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Peace Like a River by Leif Enger

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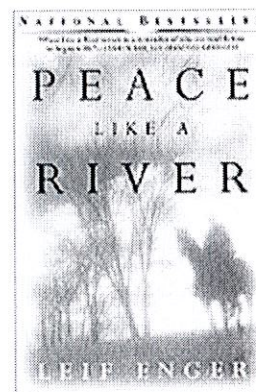
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About this Book

Set in the Minnesota countryside and North Dakota Badlands of the early 1960s, **Peace Like a River** is a moving, engrossing, beautifully told story about one family's quest to retrieve its most wayward member. Reuben Land, the novel's asthmatic and self-effacing eleven-year-old narrator, recounts an unforgettable journey riddled with outlaw tales, heartfelt insights, and bona fide miracles. Born without air in his lungs, Reuben is keenly aware of the gift of breath—and, by extension, the gift of life. Time and again, both gifts are bestowed on Reuben by his father, a gentlemanly soul who works as a school janitor and has the power—and faith—to bestow true miracles. But when Davy (Reuben's brother) kills two intruders who break into the Land home with evil intent, and then escapes from prison while his trial is in progress, events seem to have worsened beyond the aid of miracles. Or have they? For, once Reuben and his family set out to find Davy, the reader eventually witnesses rivers, plains, and city lights unseen by mortal eyes.

Equal parts tragedy, romance, adventure yarn, and meditation, **Peace Like a River** is an inspired story of family love, religious faith, and the lifelong work and trust required of both. Leif Enger's first novel is a work of easy generosity and uncommon wisdom, a book to be shared with friends and loved ones.

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Discussion Questions

1. As the novel begins—indeed, as the very life of this novel's narrator begins—a miracle happens. Describe it. How does it happen? Who accomplishes it? Begin your discussion of this book by recounting the major and minor miracles that occur throughout. What role do they play in **Peace Like a River**?
2. Born with a severe case of asthma, Reuben Land, our young hero and narrator, must often struggle to bring air into his lungs. Throughout the book, Reuben is preoccupied with his own breathing, and the act of breathing functions in this story as a metaphor for life itself. How does Reuben cope with his ailment, and how is his character influenced by it? Provide instances where breathing takes on special meaning in the narrative.
3. Consider the details of the double homicide committed by Davy, Reuben's older brother. Does Reuben see Davy as a murderer, or as one who acted in self-defense? Does he want Davy brought to justice, or does he think justice has already been served? What about the other main characters: how do they feel? And what about you, the reader? How was your impression of Davy—and of this novel—influenced by his actions? Discuss how the novel explores the idea of loyalty.
4. **Peace Like a River** is set mainly in rural Minnesota and the Badlands of North Dakota during the early 1960s. Like early American pioneers, or perhaps like mythic heroes, the Lands set out to rescue one of their own amidst the beauty and cruelty of the natural world. How does the Land family contend with this raw, uncivilized, and sometimes brutal landscape? Identify events or circumstances in which the novel's setting contributes to its elemental or mythic quality.
5. Swede, Reuben's imaginative, prolific, and precocious younger sister, creates an epic poem about a cowboy named Sunny Sundown. Talk about Sunny's ongoing saga as an ironic commentary on Reuben's larger narrative. What are the parallels?
6. Besides the Sunny Sundown text, several other outlaw tales, literary allusions, biblical legends, and historical asides are offered—by Swede or by Reuben himself. Identify a few of these stories-within-the-story, explaining how each enriches or influences the main narrative.
7. Discuss the character of Jeremiah Land, Reuben's father—and the center of his moral compass. What are Jeremiah's strengths, as a person and a parent? Does he have any weaknesses? Why did his wife leave him, all those years ago? And why does he "heal" the grotesque employer who fires him (p. 80)? Explain how the novel's dual themes of familial love and ardent faith are met in this character.
8. Both during Davy's trial and after his escape from prison, we

encounter a variety of public viewpoints on what Reuben's brother has done. Such viewpoints, usually presented as personal letters or newspaper editorials, are always steadfast yet often contradictory. What does Reuben seem to realize about the so-called "court of public opinion," in light of these viewpoints?

9. Prayer is described in many ways, and on many occasions, in **Peace Like a River**. Reading this book, did you discover anything about the activity of, reasons for, or consequences of prayer? What larger points—about religion and human nature, say—might the author be making with his varied depictions of people at prayer? For instance, when remembering a prayer he said that included blessings for even his enemies, Reuben comments thus regarding Jape Waltzer: "Later I would wish I'd spent more time on him particularly" (p. 285). Why does Reuben feel this way? What power does he recognize in his own prayers? Discuss the impact prayer has on Reuben, and how it transforms him.

10. Recovering from a near-fatal asthmatic collapse, Reuben muses: "The infirm wait always, and know it" (p. 290). Given Reuben's physical condition, and given what we know about his ancestry and the story at hand, what is Reuben "waiting" for? How is his waiting resolved? Can this analogy be applied to any of the other characters?

11. The final miracle in **Peace Like a River** occurs, of course, when Jeremiah surrenders his life for Reuben. But why, at an earlier point in the story, does Reuben observe, "Since arriving at [Roxanna's] house, we'd had no miracles whatever" (p. 257). Discuss the truth and falsehood of this remark. How might Roxanna herself be seen as a miracle?

12. What does the character of Roxanna bring to the Land family? What does she provide that the Lands had lacked before her arrival? Over the course of the novel, Reuben's attitude and his physical descriptions of Roxanna change. In what ways does it change, do you think Roxanna's attitudes toward the Lands as a family and Jeremiah as a person undergo a similar metamorphosis?

13. In "Be Jubilant, My Feet," the next-to-last chapter, Reuben and Jeremiah enter a world beyond this one. "Here in the orchard," our hero recalls, "I had a glimmer of origin: *Adam*, I thought" (p. 301). Where exactly *are* Reuben and his father? What happens to them? How have these crucial events been foreshadowed, and how are they new or unprecedented?

14. Much of this novel concerns the inner life of childhood: imagination, storytelling, chores, play, and school life. Discuss the author's portrayal of childhood. Do the children depicted here seem realistic? Why or why not?

15. Remembering his own childhood, author Leif Enger recently noted: "I grew up squinting from the backseat at gently rolling hills and true flatlands, where you could top a rise and see a tractor raising dust three miles away. So much world and sky is

visible, it's hard to put much stock in your own influence." Does this type of relationship between the individual and the natural world appear in **Peace Like a River**? If so, where? Identify key passages or scenes where the characters seem inferior to the landscape, or even at the mercy of it.

16. Finishing his story, Reuben notes: "You should know that Jape Waltzer proved as uncatchable as Swede's own Valdez" (p. 309). What do the characters of Jape and Valdez represent in this novel? Conclude your discussion by comparing and contrasting **Peace Like a River** with the traditional morality play—the symbolic drama (dating back to medieval times) based on the eternal struggle between Good and Evil.

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• Critical Praise

"Not since Charles Frazier's **Cold Mountain** or Cormac McCarthy's **Cities of the Plain** have I been so engrossed in the reading of a book, and in a story told so beautifully. **Peace Like a River** is the loveliest of gifts, a truly great book, into which the reader can sink deliciously and completely. The characters fill the reader's days and nights; and in the reading of it, we cross over into amazing territory."

—Rick Bass

"This is a stunning debut novel, one that sneaks up on you like a whisper and warms you like a quilt . . . a novel about faith, miracles, and family that is, ultimately, miraculous."

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"**Peace Like a River** serves as a reminder of why we read fiction to begin with: to commune with a vividly, lovingly rendered world, to lose ourselves in story and language and beauty, to savor what we don't want to end yet know must."

—Andrew Roe, *San Francisco Chronicle*

"A rich mixture of adventure, tragedy, and healing," **Peace Like a River** is "a collage of legends from sources sacred and profane from the Old Testament to the Old West, from the Gospels to police dramas."

—Ron Charles, *The Christian Science Monitor*

"Even if you believe only in stirring, heart-thumping storytelling and sentences that sing, this book will work for you. If you're a devotee of boys' adventure books bruised innocents confronting scoundrels round every bend all the better. But what allows **Peace Like**

a River to transcend any limitations of belief and genre is its broad, sagacious humanity. . . . There is magic here, none more potent than Leif Enger's prose."

—Dan Cryer, *Newsday*

"If ever there was a time for a novel of faith and redemption a quiet book of old-fashioned verities this is it. Written in lyrical, openhearted prose, **Peace Like a River** even has a comforting, remarkable glimpse into the afterlife."

