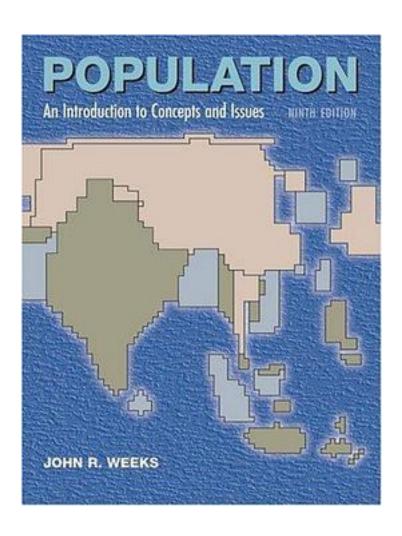
Population



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Welcome to New Auburn, Wisconsin (population: 485), where the local vigilante is a farmer's wife armed with a pistol and a Bible, the most senior member of the volunteer fire department is a cross-eyed butcher with one kidney and two ex-wives (both of

whom work at the only gas station in town), and the back roads are haunted by the ghosts of children and farmers. Michael Perry loves this place. He grew up here, and now -- after a decade away -- he has returned.

Unable to polka or repair his own pickup, his farm-boy hands gone soft after years of writing, Mike figures the best way to regain his credibility is to join the volunteer fire department. Against a backdrop of fires and tangled wrecks, bar fights and smelt feeds, he tells a frequently comic tale leavened with moments of heartbreaking delicacy and searing tragedy. Tracing his calls on a map in the little firehouse, he sees "a dense, benevolent web, spun one frantic zigzag at a time" from which the story of a tiny town emerges, building to a final chapter that is at once devastating and transcendent.

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