

On the shelf: *Coop*, by Michael Perry

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

August 26, 2009

I enjoyed [Population: 485](#),

Michael Perry's 2002 book about returning to the small town where he grew up and joining the volunteer fire department. I was excited to read stories set in northwest Wisconsin, a place I know well, and impressed with Perry's portrayal of rural life—he neither romanticizes nor patronizes [New Auburn, Wisconsin](#) but instead fixes it in his assured gaze as someone who knows it well but knows other places too.

In [Coop: A Year of Poultry, Pigs, and Parenting](#),

Perry turns his attention to several topics that have been on my own mind lately: balancing work and marriage, starting a family, dabbling in small-scale farming and other domestic [DIY](#) projects. Also faith: a fundamentalist-turned-agnostic, Perry finds himself pondering the church and the spiritual life once he becomes a dad. He approaches all this with deep self-awareness, great humor and considerable craft.

The book's diverse threads, however, never really come together or amount to anything larger. Like Perry's earlier books, *Coop* is loosely episodic, more of an unofficial essay collection than an extended treatment of a topic. But unlike in *Population: 485* and [Truck: A Love Story](#),

the various subjects don't benefit from a single theme tying them together. (The chicken-coop-building experiment of the book's title isn't really up to the task.)

It'd be nice to read more about how

Perry's reflections on faith inform his thinking on career, family, home economics and community. This paragraph is a good example of his complicated and ambiguous relationship with the obscure Christian sect in which he was raised:

I no longer believe all I believed when I sat in my chair in the white clapboard house, but I am not prepared to scoff. There is enough derision in the world. That is not to say I am above knee-jerk crankiness. When a stranger on the bus asked if I was a Christian, I shot back perhaps a little too sharply, asking if he would treat me differently depending on my answer, and I could see immediately he hadn't meant it that way. Because I grew up worshipping in a manner that could be described as unplugged and acoustic, I sometimes wax a tad irascible about churches that serve lattes and happy music. Church should not be easy, I said once while giving a talk, church should be *hard*. After which a woman mailed me an envelope containing full-color photographs of Asian children whose tongues had been ripped out after they professed Christianity. You see, the lady wrote, church *is* hard. Clearly we were talking past each other by the width of several zip codes. I get most crotchety when someone proselytizes me with an aura of impatient indulgence, as if I am a fuzzy-headed wandering lamb who scampered off to the devil's clover patch one day and never looked back. Just because you drop the dogma doesn't mean you don't dread the price of transgression. Mine is a chastened apostasy—I don't claim to have the answers, and although I stand outside the church of my parents, I still peek through the windows for guidance.

Unfortunately, this passage and others like it exist largely as asides.

As I read *Coop*,

I thought more than once of Annie Dillard. Perry shares Dillard's fascination with the natural and quotidian realms, her effortless prose and her knack for making the serious funny and the funny dreadfully serious. When *Coop's* various threads are interrupted by a tragedy involving a young child—an occasion not to set down one manuscript and start another but simply to change direction—I thought of [Holy the Firm](#). But where Dillard's audacious ambition led her to make *Holy* a dense and challenging theodicy ([her second](#) by age 32!), Perry seems content to leave us with a few loosely connected thoughts.