—Michael Giltz, *New York Post*

"Enger has written one of the year's best novels. . . . Once in a great while, a book comes along that has such wonderful characters and marvelous prose that you read it as much for the pure joy it offers on virtually every page as to find out how it ends. . . . It's not likely you'll read a better piece of fiction this year. . . . You'll be sorry if you miss it. . . . Go out and get a copy; savor it. This one is special."

—Tom Walker, *The Denver Post*

"It's dangerous work, writing about faith. To get it as right as Leif Enger does in his novel is nothing short of miraculous. What could be unbelievable becomes extraordinary in Enger's hands. . . . If words can bolster lapsed faith, if a story can sturdy a shaky foundation, then the flow of Enger's amazing new novel may bring more than a few of us to his promised peace."

—Connie Ogle, *The Miami Herald*

"You don't see novels like this one very often. **Peace Like a River** reminds a reader of Kent Haruf's **Plainsong** or even Norman Maclean's **A River Runs Through It**. It's got that pure American loss of innocence theme, that belief in and fascination with miracles, that insistence on the goodness of men outside of the law."

—Susan Salter Reynolds, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"Leif Enger . . . is a natural-born storyteller, and his novel moves in a current that can be poetic and slow or as tumultuous as whitewater rapids. This novel has the power to convince that, despite sorrow, human experience is a miracle of ordinary truth and extraordinary love."

—Michael Pearson, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

"Enger has a fertile imagination, writes rich, chewy prose, and can pop a character into your imagination with just a few phrases."

—Charles Matthews, *San Jose Mercury News*

"Enger humorously captures the romance of the dime-store Western; the frontier is still open here. . . . The spare, frozen landscape is warmed by both wise and foolish characters whose mythic adventures are depicted in rich, naturalistic detail."

—*Time Out New York*

"An impressive debut, written with remarkable command and style Enger has created here some sort of uniquely American form of magical realism **Peace Like a River** introduces Enger as a writer of talent and a born storyteller, creating memorable characters in a voice uncommonly strong and assured."

—Elizabeth Marino, *The Bloomsbury Review*

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Book Discussion Guide

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Peace Like a River

by

Leif Enger

(New York: Grove Press, 2001)

Author:

When Leif Enger sold the film rights to *Peace Like a River*, he paid off his farm, quit his job with Minnesota Public Radio, where he had worked as a reporter and producer since 1984, and retired to rural Minnesota with his wife and two sons. The novel's critical and financial success came as a surprise to the author, whose first forays into fiction-writing with his brother Lin in the early 1990s had gone almost completely unnoticed. He described the failure -- and the fun -- of writing a series of novels as L. L. Enger to Mark LaFramboise: "They're mysteries about a former major-league ballplayer who's gone into reclusive retirement in the north woods. Both of us love baseball, and we wrote the books in the belief that crime was an easy and lucrative genre to break into, which turned out to be mistaken. We wrote six novels, published five, and stopped from exhaustion and sinking hopes; but the collaboration itself was tremendous fun, and Lin taught me more than anyone about how stories work, and their editing and pacing." L. L. Enger's writing career ended with no regrets, but little to show for all the effort either.

When Leif Enger began *Peace Like a River*, it was with much humbler expectations: this time he was writing something he could read to his wife and kids. The finished novel is filled with traces of that original setting and audience. Enger's anguish over his son's asthma became the premise of the story, as he told Alden Mudge of *BookPage*: "As a parent you want to work a miracle. You would take your son's place if you could. Basically I wanted to understand what he was going through and I wanted to somehow translate my wish for his good health into the book. All I knew at the beginning was that the narrator was asthmatic and his father did miracles." Enger's youngest son John asked if the story was going to have cowboys in it, and like magic they appeared; John even got to name the cowboy hero, Sunny Sundown. And ironically, Enger's least-mercenary effort, one he wasn't even sure he would publish, was the one that paid off. *Peace Like a River* became a bestseller and was named as one of Best Books of 2001 by *Time* magazine and the *Los Angeles Times*.

From his farm in rural Minnesota, Enger is now home-schooling his boys with his wife and working on a novel about a train-robber in 1916. Only his kids can tell you whether Sunny Sundown makes another appearance.

Summary:

Life for eleven-year-old Reuben Land consists mainly of battling his severe asthma for air, until his older brother Davy kills two teenagers who had threatened the family. Davy escapes from jail before his trial is even over, riding away on horseback, and leaving Reuben, little sister Swede, and saintly father Jeremiah Land at a loss for what to do. For a while they try to continue with their lives as normal, but the intrusions of reporters and police officers make that very difficult. When the family suddenly comes into possession of an Airstream trailer, Jeremiah decides it is the will of the Lord that they search for Davy. The three pack up a few meager provisions and leave their run-down house in Minnesota behind.

The family's first stop is in North Dakota, where they visit old friends who actually fed and sheltered Davy briefly. As they proceed into the badlands, the federal agent heading up the search for Davy, Mr. Andreeson, pays them a visit, drawing their attention to the fact that they are being followed. After Swede fills Mr. Andreeson's gas tank with maple syrup, they see state troopers stationed at every gas station along the way, waiting to apprehend them, but miraculously the car does not run out of gas and the many officers on the look out fail to see them. When they arrive at a remote gas station that isn't being guarded, the Lands find much more than the much-needed gas and propane. Roxanna Cawley, the station owner, offers them hospitality during a blizzard and rapidly becomes a member of the family.

Reuben spots Davy on horseback in the distance and sneaks out of Roxanna's to see his brother. Davy tells Reuben he's living with a criminal named Jape Waltzer and Jape's adopted daughter Sara in a little cabin nearby. Jape is violent, cruel, and more than a little insane, which worries Reuben, but still, Reuben decides to warn Jape and Davy when Andreeson seems too close to finding their hideout. Later, Reuben begins to worry that in warning Jape Waltzer, he may have put Andreeson's life in danger. He finally tells his father and the authorities where Davy is and that Andreeson is in danger, leading a posse to apprehend the fugitives at the cabin. Halfway there, Reuben leads the group off-course fearing he might be betraying Davy for no good reason. Realizing Reuben has led them astray, the posse leaves him alone with a wounded man in the snow, but the officers arrive to find the cabin abandoned and Andreeson missing.

Roxanna moves with the Lands back to their Minnesota home and marries Jeremiah. Within three months, Davy appears with Sara in tow and asks if the girl can stay with the Lands. He intends to leave again, but before he can, the family is ambushed by Jape Waltzer. Jeremiah is wounded, but not critically; Reuben's chest wound proves fatal. In the moments he lies dead in the front yard, he sees paradise, but Jeremiah appears and sends him back to earth alone. When Reuben comes back, the miracle is compounded by the fact his lungs are not just repaired from the explosive gunshot, but also cured of his dangerous asthma. Reuben isn't just alive, but healthy for the first time in his life.

Questions:

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

In what ways is this novel a classic coming-of-age story?

Reuben Land goes through several rites of passage in this story, marking the way from boyhood to manhood. The boy's first kill on the hunt in North Dakota is an obvious one. Reuben feels changed afterwards, older than his sister Swede, with whom he refuses to play their usual hunting game: "Now suddenly I found it quaint, and when she sneaked a look at me I grinned and winked, instead of keeping my Sioux composure, and she frowned at me savagely" (p. 13). When Jeremiah Land is fired from his job as school janitor and develops pneumonia, Reuben also gets his first real job, working for Mr. Layton tearing down a corncrib. Despite desperately wishing for a Spartacus model and a canoe, Reuben uses his earnings to buy much-needed food for the family, another sign of his growing maturity and sense of responsibility. The dangerous night journey is also a standard scene in coming-of-age stories, and when Reuben must tell the authorities where Davy is and then lead the posse to the cabin, it is indeed a dark night of the soul. Not only does he have to find the way, he has to wrestle with his conscience and decide whether he really wants to lead them to Davy or not, and what the right thing to do truly is in that particular situation. In some ways, the story is also a literal version of a rite of passage. Reuben passes literally from his condition as a near-invalid, asthmatic boy through a mystical landscape beyond death to become finally a strong, healthy man. In that timeless place, his father asks that Reuben look after the family, knowing that when his son returns to the land of the living, he will be able to do so. Reuben is transformed physically, and quite dramatically too.

Was Davy's shooting of Israel Finch and Tommy Basca justified?

The sequence of events leading up to the shootings leaves no doubt as to what kind of people Israel Finch and Tommy Basca were. They were on the verge of raping Davy's girlfriend Dolly before they were interrupted by Jeremiah, and they kidnapped nine-year-old Swede, taking her on a nighttime joyride before returning her home and warning the terrified girl that they would be waiting just outside her window. The two boys did not just make empty threats; it was clear that they meant to act.

