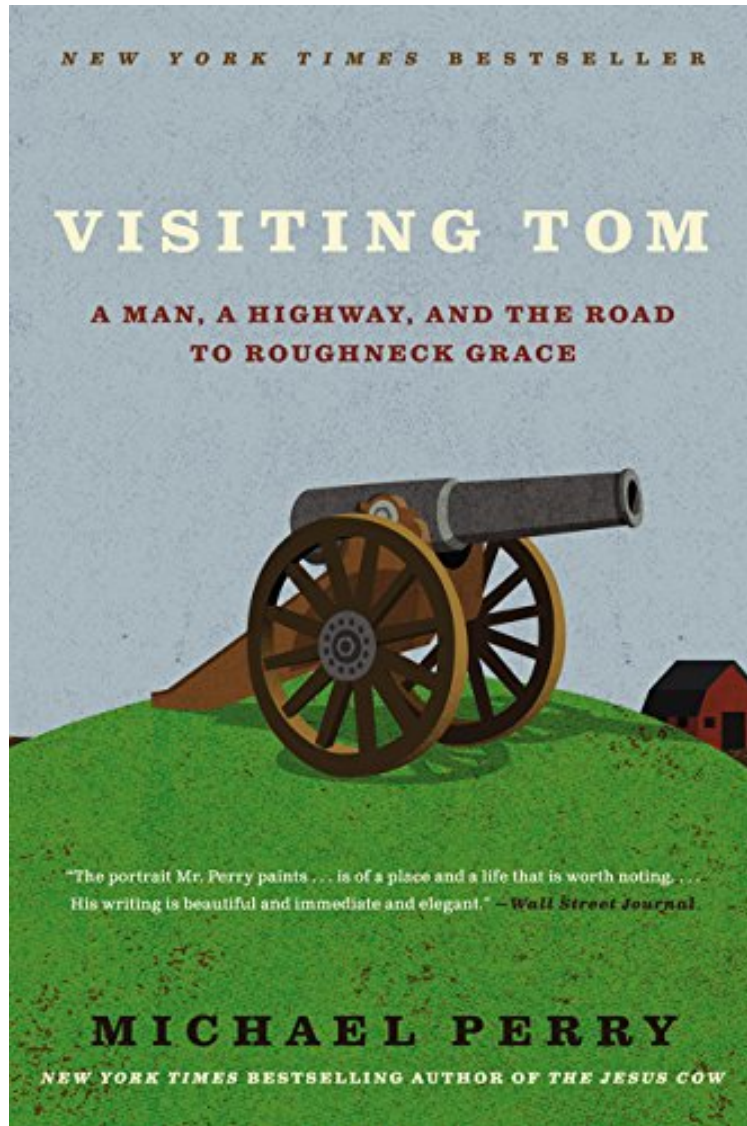


Visiting Tom: A Man, a Highway, and the Road to Roughneck Grace

Michael Perry

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Michael Perry : Visiting Tom: A Man, a Highway, and the Road to Roughneck Grace before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Visiting Tom: A Man, a Highway, and the Road to Roughneck Grace:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A Story about Real Characters Clouded by RomanticismBy ImedfordPerry's "Visiting Tom" was about what I expected after having read "Population 485" almost ten years ago.

