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MICHAEL PERRY

HARPER PERENNIAL

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

This is a work of nonfiction. In some instances, names, locations, and other identifying details have been changed to protect individual privacy.

HARPER PERENNIAL

The excerpt from Frank Stanford's "Blue Yodel of the Lost Child" on pages 231–32 appears by the kind permission of Ginny Stanford.

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Praise for *Population: 485*

"Swells with unadorned heroism. He's the real thing." —*USA Today*

"In the best tradition of books that pay quiet homage to community service, place, and the men and women who live there. A perfectly pitched celebration of small-town life." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"This is a quietly devastating book—intimate and disarming and lovely."
—Adrienne Miller, *Esquire*

"I have been waiting for thirty years for a fresh and talented voice to rise out of the volunteer fire service in America, and finally it has arrived in Michael Perry's *Population: 485*. Perry is a firefighter/EMT and he makes you feel you are responding right along with him to fires, auto wrecks, even suicides, and his hard work is told with the thoughtfulness and gracefulness of a first responder who cares about people, his town, our country, and the world we live in. But this is more than a book about a small-town fire department. It is a literary venture told on the cusp of service to his community—all written with a soft human touch by an intuitive writer with a distinctive and refined American style. Firefighters and EMTs will be talking about this book for a long time to come. And so will all readers who have a love for American literature. This is a small-town story in the big tradition of Sherwood Anderson and James Agee."
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"My heart goes out to anybody who knows—and writes as well as Michael Perry does—about rural small-town life. His book is often funny, sometimes heartbreaking, but always full of life, characters, and the tangled web of small-town history, daily drama, and strain of occasional weirdness that make country living such a challenge and an adventure. New Auburn, Wisconsin, sounds a lot like Pleasant Valley, New York, except colder in the winter, so I felt immediately at home reading *Population: 485*. If there's one thing I admire more than a man who can go home again, and does, and happily, it's a volunteer firefighter. Mr. Perry's account of firefighting is scary, inspiring, and renews my gratitude toward our own, to whom I owe much. He has written a joy of a book, as gnarly, stubborn, courageous, and full of eccentricity in all its forms as country life itself." —Michael Korda

"Minnesota has Garrison Keillor . . . neighboring Wisconsin has Michael Perry. If you read one nonfiction title this autumn, make it this one. It's that good." —*Sunday Oklahoman*

"*Population: 485* is bound to be one of the best nonfiction books of the year. . . . Filled with moments of tenderness, humor, and just plain goofiness as it takes us into the lives and homes of the inhabitants of one small town. . . . Makes for riveting reading."
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"Part portrait of a place, part rescue manual, part rumination of life and death, *Population: 485* is a beautiful meditation on the things that matter." —*Seattle Times*

"Finely crafted, hard-to-come-by honesty." —*Hope* magazine

"With self-effacing humor, stellar wit, and phenomenal writing, Perry gives an intelligent, articulate voice to small-towners. . . . Powerful, engaging, and often hilarious." —*The Phantom Tollbooth*

"Somewhere between Garrison Keillor's idyllic, sweet *Lake Wobegon* and the narrow-mindedness of Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* lies the reality of small-town life. This is where Michael Perry lives."
—*St. Paul Pioneer Press*

"May simply be the best book about small-town life ever written."
—*Wisconsin State Journal*

"Humorous, poignant." —*Chicago Tribune*

"A remarkable new book, sometimes comic—sometimes sad."
—*Los Angeles Times*

Population: 485

Also by Michael Perry

Truck: A Love Story

Off Main Street

Big Rigs, Elvis & the Grand Dragon Wayne

Why They Killed Big Boy . . . and Other Stories

Never Stand Behind a Sneezing Cow (CD)

I Got It from the Cows (CD)

For J. & S.

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. . . the volunteers everywhere, and to the professionals who do it every day, setting the bar for us amateurs.

. . . the memory of Robert Jones and Waylon Jennings.

If I missed you, drop by. But do announce yerself. . . .