After Swede's kidnapping, however, Davy's actions make it more difficult to place blame. Davy smashes Israel Finch's most prized possession, his car, knowing full well that it will infuriate him and guarantee that the two boys pay the Lands a visit. Davy goes to bed with his rifle expecting to wake and find Israel Finch with a baseball bat, as indeed he does. Davy Land was defending himself against attack, and defending the innocent lives of his father and siblings, but he did deliberately provoke the attack that night and prepare for it. If Israel Finch and Tommy Basca were intent on violence that night, Davy Land was no less so.

Davy has assigned himself the roles of judge, jury, and executioner, but only after the system of law failed to protect the innocent. Does that justify luring the two juvenile delinquents into an ambush and killing them both? The answer depends on

a reader's feelings about the ability of our justice system to stop crime and prosecute the guilty. If our system of justice is a failure, then vigilantism may be more appealing as a last defense. Leif Enger does add one detail that may tip the scales against seeing Davy as an instrument of justice, and that's his execution of Tommy Basca. We know Tommy was easily led, and basically harmless except when under the sway of Israel Finch. Finch may have been irredeemably bad, but Tommy Basca is portrayed as weak rather than mean or dangerous, and he is not killed outright by Davy's first shot. Davy has the chance to stop short of killing Tommy, but he does not. At that point, Davy's actions become vengeful rather than just.

What miracles does Jeremiah Land perform in the story? How are they presented?

One of Jeremiah Land's most salient features is his ability to work miracles. It is also the characteristic that could potentially alienate the most readers. How Leif Enger presents the occurrence of miracles in everyday life in Roofing, Minnesota in 1962 is critical to how the reader accepts the story as a whole and Jeremiah Land as a character.

Jeremiah performs a variety of miracles in the story, from making a pot of soup last an extra-long time to walking on thin air. He makes engines run without gasoline and brings Reuben back from the dead not once but twice. The key to how the miracles and the miracle-worker are portrayed seems to be in their everyday-ness. He's a school janitor and a single father. He's plagued by overfriendly encyclopedia salesmen and his culinary masterpiece is fish and potato chowder. He slicks his hair down uncomfortably and tries to learn to play love songs on guitar to court Roxanna. Without these homely, down-to-earth details, a man who walks on air and wrestles physically with God's will would be very difficult to relate to outside biblical or inspirational literature.

While these details make Jeremiah more immediate to readers than long-dead prophets and saints, he is still remote in the story. We know only what Reuben and others report, and Reuben is an eleven-year-old boy who idolizes, but perhaps doesn't understand, his father. Furthermore, he is reporting the story as an adult, looking back at his eleven-year-old self; memory colors the events, as does his father's heroic death and self-sacrifice. Jeremiah remains elusive and mysterious, and just enigmatic enough to make readers wonder if he couldn't be the sort of man who could work miracles.

What role does fame play in this story?

Davy Land's fate depends very much on public perception of him. Initially, the press depicts him as a long-suffering hero, threatened with prison for defending his family against threat of violence by two known troublemakers and lawbreakers. As time goes on and the public grows bored with the story, the press explores a different angle, turning Tommy Basca into a helpless victim. "His aunt called him Bubby because as a child nothing made him happier than sitting on her back step, blowing soap bubbles that rose and drifted across the yards of this small middle-American town" the newspapers reported, making it sound as if Davy had shot the most helpless sort of creature instead of someone breaking into a home with the intention of doing the family inside bodily harm. The "Bubby" story turned Davy Land from folk hero to butcher, and the fact Davy shows no remorse at his trial -- indeed, feels none -- gives the press additional grist for the mill. Ironically, it is Davy's next crime, escaping from jail on horseback, that endears him to the public once more. He becomes the hero of one famous columnist, whose "Ride, Davy, Ride" story was particularly popular for its portrayal of Davy's escape as proof that the impossible can still happen:

A boy on horseback can't outride the law. Not in 1962. The police tell us so, and perhaps they are right. America is a grown-up place, after all. It's been a long while since we loved our outlaws. Perhaps the songs we knew as kids -- about Jesse James, and Billy the Kid, and the Dirty Little Coward Who Shot Mr. Howard -- have no place in a world full of television and helicopters and rock and roll. Perhaps this is all for the best. Today is December 5. Davy Land escaped from jail twelve days ago. I've just checked the wires and he is still free. Excuse me while I chuckle. (p. 102)

Two things are immediately clear from this sequence of events: the press is opportunistic and the public fickle. Under these circumstances, we may begin to wonder about the truth behind some of those other famous and infamous characters of legend, knowing the truth behind the story of Davy Land. Roxanna Cawley is able to tell the children the true story of the death of Butch Cassidy, another incident that demonstrates the independence of truth from legend. Storytelling is more significant and more lasting than the historical truth, for better or worse, a lesson Swede seems to take to heart early as she begins her own writing career.

How is Swede's story a reflection of her changing mindset throughout the story?

Swede writes a simple, classic Western story (albeit in verse) at the first. Her hero, Sunny Sundown, is everything a good

hero should be, and the villain Valdez is a mustache-twirling cartoonish bad guy. There is no question who the good guy is or that he can easily defeat the evil Valdez. After Swede is kidnapped by Finch and Basca, the innocent adventure story turned dark: Sunny tracks Valdez, finding his victims and evidence of his vicious crimes all around: "Now, overnight, Valdez had come unbound. He'd grown personally. He was a monster. I worried that real damage had been done to Swede, something that might plague her not for weeks but years" (p. 68). When Davy escapes from jail, Swede finds she can't kill Valdez. Slowly, Sunny Sundown, peerless lawman, is metamorphosed into a misunderstood outlaw, and Valdez into such evil that he couldn't be stopped. Swede's moral categories seem to have grown in complexity almost overnight, and she has no idea how to sort it all out. As advanced as the nine-year-old writer may be, the troubles with Davy's escape and her own trauma at being kidnapped and seeing her kidnappers shot shortly thereafter, it's too much for her to process all at once. By the novel's end, Sunny has retreated to a hidden valley in the mountains, a paradise he could seal off with one stick of dynamite, and that seems to be how his story ends. He seals himself and his bride in the hidden Eden and escapes for once and all. It represents Swede's desire to see her brother safe from the long arm of the law but also happy, which as Reuben knows is a far cry from the ramshackle hut Davy and Jape Waltzer are hiding in. While Swede isn't right about the perfect escape for Davy, she is right that the truly evil in this world, like Valdez or Waltzer, get away all too often.

What is paradise like? How is the final meeting of father and son described?

When Reuben Land dies, he finds a landscape of rivers and streams, of swarming birds and butterflies. He moves along without sense of time or speech, surrounded by horses and orchards and other earthly things, only in perfected forms. He begins to hear sound, which he gradually recognizes as music, and finally as a song that he can sing. Awareness of identity and history returns to him only when he encounters his own father, both of them in the strength and vigor of young manhood: "We were like two friends, and I saw he was proud of me, that he knew me better than he'd ever thought to and was not dismayed by the knowledge; and even as I wondered at his ageless face, so clear and at home, his eyes owned up to some small regret, for he knew a thing I didn't" (p. 303). Jeremiah will jump into the final stream and be carried away laughing and singing to the sun-like city glittering before them; Reuben will return to life in Jeremiah's last miracle.

This presentation of the afterlife is important in the story for several reasons. First of all, heaven is surely at home in a story so fraught with miracles. Jeremiah Land is in contact with this paradise and its master every day in his prayers and in the wondrous supernatural feats he performs. Secondly, the bleakness of the family shot down by a murderer is transformed into a much happier ending by seeing Jeremiah's bliss and eagerness to exchange himself for Reuben. This scene makes clear the exchange that has taken place and that it is a joyous thing, not something the family should regret. It would have been difficult to create the same sense of peace and happiness in a scene of such horror without this interlude.

How did you feel about the novel's ending?

In many ways, the ending of the story is obvious: the father who has wished more than anything that he could cure his son's debilitating asthma and resulting poor health is able to do so, and in a dramatic and transcendent way in keeping with his special relationship with God and ability to work miracles. In this sense, Jeremiah Land fulfills his life in an act of self-sacrifice, and blesses the life of the son he leaves behind. In the hands of another writer, the horror of Jape Waltzer's ambush of the family and the resulting carnage would have dominated, or perhaps the grief of the family left behind when Jeremiah exchanges his life for Reuben's. Jeremiah leaves Roxanna behind, his bride of three months, and two orphaned children, with one son still on the run from the law. Jape Waltzer is never apprehended. Mr. Andreesson's body is never found, and Reuben doesn't even know what to say because of him when his children come to ask what happened to their father. Surely there are tragic elements in the story's ending, and yet the tragic is not allowed to dominate. Instead, Enger shows flashes of a happy future in which Reuben is strong and healthy, married to Sara and raising a family of his own. Swede is a writer and professor, famous and as fearless as ever. It's clear that Enger wants us to understand that Jeremiah is in paradise and his family well, despite the bloody afternoon Jape Waltzer came to take revenge on Davy.