The people depicted are real and identifiable by locals, but the romanticization of "the old ways" and life lessons are too saccharine for a story that depicts farm folks given to a more pragmatic outlook. While reading, I couldn't help but wonder what Tommy thinks or would think of the book, what Arlene would say if she were still around to offer her opinion, or the verdict of any of the other locals who appear in its pages. Of course, I do not doubt that Perry received their blessing for writing the book. My lived experience makes me cringe at the overly romantic spirit of the story rather than pick at the admirably accurate details. In full disclosure, I have met many of the people depicted in the book and know of many more through family members. My grandparents' farm is on one of the nearby roads christened with the family last name. Running the Steinke Road hill for cross country practice only one time explains why the Fall Creek team always did so much better than my team. "Farmer Jerry's" kids, now well into their careers, showed cattle with me at the Eau Claire Country Fair. I remember Tommy (as I'd always heard him called) and Arlene from childhood visits to buy honey or drop off medicine for an ailing animal. I recognize that it is easy to be a critic if one is from the area where the book is set, and so I want to be clear about my praise the accurate details and descriptions. Even with the names changes, it was easy to identify the people and places referenced. Perry's descriptions depict the places well. The road change about which Perry agonizes was big news for the people around County Road I/J -- I remember my mom getting the scoop on it from Farmer Jerry. Tommy "Hartwig" is a local living legend, known for his quiriness and brilliant ingenuity, but Perry wants too much from his character. Sometimes the author acknowledges longing for bits of wisdom, depicting Mr. "Hartwig" as an old sage, but he never really resolves the sense of longing even after he squeezes out the book's final concluding sentiments. He wants more from Hartwig in a spiritual sense than Tommy or most people have to give. It is good to have a book that captures many of the aspects of my home area that will be gone or forever changed sooner than I would like to think. However, it often misses the lessons in pragmatism and straightforwardness that characterize daily interaction there. Occasionally, Perry captures the essence of the people that I know and relates it with his characteristic humorous tone. The part truest to the Tommy I knew was Tom's affirmation that Perry was harvesting wheat by hand with his scythe "about right" and later remark that trounced Perry's nostalgia-infused pride by adding that a gas-powered weed whacker worked even better. Folks looking to remember the old days may appreciate the book. My grandpa seemed to like it. Younger people inclined to find their roots in the soil and try their hand at subsistence farming might also find the the sentiments endearing. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. NostalgicBy Barbara J. Lepkowski When I-94 was in the process of being built, we lived at my grandparent's house during that first summer, just feet away from all the construction on what was previously grandpa's farm. This story brought back so very many memories of the noise of the huge machines, the "taking" of grandpa's land and the feelings associated with that, and the construction workers, among other things. Michael's description of the opening ceremonies all along the route and the cars that now traveled that route, were very comical! And his account of the change in the country road by his home reminded me of the many accidents that occurred on the newly constructed curve on I-94 by grandpa's house, which was created by knowledgeable engineers, and ended up being changed due to an extreme number of accidents and deaths. Grandpa complained every time an accident occurred but it took a long time for the error to be rectified! Until recently, our daughter lived in Altoona by Eau Claire, so when he wrote about shopping centers going up and the sign Oakwood Mall appearing, I knew exactly of what he spoke. I've just begun reading, Population 485, and am also enjoying that, as we have relatives in New Auburn. I'm hoping one of his other books might describe his courtship of his wife, as when he writes of her and their children in Visiting Tom, he does so with much love. I'd like to learn how they met and fell in love. If he didn't write about that time in his life, perhaps a new book topic has just been suggested! UPDATE: Now read Truck and I see he did, indeed, write about his courtship and marriage. Up next: Coop. Love his writing!! 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Look Back, Hoping ForwardBy GridleyTheres a lot to say about this book, and I dont think I can say it all in a blog post. First, the serendipity: some 6-7 years ago, when I was doing a lot of driving for various reasons, the missus gave me a book on CDs - Population: 485, by this same Michael Perry. Some weeks ago, a musician friend offered to introduce me to Perry, a friend (he didnt follow up), and out of curiosity I bought this book. Only as I turned the last page did I realize this was the same Michael Perry. Back when the CD was published, the credits had perry thusly: A registered nurse and former working cowboy currently...with two rural rescue services and one fire department. The current bio has him an amateur pig farmer, still a member of the same rescue services, and a contributing editor to Mens Health. Im putting all this up front because the book, while it purports to be about one Tom Hartwig and his wife, Arlene. But as is the case with memoir, the book is more about Perry - through his relationship to the Hartwigs. The story is basically this: The Perrys and Hartwigs are neighbors in rural Wisconsin, and many years ago a highway has been built through Hartwigs property. This was in the era of massive roadbuilding in the U.S., and roadbuilding was only possible by obtaining property and rights of way through the dicey device of eminent domain, which more or less forces property owners to give up portions of their property for the greater good of things such as roads. The devices potency has since been watered down severely as building new roads has become less critical to the nations functioning. Perry empathizes with Hartwigs long-ago trauma, and there is a current fight with the state highway folks over a bad decision on a minor road used by few people. Hartwig is of the old order - a self sufficient farmer who is gaining in years. Perry is not, but he has more than a grudging admiration for Tom and Arlene and the

individualistic manner in which they've lived their lives. And the central metaphor in Perry's tale here is a cannon Tom has built and occasionally fires. The piece of artillery is similar to Civil War weaponry, which is seen to have nostalgic value to Tom and Perry. Too, Tom has made the dad-gummed thing himself, and the simulated cannonballs and powder. Yankee ingenuity - the centerpiece of this country for more than 200 years. Ah, if we could only find a way to be so individualistic these days, Perry seems to lament. But, Perry notices, Tom has changed. He still begrudges the road, but he's able to adapt to such upsets in his life. And so Perry realizes that despite his own desire to look longingly over his shoulder at the past, he must overcome upsets, too, and move on. As we write in the final pages: This is the universe suggesting that it is quite capable of absorbing my wobbles, and that if need be, it can spare the bulk of an entire galaxy to do the job. As you notice, this is more of an essay inspired by reading Perry's book, and not a book review. And that's a testament to the thoughts and emotions this book conjures in me. I'm not cut from the same cloth as Perry, who sees the past here through a romanticist's eyes, although my Southern heritage sometimes demands in a very loud voice that I pay homage to the past. My impulse is to look forward, however, and do whatever I might to prepare for a future I have no way of divining. Still, Perry and I both know that the present is where the action is, the only time, the only state of mind that matters. My rating: 18 of 20 stars