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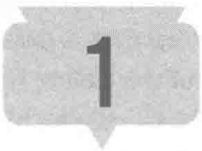

Jabowski's Corner

We are in trouble down here. There is blood in the dirt. We have made our call for help. Now we look to the sky.

Summer here comes on like a zaftig hippie chick, jazzed on chlorophyll and flinging fistfuls of butterflies to the sun. The swamps grow spongy and pungent. Standing water goes warm and soupy, clotted with frog eggs and twitching with larvae. Along the ditches, heron-legged stalks of canary grass shoot six feet high and unfurl seed plumes. In the fields, the clover pops its blooms and corn trembles for the sky.

If you were approaching from the sky, you would see farmland neatly delineated by tilled squares and irrigated circles. The forests, mostly hardwoods and new-growth pine, butt up against fields, terminating abruptly, squared off at fence lines. The swamps and wetlands, on the other hand, respect no such boundaries, and simply meander the lay of the land, spreading organically in fecund hundred-

acre stains. The whole works is done up in an infinite palette of greens.

There is a road below, a slim strip of county two-lane, where the faded blacktop runs east-west, then bends—at Jabowski's Corner—like an elbow. In the crook of the elbow, right in the space where you would cradle a baby, is a clot of people. My mother is there, and my sister, and several volunteer firefighters, and I have just joined them, and we are all on our knees, kneeling in a ring around a young girl who has been horribly injured in a car wreck. She is crying out, and we are doing what we can, but she feels death pressing at her chest. She tells us this, and we deny it, tell her no, no, help is on the way.

I do my writing in a tiny bedroom overlooking Main Street in the village of New Auburn, Wisconsin. Population: 485. Eleven streets. One four-legged silver water tower. Seasons here are extreme. We complain about the heat and brag about the cold. Summer is for stock cars and softball. Winter is for Friday-night fish fries. And snowmobiles. After a good blizzard, you'll hear their Doppler snarl all through the dark, and down at the bar, sleds will outnumber cars. In the surrounding countryside, farmsteads with little red barns have been pretty much kicked in the head, replaced with monster dairies, turkey sheds, and vinyl-sided prefabs. The farmers who came to town to grind feed and grumble in the café have faded away. The grand old buildings are gone. There is a sense of decline. Or worse, of dormancy in the wake of decline. But we are not dead here. We still have our Friday-night football games. Polka dances. Bowling. If you know who to ask, you can still get yourself some moonshine, although methamphetamine has become the favored homebrew. Every day, the village dogs howl at the train that rumbles through town, and I like to think they are echoing their ancestors, howling at that first train when it stopped here in 1883. Maybe that's all you need to know about this town—the train doesn't stop here anymore.

Mostly I write at night, when most of this wee town—except for

the one-man night shift at the plastics factory, and the most dedicated drinkers, and the mothers with colicky babies, and the odd insomniac widower, and the young couples tossing and turning over charge card balances and home pregnancy tests—is asleep. This is my hometown, and in these early hours, when time is gathering itself, I can kill the lights, crack the blinds, and, looking down on Main Street, see the ghost of my teenage self, snake-dancing beneath the streetlight, celebrating some football game twenty years gone. I was a farm boy then, rarely in town for anything other than school activities. I didn't see Main Street unless I was in a parade or on a school bus.

But now Main Street is in my front yard. On a May evening nineteen years ago I walked out of the school gym in a blue gown and left this place. Now I have returned, to a house I remember only from the perspective of a school bus seat. In a place from the past, I am looking for a place in the present. This, as they say, is where my roots are. The trick is in reattaching. About a month after I moved back, I dropped by the monthly meeting of the volunteer fire department.