If Davy's fate is less rosy, it is probably because he is unrepentant and still on the run. Davy did wrong in executing Tommy Brasca, even if it's possible to see his defense of his family against home invasion as justifiable. He is denied a perfectly happy ending, still living the life of a fugitive, but he is still in contact with Reuben and so has not lost touch with his family. His is an ambiguous ending, as suits the ambiguity surrounding the shooting that fateful night when he was sixteen.

Further Reading:

Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain* (1997).

Like *Peace Like a River*, *Cold Mountain* is well written and landscape-driven. Winner of the National Book Award, the novel follows Confederate deserter Inman as he walks the long way home to the land and woman he left behind to fight in the Civil War.

Elmore Leonard, *Valdez Is Coming* (1970).

Leif Enger recommends this novel as one of his all-time favorite Westerns. Elmore Leonard himself describes it on his website as "The basic Elmore Leonard story: Big guys shoves little guy, little guy shoves back -- and then some."

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960).

In Alabama during the Great Depression, eight-year-old Scout Finch watches dramatic events unfold around her as her father defends a black man accused of raping a white woman. Scout and her brother learn both the difficulty and necessity of standing up for what's right as the trial brings out the best and the worst of the small town.

Norman MacLean, *A River Runs Through It* (1976).

Fly-fishing unites a small-town Montana minister and his sons in this evocative portrait of small town and family life.

John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989).

Owen Meany accidentally kills his best friend's mother with a baseball, but believes he will be redeemed by martyrdom. This is one of John Irving's most popular novels, combining a moral argument with quirky humor.

Russell Banks, *Cloudsplitter* (1998).

This is another novel from the perspective of the son of a remarkable, dead father, in this case not the saintly Jeremiah Land of *Peace Like a River*, but the idolized and demonized John Brown, whose band of men killed pro-slavery forces in Kansas and led the raid on Harper's Ferry on orders from God.

Myla Goldberg, *Bee Season: A Novel* (2000).

Nine-year-old Eliza Naumann unexpectedly takes first prize in the school spelling bee, prompting her parents to reassess her prospects in life and her position in the family. Eliza's newfound success transforms the entire family, sending them on restless spiritual quests and redefining the relationships between them.

February, 2003

This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Janet West, who teaches literature and writing at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

(RID=501399)



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2004—If All of Rochester Read the Same Book...

In This Section

Interview With Leif Enger

W&B: When did you start writing?**Enger:** In third grade, when I was eight. Poetry. There was no word I wouldn't misuse, no rhythm I wouldn't break for a rhyme.**W&B:** As a young boy, were you creative and writerly like Swede, constantly creating characters and inventing stories?**Enger:** I don't know about writerly. I made some ballads about baseball players and cowboys, also dinosaurs, gorillas and certain classmates who seemed to have it coming. It wasn't writing so much as play.**W&B:** Although *Peace Like a River* is commonly referred to as your debut novel, you have actually penned several novels with your brother Lin. What was that experience of collaboration like?**Enger:** They were crime novels about a major league baseball player turned northwoods recluse, and we had gigantic fun writing them. Lin had been writing much longer than I and showed me the elements of fiction: clean sentences, clear action, characters you can like and invest in. We'd plot a book in one weekend, break it down into chapters, and send each other chapters through the mail. I can't think of a better way to learn

writing, or a gentler teacher than my brother.

W&B: How did that experience of writing with your brother affect the process of writing *Peace Like a River*?**Enger:** The biggest lesson of the crime books was that character is best developed through action. We know Jeremiah and Davy from their responses to the threat of violence from Israel Finch. The axiom counsels writers to show, not tell, which is why incident-heavy stories often feel more genuine than those driven mostly by dialogue.**W&B:** What was the impetus for *Peace Like a River* and how did it evolve? Did the characters come first and the story follow?**Enger:** Reuben came first—a boy who, like our oldest son, suffered from asthma and had learned to*Peace Like a River*
by Leif Enger*Peace Like a River*
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cope with lowered expectations. So this boy came knocking and brought along his brother, who is like an outlaw of departed times, and his smart little sister, and his father, who, it seems to Reuben, can do any miracle except the one he most wants. The characters early on declared what they wanted, and after that the story came easily.

W&B: How long did you spend writing *Peace Like a River*? What was the process like for you? For your family?

Enger: Five years. There was no urgency, no expectation of publication, no one was watching and the thing could be carried out in secrecy. I read each new scene to [my wife] Robin and most of them to the boys as well—they were awfully patient.

W&B: Was your family involved in the detailed process of crafting the book? Did they have suggestions for the larger narrative or for finer points of character?

Enger: Robin was the critic for character, Ty and John for story.

W&B: *Peace Like a River* is a novel about faith, among other things. How does the faith of Reuben and his father Jeremiah, for example, parallel your own experience?

Enger: You grow up inside the faith of your family, which is Christianity in both Reuben's and mine. For most of us there's a time when you must decide whether that faith is true or false; you accept it as yours, as something to be nurtured and guarded, or you cut ties and go looking for truth elsewhere. You are deciding who and whose you will be in this world. I wanted Reuben, in his sickness and his loyalty to both Davy and Jeremiah, to come up against these questions—before he wanted to, probably before he was ready to. That sort of drama is rare at the age of eleven; I know I had much more time than that, and easier circumstances, but we came to the same conclusions.

W&B: Several times in the book Reuben, after a "miracle" has occurred, tells the reader, "Make of it what you will." Is this possibly a disavowal of the truth of the family's history from the voice of the adult Reuben who is writing the story from the future? Or is it more of what one reviewer called an example of the "verbal stoicism of the northern Great Plains"? What are you advising readers to believe?

Enger: The lovely part of being a witness is that you can't compel belief. All you can do is say: here is what happened. In saying this the witness is only doing his job; how people respond is their own burden, their own responsibility. Whom would you say has more credibility: the man who pounds on the table insisting his story is true, or the one who, having the reputation of honesty, frees his listeners to decide for themselves?

W&B: In the beginning of the book, as Reuben is explaining miracles, he relates the adult Swede's important point that a miracle cannot occur without a witness. For most of Jeremiah's "miracles," only Reuben is a witness. When they are driving West, however, Swede notices some unusual occurrences as well. When did you as the author make the decision to share this magic with other members of the family besides Reuben and why was it important to do so?

Enger: I remember the relief I felt when Reuben at last told Swede about the miracles. Without my realizing it, the knowledge had become too heavy for one small boy to carry. I didn't think at the time

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how it might matter to the story—it simply had to happen—but in the end it made stronger allies of Swede and Reuben, and made the tale easier for me to tell.

W&B: Do you believe in miracles and do you define them as Reuben does? Do you think it is necessary for readers to believe in miracles to remain inside the magic of the story?

Enger: Reuben's definition is my own, but it's been a happy surprise that many self-described skeptics have enjoyed the novel—I suspect because it tells the story simply, rather than pounding the table. Similarly, I have loved many novels written from outside what you'd call a Christian worldview. The thing is to fall into a story and be swept along.

W&B: The theme of loss is prevalent throughout the novel, both in physical and spiritual terms. Do you feel this is necessary to put the family's current difficulties in perspective? Or does it reflect a literary tradition of loss in narratives focused on the West?

Enger: I'm terrible at thematic planning. Themes aren't really my choice—this was just the story that percolated up and came out through my fingers. I'd suggest, though, that loss is such an innate piece of being human that it pervades all truthful fiction, not just the western kind. We identify with characters in part by which losses they've suffered, and which have been hardest on them.

W&B: Following on the theme of loss, the novel could almost be called "The Ballad of the Lands." Did this title ever occur to you, especially as you incorporated Swede's passion for epic cowboy poetry?

Enger: Never thought of that title, though I did imagine calling it "The Battle Hymn of Reuben Land," which is close to the same thing.

W&B: *Peace Like a River* is very much a novel of external place and of landscape, as well as internal. Even the family's surname, Land, echoes this. How did you come to know the physical areas of the West that you write about? What does the archetypal West mean to you?

Enger: The book is in many ways a Western though the Lands never actually reach Montana—the North Dakota badlands are as far as they get. Because my grandparents were all in North Dakota and I grew up visiting them often, especially during goose-hunting season, that country has always been familiar and beautiful to me. It's empty, wide, dry, often brown, fairly unforgiving and as such romantic; you could still ride into the badlands and end up dead if your horse wandered away. The West offers glory and obscurity and suggests the two aren't far apart. What better testing ground could you want?