Somewhere between Garrison Keillor's idyllic-sweet Lake Wobegon and the narrow-mindedness of Sinclair Lewis' Main Street lies the reality of small-town life. This is where Michael Perry lives. St. Paul Pioneer Press Perry can take comfort in the power of his writing, his ability to pull readers from all corners onto his Wisconsin spread, and make them feel right at home. Seattle Times Tuesdays with Morrie meets Bill Bryson in *Visiting Tom*, another witty, poignant, and stylish paean to living in New Auburn, Wisconsin, from Michael Perry. The author of *Population: 485*, *Coop*, and *Truck: A Love Story*, Perry takes us along on his uplifting visits with his octogenarian neighbor one valley over and celebrates the wisdom, heart, and sass of a vanishing generation that embodies the indomitable spirit of small-town America.

From Booklist Though Perry makes no claim to being an actual farmer whose livelihood is dependent on his labor, he offers a loving portrait of the occasional rigors and quirks of farm life. In this book, the focus is on his neighbor Tom Hartwig, a man who has lived 82 years in one farmhouse in rural Wisconsin, on a farm that survived the construction of a four-lane interstate in its front yard in 1965. Tom, known for his hobby of building and occasionally firing cannons, offers pearls of wisdom on everything from living with whizzing traffic outside your kitchen window, to repairing tools ranging from massive farm equipment to shovel handles, to raising daughters. Perry relates his own farm life, including realizing that taking his daughter to swim in the local creek is more important than deadlines and appreciating the pleasure of odd tools as he sharpens a scythe (only to be told very matter-of-factly by Tom that a gas-powered weed whacker is better). A charming and humorous appreciation of life by a middle-aged man late to farming and parenting. --Vanessa Bush Drop whatever you are doing and sit down to read Michael Perry's *Visiting Tom*. Perry is a craftsman of the highest order. When you go back to doing what you were doing when you picked up this book, you might just see your world with a broader, more humane perspective. (New York Journal of Books) Warmhearted, engaging, down-to-earth and genuine. (Kirkus) Funnier than Keillor. (MinnPost) *Visiting Tom* is more than just a whimsical portrait of a unique character. It's a meditation on modernity and self-reliance that sneaks up on you with its unexpected depth. (Capital Times) Charming and humorous. (Booklist) 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. (Experience Wisconsin Magazine) The portrait Mr. Perry paints... is of a place and a life that is worth noting. His writing is beautiful and immediate and elegant. (Wall Street Journal) [Perry] is a sharp and empathetic observer. (Journal Sentinel) In *Visiting Tom*, a story that melds Perry's unique humor with notes of Garrison Keillor and Billy Bryson, the elderly man's tenderness and character jump off the page as he shares his thoughts on life and love. (Express Milwaukee) It's part memoir, part character piece. There's a bit of the poetic to it. It's about fighting bureaucracy, Foxfire-ish self-sustenance, life the old timers way, and male-bonding foolishness. It's about fatherhood, marriage and love. And it's just about one of the sweetest books you'll ever read. (Daily Sparks Tribune) From the Back Cover From the acclaimed author of *Coop* and *Population: 485* comes a portrait of a unique individual and a dedicated way of life. What can we learn about life, love, and artillery from an eighty-two-year-old man whose favorite hobby is firing his homemade cannons? Visit by visit often with his young daughters in tow author Michael Perry finds out. Toiling in his shop, Tom Hartwig makes gag shovel handles, parts for quarter-million-dollar farm equipment, and now and then batches of potentially extralegal explosives. Tom, who is approaching his sixtieth wedding anniversary with his wife, Arlene, and is famous for driving a team of oxen in local parades, has stories dating back to the days of his prize Model A and an anti-authoritarian streak refreshed daily by the interstate that was shoved through his front yard in 1965 and now dumps more than eight million vehicles past his kitchen window every year. And yet *Visiting Tom* is dominated by the elderly man's equanimity and ultimately when he and Perry converse as husbands and

the fathers of daughtersunvarnished tenderness.PERRYYS the real thing. USA Today