The New Auburn fire department was formed in 1905. The little village was just thirty years old, but it had already seen its share of change. The sawmill that spawned the settlement ran out of pine trees and shut down before the turn of the century. Forests gave way to farmland and New Auburn became a potato shipping center. Large, hutlike charcoal kilns sprang up beside the rail depot. In time, the village has been home to a wagon wheel factory, a brick factory, and a pickle factory. There was always something coming and going. But then, in 1974, the state converted the two lanes of Highway 53 to four lanes and routed them west of town, and the coming and going pretty much went. We have a gas station, two cafés, a couple of bars, and a handful of small businesses, but the closest thing to industry is the plastics factory, which employs two men per shift, rolling plastic pellets into plastic picnic table covers. Most of the steady work, the good-paying stuff, is thirty or forty miles away. During the day, the streets are still. It is from this shal-

low pool that the community must skim its firefighters. If we get a fire call during a weekday, we are likely to have more fire trucks than volunteer firefighters to drive them.

During that first meeting, a motion was made and seconded to consider my application as a member. The motion carried on a voice vote, and I was admitted on probationary status. After the meeting concluded, the chief led me to the truck bay. He is a stout man, burly but friendly. By day he dispatches freight trucks. "Try on these boots," he said. "We've got a helmet around here somewhere." Someone handed me a stiff pair of old fire pants—bunkers, they're called. A farmer in a bar jacket showed me how to shift the pumper, his cigarette a singalong dot dancing from word to word. That was it. I was now a member of the NAAFD—the New Auburn Area Fire Department.

Among my fellow volunteers are a pair of butchers, two truckers, a farmer, a carpenter, a mailman, and a mother of four. A guy like me ends up on the fire department for two reasons: (a) I have a pulse, and (b) I am frequently home during the day. I've put in seven years now, and am no longer on probation. I've been to house fires, barn fires, brush fires, and car fires, and I've had enough training to tell a halligan from a hydrant wrench. When one of the old-timers sends me after a water hammer, I don't take the bait. I have attended firefighting classes at the tech school, where I learned that water hammer is a situation, not a tool. Still, my primary qualifications remain availability and a valid driver's license.

Seven years since the accident, and this is what freezes me, late at night: There was a moment—a still, horrible moment—when the car came squalling to a halt, the violent kinetics spent, and the girl was pinned in silence. One moment gravel is in the air like shrapnel, steel is tumbling, rubber tearing, glass imploding, and then . . . utter stillness. As if peace is the only answer to destruction. The meadowlark sings, the land drops away south to the hazy tamarack bowl of the Big Swamp . . . all around the land is rank with life. The girl is terribly, terribly alone in a beautiful, beautiful world.

As long as I can remember, Stanislaw Jabowski was all stove up. Foggy autumn mornings, the school bus would stop where the county road cut between his house and barn, and we'd see him stumping along the path, pails in hand, shoulders rocking side to side with his hitch-along gait. Spare, he was. Short, and lean as a tendon. A walking Joshua tree, with a posture less tribute to adversity overcome than adversity withstood.

The farm was a rock patch. And where the rocks stopped, the swamps began. It was a tough place to subsist, let alone thrive. During one nine-year stretch, when five of the ten Jabowski kids were in braces, Stanislaw worked night and swing shifts at the munitions plant in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, arranging his farm work around the full-time job. He'd feed the sheep and cows, do the milking, drive forty miles to the munitions plant, pull a full shift, drive home, and do all the chores again before sleeping. Night shift or swing shift, the cows swung with him. Somewhere in there—I can't imagine—he planted crops and put up hay and sleepwalked through the month-long twenty-four-hour-a-day grind of lambing season. I regret to report that there was a shamefully mirror-intensive period in my life in which I engaged briefly and quite ineffectively in the sport of body-building, and one of the reasons I just couldn't keep at it was because I'd watch my bulging, lubricated compadres admiring the cut of their triceps, or the belly of their biceps, and I'd think of Stanislaw Jabowski, with his bowed shoulders and little strap-iron muscles, and how, within four days of head-to-head choring and bomb-building, he would leave those baked-fish-nibbling showpieces whimpering in a damp corner of the milkhouse. Somehow, pectorals the size of beef roasts seemed pointless.

Catholics, the Jabowskis. Seven girls, three boys. And for them, Stanislaw worked himself to a nub. They were smart kids, and one pail of milk at a time, Stanislaw fed them, clothed them, and earned every one of them a chance at college—and the Pope always got his