W&B: Eleven-year-old Reuben Land is a strong narrator who can be compared to Huck Finn, who Rube references on more than one occasion. Are there other young literary adventurers that you were thinking of when you fleshed out the character of Reuben?

Enger: Robert Taylor published a wonderful novel in the late 1950s, *The Travels of Jaimie McPheeters*, which won the Pulitzer Prize and spawned a brief TV series (starring Kurt Russell) and has now fallen pretty much out of memory, but young Jaimie, who told the story of going west in 1849 with his generous tipping doctor father, was a major influence on the voice of Reuben.

W&B: What other authors, historical or contemporary, influenced your writing of this novel or inspire you in general?

Enger: Robert Louis Stevenson is a great master whose books I keep returning to; he was ahead of his time for precise yet informal prose, for deep stories cloaked as adventures for young readers, for flawed heroes you like well and complicated villains you like better. Jack London, Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, Flannery O'Connor, C.S. Lewis, Jim Harrison, Anne Tyler, Tom McGuane, Michael Chabon, Larry McMurtry, David Mamet. King David, Solomon, the Apostle Paul. Inspiration is everywhere.

W&B: You have two young boys of your own. How did they affect your creation of Reuben (or of Swede)?

Enger: It's fairly easy to write from a boy's point of view when you've got two of your own living in your pockets. Kids notice things in a different way—sometimes incompletely, but always differently. The way events occupy and grow inside a child's mind is easy to forget unless you've got one around; they're more interesting than adults.

W&B: How did you translate what your boys were taking note of or how they were reacting to their world into the youthful characters and action of the story?

Enger: It is more a matter of seeing how they see, rather than using their specific observations. A parent sees a school bus drive by, loaded with children, and thinks, "Well, there go some kids, off to school." A boy sees the same bus and thinks, "Look at that poor kid pressing his hands against the window—he's on his way to prison." Which offers the better story?

W&B: Reuben and Swede are quite literate young people, quoting classic novels by such authors as Mark Twain and the adventures of such classic characters as Odysseus, as well as passages from the Bible. Do you think circumstances have changed for school children in our day? Have today's kids lost the joy of literature?

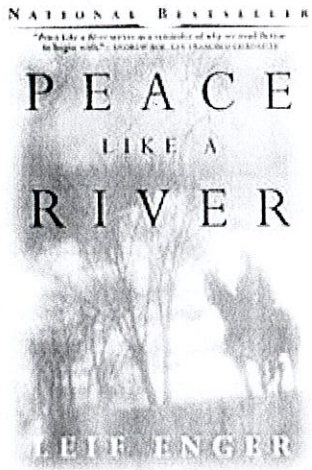
Enger: Maybe some have, though I'm no prophet of cultural freefall—as long as we have the choice to read what we want, I suspect Twain and Homer and the rest will always be with us. The stoutest old writers ebb and flow in popularity; tastes and political correctness and educational trends also ebb and flow, and we have a tendency to embrace the short view because it makes better news stories. So the joy of literature may not be at a high water mark right now, and yet you can walk into the Target store of your choice and pick up *Catcher in the Rye*. Beauty floats, I guess, along with sorrow and hope.

W&B: Some readers have commented that your portrayal of Reuben's asthmatic condition has brought to light a common, yet menacing, physical ailment in terms of understanding how debilitating and frightening it can be. How did you come to write so convincingly about this condition?

Enger: Our oldest son dealt with asthma every day from the age of four to about fifteen. When someone in your family can't perform the simplest of actions, breathing, without physical and mental effort, that fact goes straight to the center of your life. So it wasn't difficult to climb into Reuben's skin and describe his condition from the inside out.

W&B: Since you have an asthmatic child of your own, was writing about Jeremiah's ultimate sacrifice

for his son a particularly emotional experience for you?



Enger: It was difficult, at times, but helpful over the long haul in understanding what our son was up against. Sometimes you write your way through things; you start conversations you can't see to the end of. It's a risk, but sometimes it pays off in growth and a good story.

W&B: Some readers have wondered about the lack of adult female characters in the novel until Roxanna arrives on the scene (or rather, the Land family on her doorstep). When and why did you make the decision for the Land family to have lost their mother?

Enger: I didn't make the decision. The Lands were simply motherless at the beginning of the book—that was how they were, and I didn't even really wonder why until a good way in. They had lost their mother, it was part of their sadness; they weren't whole, but neither were they

“dysfunctional.” Yet things fall a certain way for a reason, and at some point I understood they were looking for more than Davy out in North Dakota.

W&B: You have stated in other interviews that during college you hoped to write novels, but chose to become a reporter because it was a more stable source of income as a writer. How and when did you decide to go back to your dream of novel writing?

Enger: I started writing a novel immediately after finishing school; it was completely terrible and I was glad to put it away when Lin suggested we write a crime book. Then we spent seven years collaborating; and a month after we finished the last novel in the series, I started making notes for *Peace Like a River*. So, while I've never felt particularly driven, there's always been a book in the works. By the time *Peace* cropped up I'd pretty much abandoned the dream of being able to make a living of fiction; somehow losing that impetus made the storytelling itself easier and more enjoyable. John Gardner said if you're going to write fiction, the spiritual rewards had better be enough.

W&B: You use several unusual, some perhaps made up, words in the novel such as muzzy, racketous, nettly, screele and whuffed that you most likely could not use as a journalist. These often add an effective onomatopoeic feel to the prose. Does fiction give you a freedom that your prior writing life as a reporter could not?

Enger: I wasn't aware the words you mention weren't in the dictionary; all of them seemed appropriate and came to mind when called. On the other hand I suppose part of the thrill of language is making up a new word when one seems needed, or just for the fun of it, or using an old word in a new way. Is it easier to do so in fiction than journalism? Sure, although my editors at MPR generally loved words and wanted to see them used creatively—one, bored by my description of sailors eating breakfast, suggested the phrase “forking down wedges of eggs,” a huge improvement. I've yet to hear anyone else on this continent use the word “wedge” with such authority, though this particular editor is Scottish and so has unfair advantage in colorful speech.

W&B: You were a reporter for Minnesota Public Radio for many years. How does that experience inform your fiction writing?

Enger: It forced me to get out and meet whole parades of interesting and likeable people, people I'd never have met otherwise. It also gave me lots of chances to work with MPR's fine battery of editors, a humbling experience. A common flaw of young writers is unwillingness to admit one's draft might be improved upon, and I remember storming around after early script conversations, but in fact every last editing session resulted in better work. I've gradually learned to love rewriting and the pain of burning cross.

W&B: What is the difference between the immediacy of radio work and the more removed and extended process of writing fiction?

Enger: Radio has that quick reward: you write the piece one day and hear it back the next. Usually there's a phrase or two that gives you joy, or a great bit of sound, ear candy. Sometimes the phone rings afterward, and you feel good. Then it's gone, though, and there's the nervous part of the job awaiting you—getting the next interview, trying to make sense of the story, trying to get it done quickly. A book on the other hand is a tortoise. You get on every morning and ride it slowly forward, knowing how silly you look, hoping the tortoise knows where it's going. In radio, you can do a story quite badly and know forgiveness isn't far off; a book has heavier expectations.

W&B: In *Peace Like a River* the media is shown as having a tendency toward the sensational. Is this a commentary on your former profession?

Enger: Sure, though neither the tendency nor the commentary is anything new. Journalism loves the new disease, the telling trend. Watch any television newscast—watch for the lowered brow, the deepened voice, the grave concern.

W&B: There are different truths intrinsic to the writing of journalism and that of fiction. How do you balance them? Does your history of reporting necessitate more extensive "truth telling" in your fiction than might be true of other novelists?

Enger: Truthfulness is at best partial in journalism. That's not an indictment of the profession—there's usually just not enough time for a reporter to really know his subjects. You do the best you can, and thus it's always been. Novels grant you license to be fanciful, whimsical, to tell the truth according to things other than fact. I love research, which is an excuse to read obscure histories and biographies, but I don't feel much constrained by facts.

W&B: What are the things other than fact that you rely on to tell truth in your stories?

Enger: Faith. Doubt. Spiritual honesty, or my best stab at it.

W&B: How has the success of *Peace Like a River* changed your life as a writer?

Enger: I get up later in the morning now; I get more mail; and, after two long book tours in two years, I appreciate more keenly the hills and woods of our little farm.

W&B: The book has been optioned for film. What stage is that project in now?

Enger: There's a screenplay, a producer, and a studio, in search of a director.

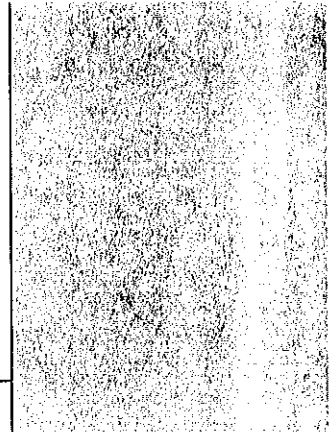
W&B: What is your current writing project and what are your plans for the future?

