



"The Newspaper That Cares About Rural Life"

Country Market

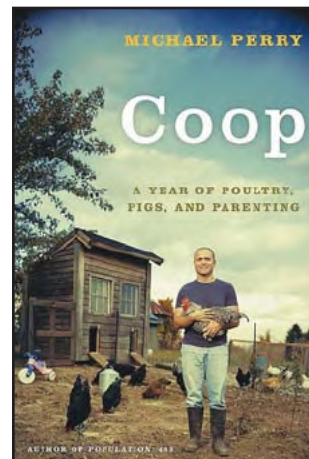
The Country Today SECTION

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Photos by Andi Stempniak

Michael Perry, 44, recently released his fourth book, "Coop: A Year of Poultry, Pigs, and Parenting." He and his wife and two daughters raise pigs and chickens between Fall Creek and Eau Claire.



An excerpt from 'Coop'

Back in the day, most farmers kept a bull on the farm for the obvious purpose. We all knew a few stories of goring, trampling and death. What Dad had instead was a cabinet mounted just inside the milk-house door. The cabinet door — which folded down to serve as a miniature desk — was imprinted with a silhouette of a fine bull, the words "Every Sire Proven Great," and the logo ABS, for American Breeders Service. Within the cabinet were a few stubby pencils, a few bright tags that read "Breed this Cow," and the American Breeders Service bull catalog.

The ABS catalog was basically "Playgirl" for cows. It was filled with page after page of photographs of the ultimate bulls. These were the Greek gods of the bovine world. They were posed with their front hooves on a small mound of clean sawdust, and their tails hung long and were fluffed to a voluminous switch. The bulls were ornately named. One of the stars of my childhood was Fultonway Ivanhoe Belshazzar — one-third landed gentry, one-third literature, and one-third Old Testament. I always thought it would be fun to be the guy coming up with the names for the bulls. I figure you'd want something relevant but exotic, say, Golden Turkish Alfalfa Rocket.

When a cow was in heat (we learned early to listen for the urgent, high-pitched mooing and cows "riding" each other), we kids would go through the catalog page by page, studying each portrait closely. In addition to the photographs, each bull's page included a chart delineating their specific genetic attributes relevant to the qualities they caused to arise in their female offspring — which, after all, was where the farmer's prime interest lay. Among the categories you might review were body depth, foot angle, thurl width, rump angle, teat placement, and udder clef. We'd pore over the photographs, review all the data, and then finally pick our favorite. Dad, we'd say, this one here — Spanky Tango Cremore Blaster — he's the one!

Knowing now what I didn't know then about my parents' financial situation, I have come to realize Dad probably just went to the back of the catalog, to the discount section ("Bull in a Bucket"), and ordered the cheapest product available. And then, sometime within the next eight hours, the artificial inseminator would arrive, and he would walk into the barn and commit astounding acts.

When you're a kid growing up on a rural Wisconsin dairy farm with no television, the artificial inseminator is a combination science exhibit and freak show on wheels. We never missed it.

Flying the coop

Michael Perry returns to farming roots in his new book

By Megan Parker

Assistant Editor

FALL CREEK — When Michael Perry's newest book was nearly finished, he received a carefully worded e-mail from his New York City editor. The wordsmith wondered why Perry had written that an artificial inseminator palpated a cow's rectum and not a different body part.

After the hardcover was released April 21, Perry received another e-mail, this time from a reader wondering the same thing. Sitting in a weathered granary a few weeks ago at his Fall Creek farm, Perry joked that he should include an artificial insemination diagram in the paperback version.

Despite his knowledge of the intricacies of artificial insemination, and the book's title — "Coop: A Year of Poultry, Pigs, and Parenting" — Perry insists he is not a farmer.

"The main narrative in the book was my wife and I moved to this farm. Our hope was to raise some of our own food, and we kept our sights pretty low and pretty realistic. We both came from farming backgrounds, so we didn't have any illusions," Perry said.

"Coop," published by HarperCollins, chronicles Perry's first year at the 37-acre farm between Eau Claire and Fall Creek. He and his wife, who was seven months pregnant, and his 6-year-old stepdaughter moved there from New Auburn. (Fans will recall his description of "Nobbern" in his first book, "Popula-

tion 485: Meeting Your Neighbors One Siren at a Time.")

With a couple of feeder pigs, a dozen chickens and a newly minted chicken coop, Perry, 44, and his family started down the road toward self-sufficiency.

But Perry doesn't believe his book should be lumped with local-food writers such as Michael Pollan, Barbara Kingsolver and Joel Salatin.

"Mine is kind of like 'Backyard Chickens for Dummies,'" he said with a grin.

Moving to the Fall Creek acreage jogged memories of his childhood on a northern Chippewa County dairy farm, he said.

"The book is less about us trying to become quote-unquote farmers than it is an excuse for me to go back and revisit my childhood on the farm," he said.

He ranks the memory of his first time driving a tractor up there with his first kiss. He recalls lambing season, feeding calves and making hay. And, of course, there's the story about when the artificial inseminator arrived.

"I love to read that piece at readings," Perry said. "If I do it and there are rural folks in the audience, they're all nodding and laughing. I love also to do it at places like the Overture Center



Perry cradled feather-toed Brahma roosters. He keeps them separate from the hens because they run the ladies ragged, he said.

for the Arts in Madison because those people are laughing too, but it's a more of a horrified laugh. They can't believe that such things go on."

As for the "parenting" part of the subtitle, Perry writes about raising kids, including explaining God to them. Perry was raised in a fundamentalist Christian sect.

"That sounds all ominous, but the truth was it was very gentle and loving. I'm no longer part of that, but my parents still are. And they are the gentlest people, and I still turn to them for guidance," he said. "So I write about when

you have children, you have to decide what you're going to tell them.

"I, by the way, do not pretend to have an answer."

Though his two-month book tour sets back Perry's farming forays, the day after he returns home is marked on his calendar: It's the day he picks up his feeder pigs.

"Whether it's going down to walk through the pig muck or dig in the garden, it's good to be back close to the earth again," he said.

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Perry pulled apart hog fencing recently. He's setting up the pen in a different spot this year so his feeder pigs can root up a new patch of ground. In his new book, "Coop," Perry writes about farming on the cheap, including salvaging old fencing and feeding his pigs expired bakery goods.