Enger: I'm writing a novel about an aging train robber in the early 20th century, trying to win back the wife he abandoned long before. If the tortoise stays course I should finish this summer.

END

For more information, contact Karen vanMeenen at 585-473-2590 x104 or karenv@wab.org.

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Interviewed by Linda M. Castellitto

BookSense.com: Many of the articles I've read about you and *Peace Like a River* mention your surprise at your book's success -- not least [shameless plug alert] the Book Sense Book of the Year Award! Have you become any more used to your fame since then? What sort of impact has it had on your life?

Leif Enger: All that's happened has been a complete joy, a delight. And yes, a great surprise -- I never cultivated commercial expectations for the book during its writing, so the lists and kind words and Book Sense honor were like an odd knock at the door -- we opened it, and there lay a candlelit banquet. But most things haven't changed. I did leave my job at Minnesota Public Radio; we paid off the farm, which felt remarkably good; but I still work eight hours a day, Robin still teaches, there's still school and music and church and the whole parade of chores to be done. The bedrock stays, and we're grateful for that.

Your book is, as many have said before me, a wonderful read -- you succeed at making the fantastical seem believable, and the impossible, achievable. Does this echo any experiences you've had, or feelings you have, about life or human interaction?

Probably a sense that we narrow our expectations as we age; that the field of possibility is much broader, and wonders more likely, than we allow ourselves to believe. This calcification is not inevitable. My older brother, a commercial pilot, abruptly decided about three years ago to learn blues guitar. He bought a G&L electric and a Fender Classic amp and set



Leif Enger's *Peace Like a River* has been a bookseller favorite from the moment it was published; it was a No. 1 Book Sense 76 pick, and won the 2001 Book Sense Book of the Year Award!

It's at the top of numerous bestseller lists, and was named a Best Book for 2001 by *Time* magazine, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Denver Post*. Before this solo writing venture, Enger wrote several books with his brother-in-law, including *The Summer League*.

He grew up in Minnesota, and lives there with his wife and children.

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himself to practice 1,000 hours per year -- you should hear him now.

Reuben, the narrator, is a proverbial good kid: smart, curious, fallible, devoted to his family, but not without the occasional urge to be a pain in the butt...so real! Did you observe your kids, or think back to your childhood with your brother, and draw on those people/experiences for Reuben?

I had a great rollicking childhood, dragged along always by my older brothers and sister, so being a pain is something I understand and was always good at. My siblings were mostly patient, though [my brother] Lin sometimes took pleasure in my gullibility, such as the time after a rainstorm when we were playing in the driveway and he offered me a "giant chocolate chip." It sure looked like a chocolate chip -- Hershey Kisses weren't around then, but the item Lin held out resembled one, though unwrapped. I was probably seven and should've known better, given the dirty condition of Lin's hands, but I grabbed it and chewed several times before understanding it was only rich dark mud.

Now it's our kids' turn; last night during the Twins game, Ty got up from the couch and fell right on his face because John, three years younger, had sneaked up and tied his feet together with a leather strap. You have to be close and of generous character to endure this kind of warfare, and I think they're friends for life.

The character of Jeremiah is a spiritual, spiritually gifted sort who can perform miracles...except he cannot heal his son's asthma. What made you decide to have that be so?

I never really thought about having Jeremiah simply heal Reuben; I guess if a person is an agent of the miraculous, then the miracles themselves can't be predicted or assumed -- otherwise that person would have no conflict, no problems. No hardships whatever. It would make for an easy life and boring fiction. Our natures are such that often what we want the most, we cannot have, at least without sacrifice; so the decision was made for me.

Do you believe in miracles?

Yes.

Swede's cowboy poem was such fun to read, and the adventures of Sunny served as a nice counterpoint to the adventures of Reuben and his family. Have you written other poetry, and/or do you ever have the urge to?



I haven't written much verse since Sunny Sundown, but gladly will if another excuse to do so shows up. My taste in poetry never grew past the age of 11, so my favorite stuff still rhymes and thumps and actually tells a story.

I don't want to give too much away, so I'll just note that the ending of *Peace Like a River* was powerful -- it brought resolution and serenity in some ways, but was provocative and discomfiting, too. Was this ending something you had in mind when you started out, or did it grow along with the book?

The ending unnerved me a little as I neared it -- it seemed risky, and I wasn't sure how convincingly it would read -- yet it also seemed inevitable, as though to do anything else would be untrue. The whole story, the character of Jeremiah, the miraculous events, had been leading to something; I was probably three-quarters of the way through when I realized what it was.

What's interesting is that while it was the part of the book that should've been hardest to write, it came much faster than the rest, so I felt confident of being on the right track.

Do you live among the landscape you describe in the book? Would you talk a little bit about how landscape informs literature in general, and your writing in particular?

Certainly landscape helps mold the characters who inhabit it. A hard plain under relentless weather seems likely to produce quiet hardworking people who squint a lot -- it's the old laconic-cowboy standard, and there's truth to it. I'd say the winsome lakes and fields of central Minnesota, where I've always lived, have contributed to a general contentment and generosity.

But geography's also an active exotic backdrop anxious to influence the story, and I like best when writers allow it to do so. In the North Dakota Badlands there were burning veins of lignite that captured the imagination of all who saw them -- Teddy Roosevelt came across them horseback in the 1880s, I saw (and feared) them as a boy of eight, then flameshot cracks in the earth, and the ranchers I talked to while writing *Peace Like a River* told stories of coal-warmed picnics in January and game wardens disappearing forever into the burning fissures. How could anyone not use such material? What's more dramatic than ground and fire and sky?

When do you do your writing? I know that you used to write in the early morning before you went to work at Minnesota Public Radio. Do you write all day (and sleep a little later!) now?

Early morning's still best for me, though that 5:00 a.m. schedule gets lost in the summer months -- it requires getting to bed early, which is difficult with the evenings so long and light and pleasant. At present, I'm starting at 8:00 a.m. and writing until around 5:00 p.m.; but once autumn comes, and school starts, and it's dark soon after supper, then it's back to early coffee.

You've been touring for the book -- how has that been going? Did you have expectations that were met (or not) in terms of the

response you got, how tired it made you, how many times you had to write your name, and so on?

Robin and the boys came along for most of the traveling -- we enjoyed the long drives across the Great Plains and down the western coastline, and people very graciously came out for the events. It's tiring, as you suggest, but also wonderful -- we made many friends among booksellers and readers, and were shown hospitality day after day. What surprised me most was the generosity of audiences and the energy and curiosity they brought to the readings. We needed that energy -- in one stretch we drove 10,000 miles in 31 days.

The book has been optioned for a movie, yes? Will you be writing the screenplay? Have you been to Hollywood?

The book's been optioned and a screenplay is under construction, though I'm not writing it; nor have I visited Hollywood -- though, like most Midwestern tourists, I intend to someday.

Are you working on another book, or any other projects, at the moment?

I'm writing a novel set in 1916 about an old train-robber working to win back the wife he abandoned long before.

Will you tell us a little bit about your previous books, written with your brother?

They're mysteries about a former major-league ballplayer who's gone into reclusive retirement in the north woods. Both of us were baseball, and we wrote the books in the belief that crime was an easy and lucrative genre to break into, which turned out to be mistaken. We wrote six novels, published five, and stopped from exhaustion and creative desires, but the collaboration itself was tremendous fun, and Lin taught me more than anyone about how stories work, and their editing and pacing.

Do you have a favorite bookstore?

Rainy Days Bookstore[1], in Nisswa, Minnesota -- Barbara Scott is a faithful friend from the mystery-novel years, and one of the best booksellers with a kind of prescience about her customers' wants.

What are you reading now? What do you read to your kids?

We still read most nights as a family -- poetry sometimes (I'd recommend Poems and Stories for Extremely Young Children of All Ages, edited by Harold Bloom) but mostly great fiction by the stalwart writers of adventure like London, Arthur Conan Doyle and Grey Wister.



Harold Bloom

What books would you recommend to our readers?

Elmore Leonard used to write western, and he wrote a good one at them I wish he'd do a few more. "Valdez is Coming" is my favorite of

these, but I just picked up a reprint of "The Law at Mandado" and that was good too.

Mark Dunn has a new novel coming out this fall, "Welcome to Higby", which is very funny, in the vein of James Wilcox, and I've recently read Larry McMurtry's book "Roads," which was like eating sticky candy.

David Nasaw's biography of William Hearst, Martin Amis' memoir "Experience," and Asa Mercer's "Banditti of the Plains," about the Johnson County War, are all fascinating.

Peace Like a River

Search for all of [Leif Enger's](#) books on [BookSense.com](#)

[1] Rainy Days Bookstore: 25491 Main Street, Nisswa, MN Phone: (612) 396-4891 Email: rainyday@uslink.net

***Peace Like a River* was the No. 1 Book Sense Pick in Sept./Oct. 2001:**

"What a book! I was captivated from page one. His pitch perfect prose is a pleasure to read, and his imaginative storytelling took me through the whole range of human emotion. *Peace Like a River* deserves a huge audience, it's that good. I eagerly look forward to its arrival so we can begin the delightful task of finding a readership for this really extraordinary (and really fun) novel."



- Mark LaFramboise, Politics and Prose Bookstore, Washington, DC

Author photo by Don Enger

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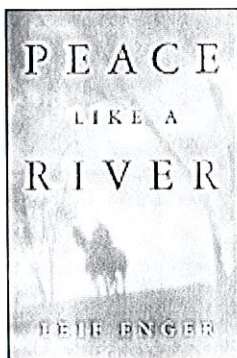
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Riding the wave of Leif Enger's dazzling debut

INTERVIEW BY ALDEN MUDGE

Leif Enger's novel, **Peace Like a River**, is generating enough pre-publication buzz that it is already being compared to Charles Frazier's 1997 surprise National Book Award winner, *Cold Mountain*. That's not a bad comparison. Both novels seem to have come out of nowhere and arrived fully formed, alive with inspired casts of characters and powered by an old-time joy in storytelling. Of the two, **Peace Like a River** is the more humorous, though its humor is shaded by enough tragedy to make the experience of reading it complete and resonant.

Peace Like a River

By Leif Enger
Atlantic Monthly Press, \$24
ISBN 087113795X

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And there all comparisons should end. Because **Peace Like a River** casts a spell all its own. The spell is already being felt in the book world: enthusiastic booksellers are raving, and at a recent national book convention Peace was listed as the "buzz book" to watch. All this attention comes as a total surprise to the book's author, Leif Enger. "I'm completely amazed by it," he says during a call to his home in Minnesota, where he lives with his wife and two sons. "In my greatest dreams of success -- which every struggling writer lives upon -- I didn't dream that something like this could happen."



Enger, who has wanted to write fiction since his teens, was a reporter and producer for Minnesota Public Radio from 1984 until the sale of **Peace Like a River** to publisher Grove/Atlantic allowed him to take time off to write. In the 1990s, he and his older brother, Lin, writing under the pen name L.L. Enger, produced a series of mystery novels featuring a retired baseball player.

"It was one of those mercenary adventures that comes up empty-handed," Enger says with a remarkably good-natured laugh. "Nobody really read them and they didn't get much attention and we didn't get paid very much for them. We had a lot of fun doing it, and it was a fabulous apprenticeship for me."

By the time he began to write **Peace Like a River** six years ago, Enger had given up great expectations of publishing glory. "I figured since I had given commercial writing my very best shot, I was free to just write something that I could read to my wife and kids. When I finished a scene I would gather them around and read it to them, and if it didn't make them laugh or if it didn't provoke some strong reaction, I knew I had to go

back to the drawing board. What I wanted to do and what I think I did is just put everything that I love into it. I didn't think about the book commercially until I was over half done and I realized the book was going to have an end."

As heart-warming as all that sounds, Enger also notes that the kernel of the book "was a little bit of desperation." **Peace Like a River** is set in the Midwest in 1962 and is an account of events that occurred when narrator Reuben Land was 11 years old. As a boy, Reuben was so severely afflicted by asthma that he was unable to draw breath at birth and was only saved by his miracle-performing father, Jeremiah.

X "When I was starting the book six years ago, my son was fighting a terrible case of asthma," Enger says. "He was just fighting for breath. It was terribly frightening for Robin and me. We didn't know what was going on. We didn't know how to treat it. We didn't know how to prevent it. As a parent you want to work a miracle. You would take your son's place if you could. Basically I wanted to understand what he was going through and I wanted to somehow translate my wish for his good health into the book. All I knew at the beginning was that the narrator was asthmatic and his father did miracles."

From that beginning, Enger weaves a story that is a surprising and beguiling mix of heroic quest, cowboy romance and moral fable. Reuben's older brother Davy gets caught up in an escalating feud with two small-town bullies, is charged and tried for murdering them, and when the verdict seems about to go against him, escapes on horseback for parts unknown. Reuben, his father and his younger sister Swede set out in their Airstream trailer to find the outlaw Davy Land, and along the way, Reuben learns more than most of us about sacrifice, redemption and faith.

Reuben's younger sister Swede is a writer of heroic cowboy verse about a complicated hero named Sunny Sundown. Her talents, swift wit and force of personality hold her older 11-year-old brother in her thrall. The two share a fascination for the West and, indeed, seem to live out a kind of timeless cowboy adventure.

Y By rights, a storyline like this should not work in a literary novel like **Peace Like a River**. But such is Enger's unflagging, high-spirited storytelling that the relationship between Reuben and his cowboy poet sister is a high point of the novel. As is her clunky, comical, oddly affecting verse.

"That stuff was tremendously easy to write," says Enger, who relates childhood memories of long summer afternoons dressed in a breechcloth roaming the woods and fields around their home in Osakis, Minnesota, with his older brothers. "I'm kind of like Reuben, in that I'm a very slow study of things, and don't think well on my feet. But I love people who are fast and brilliant like Swede."

He adds, "Swede almost had to be a poet and write heroic couplets and cowboy verse because I grew up being read to from Robert Service, who wrote the great sourdough poetry, *The Ballad of Dan McGrew*, *The Ballad of Blasphemous Bill* and *The Ballad of the Iceworm Cocktail*. And then there is Robert Louis Stevenson. Mom read us *Treasure Island* every year for many years, starting before I was old enough to understand any of it. It was confusing to me, but I loved it. I loved the play of words. I

loved the language. He was a strikingly contemporary writer for the time; he was ahead of his time. He's my favorite writer of all time. I just love his poems, his great adventure tales, his brand of moral fiction."

Then, finally, at the very end of our conversation, Enger describes one of those unexpected moments when creative opportunity presents itself:

"I was about 20 pages into the manuscript and was working on it early one morning when my youngest son, John, got up and came toddling in in his pajamas. He said: 'How's it going, Dad?' I said: 'It's going pretty well.' He said: 'You got any cowboys in that book yet?' And I said: 'No, not yet. But that's a fabulous idea. You think I should?' And he said: 'Yes!' I said: 'Well if you could give me a good name, I'll put a cowboy in the book.' And he said: 'Sunny Sundown.' No hesitation. Sunny Sundown. He'd been thinking about Sunny, apparently, for a while. I just happened to be at a spot where I could take off into it. By the end of the day the first few stanzas of Sunny were written and I just never looked back."

And thus a cowboy, a cowboy poet and a novel of uncommon appeal are born.

Alden Mudge is a writer in Oakland, California.

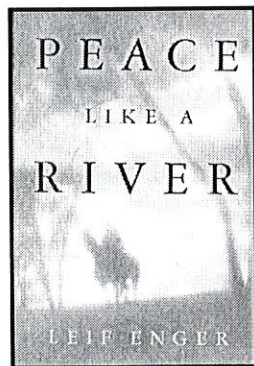
Author photo by Don Enger.

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NoveList



Peace like a river

Leif Enger

Author: Enger, Leif

The quiet 1960s midwestern life of the Land family--father Jeremiah, and children, Reuben, Davy and Swede--is upended when Davy kills two teenage boys who have come to harm the family. On the morning of his sentencing, Davy escapes from his cell and the Lands set out in search of him. Their search is at once a heroic quest, a tragedy, a love story, and a haunting meditation on the possibility of magic in the everyday world.

New York: Atlantic Monthly Press; [Emeryville, CA]: Distributed by Publishers Group West, c2001, 313 p.

Popularity: ★★★★★

Level: Adult

Subject Headings:

- Eleven-year-old boys -- Minnesota
- Father and son -- Minnesota
- Mother-separated children -- Minnesota
- Brothers -- Minnesota
- Outlaws -- Minnesota
- Fugitives -- Minnesota
- Asthmatic boys -- Minnesota
- Coming-of-age stories
- Minnesota

Reviews for this Title:

Booklist Review: What readers will appreciate first in Enger's marvelous novel is the language. His limpid sentences are composed with the clarity and richness for which poets strive. It takes longer to get caught up in the story, but gradually, as the complex narrative unwinds, readers will find themselves immersed in an exceptionally heartfelt and moving tale about the resilience of family relationships, told in retrospect through the prism of memory. "We all hold history differently inside us," says narrator Reuben, who was an adolescent in Minnesota in the 1960s, when his brother, Davy, shot and killed two young men who were harassing the family. Reuben's father--in Reuben's estimation fully capable of performing miracles even though the outside world believed him to be lost in the clouds--packs Reuben and his sister up and follows the trail Davy has left in his flight from the law. Their journey comprises the action in the novel, but this is not really a book about adventures on the road. Rather, it is a story of relationships in which the exploration of character takes precedence over incident. Enger's profound understanding of human nature stands behind his compelling prose.
(Reviewed May 15, 2001) -- Brad Hooper

Publishers Weekly Review: Dead for 10 minutes before his father orders him to breathe in the name of the living God, Reuben Land is living proof that the world is full of miracles. But it's the impassioned honesty of his quiet, measured narrative voice that gives weight and truth to the fantastic elements of this engrossing tale. From the vantage point of adulthood, Reuben tells how his father rescued his brother Davy's girlfriend from two attackers, how that led to Davy being jailed for murder and how, once Davy escapes and heads south for the Badlands of North Dakota, 12-year-old Reuben, his younger sister Swede and their janitor father light out after him. But the FBI is following Davy as well, and Reuben has a part to play in the finale of that chase, just as he had a part to play in his brother's trial. It's the kind of story that used to be material for ballads, and Enger twines in numerous references to the Old West, chiefly through the rhymed poetry Swede writes about a hero called Sunny Sundown. That the story is set in the early '60s in Minnesota gives it an archetypal feel, evoking a time when the possibility of getting lost in the country still existed. Enger has created a world of signs, where dead crows fall in a snowstorm and vagrants lie curled up in fields, in which everything is significant, everything has weight and comprehension is always fleeting. This is a stunning debut novel, one that sneaks up on you like a whisper and warms you like a quilt in a North Dakota winter, a novel about faith, miracles and family that is, ultimately, miraculous.
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Library Journal Review: Fair or not, Enger's first novel will inevitably be compared to the work of Garrison Keillor: both men are veterans of Minnesota Public Radio, and the book very much shares the spirit of Keillor's radio work and fiction, with its quiet, observant gaze capturing the beauty of simple things, related through wise and thoughtful characters—in this case, the Land family from North Dakota. Asthmatic youngster Reuben Land tells the admittedly shaggy-dog story of his older brother Davy, who shoots and kills two violent intruders as they break into the family's home; Davy is convicted but manages to flee. Both the Lands and the law follow in hot pursuit, but the family seems to have support from a higher power—father Jeremiah himself has performed a miracle or two in his lifetime (walking on water, healing the afflicted with his touch, and the like). Biblical allusions abound, and fantastic things happen, such as the patriarch's four-mile tour via tornado. "Make of it what you will," says Reuben. A low-key charmer for literary collections. [Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ5/15/01.]—Marc Klosszewski, *Indiana Free Lib., PA* (Reviewed June 15, 2001) (*Library Journal*, vol 126, issue 11, p102)

Kirkus Reviews Minnesotan Enger pulls out the stops in this readable albeit religiously correct debut about a family with a father who may be touched by God and a son by the Devil.

Jeremiah Land's wife left him years ago, and now, in a midwestern town called Roofing, in 1962 or so, he's janitor at the local school and sole parent of chronically asthmatic Reuben, 11 and the tale's teller; his precocious sister Swede, only 9 and already an accomplished poet of western outlaw-romances; and Davy, who at 17 becomes a killer—though possibly a just one. Two town boys from the wrong side of the tracks have a grudge against custodian Jeremiah (he caught them in the girls' locker room) and, after vowing revenge (and briefly kidnapping Swede), they appear one night in the upstairs of the Land house, whereupon Davy (did he lure them there?) bravely and determinedly shoots them dead. There's a trial, a conviction—and then a jailbreak as Davy escapes, not to be seen for some months. Miraculous? Well, Reuben has seen his father walk on air ("Make of it what you will," he advises the reader), and now there's a miraculous meal (a pot of soup is bottomless), the miracle of the family's being left an Airstream trailer—even the miracle of Jeremiah being fired, leaving the family free to take to the road after Davy. The direction they go (toward the Badlands), how they avoid the police, what people they meet (including a future wife for Jeremiah), how they find handsome Davy—all depend on what may or may not constitute miracle, subtle or wondrous, including the suspenseful events leading to a last gunfight and the biggest miracle of all (preceded by a glimpse of heaven), all followed by certain rearrangements among the lives of mortals. Handsomely written, rich with the feel and flavor of the plains—and suited mainly for those whose yearnings are in the down-home, just-folks style of the godly.
(*Kirkus Reviews*, June 1, 2001)

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Excerpt

Peace Like a River by Leif Enger

List Price: \$13.00

Pages: 320

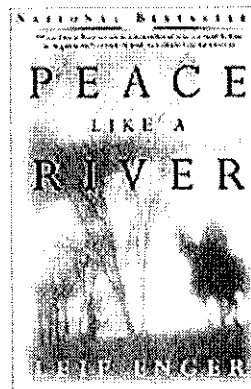
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Author Biography

Leif Enger was raised in Osakis, Minnesota, and has worked as a reporter and producer for Minnesota Public Radio since 1984. He lives on a farm in Minnesota with his wife and two sons.

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Author Interview

Interview conducted by Mark LaFramboise, of Politics & Prose Bookstore, Washington D.C.

ML: Booksellers I know have been raving about **PEACE LIKE A RIVER** for a while now. Now that you know how well the book is being received, how is the inevitable prepublication waiting affecting your life? Are you about to burst, or maybe even a little frightened?

LE: I'm a little anxious; when you've put so much work into a novel, and been backed so generously by your publisher, naturally you hope it doesn't disappoint. But the waiting's been relaxed and pleasant. Robin, my wife, and I home educate the boys and I've been able to take a bigger role in that. Our youngest is building a canoe -- I'm there to cut the tricky angles. We've camped lately in Minnesota's Boundary Waters and also the Teton and Bighorn ranges of Wyoming, and now we're painting the

farmhouse and hanging some wallpaper. Grove/Atlantic introduced me to a number of booksellers over the summer, which was enormous fun, but until the past few weeks publication has seemed like something sweet and far-off and hazy. It's exciting, now, to have things coming into focus -- to be thinking of the book tour, and seeing new places.

ML: This isn't your first book. What was your earlier experience in writing and publishing?

LE: Back in the 80s my brother Lin, then at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, wrote to me suggesting we have some fun and collaborate on a crime novel—he had a character in mind, an ex-major-league ballplayer living reclusively in the north woods. We sketched out the plot on note cards, one card per chapter, and sent each other chapters through the mail. We ended up publishing five books with Pocket and Simon & Schuster. They were widely ignored, but we had a great time -- we'd get together, rub our hands over sinister plots, and then pitch batting practice to each other until dark. Lin's the better hitter, and also taught me most of what I know about writing fiction.

ML: How do you think your role as husband and father affected the telling of PEACE LIKE A RIVER? Are there insights into character that you couldn't have gained any other way?

LE: Robin and the boys were the book's first audience. I read them almost every scene in first draft, and usually based my rewriting on their responses. Kids have a dead-on instinct for what makes a good story (outlaws on horseback, hidden treasure, secret caves, dynamite) and Robin, who would rather praise than criticize, was always brave enough to recognize when I'd gotten off track or written needless pages. Also, without my own family it's doubtful I could've written convincingly of Jeremiah's relationship with his children, or with Roxanna. What father hasn't wished he could take a child's pain on himself? Who knows better than a husband what's gained by courtship, or lost when courtship ends?

ML: Setting is so important in this novel. The family's name, Land, even suggests this. Are there certain personal characteristics that you think arise from the upper Midwest, from Minnesota in particular?

LE: Acceptance, probably. Perseverance. I grew up squinting from the backseat at gently rolling hills and true flatlands, where you could top a rise and see a tractor raising dust three miles away. So much world and sky is visible it's hard to put much stock in your own influence -- it's a perfect landscape for cultivating gratitude.

ML: Also, while the book is contained geographically within western Minnesota and the Dakotas, a variety of landscapes are described: the town, the country, and open road, and the nearly mystical place of snow and steam

where the family occasionally gathers. Can you suggest any way(s) these different places inform the story, or the interior lives of its participants?

LE: It's hard for me to fully picture a character without the ground he occupies, or his responses to new landscapes. When I was seven or eight we visited family in Montana, where my uncle showed us a lignite vein that had caught fire years before and was burning still. The fire had worked so deeply into the ground flames were no longer visible and what we saw was a blackened cut through the badlands where heat shimmered out. Though old enough to realize this was geography and not Hell itself I confess to many fearful imaginings involving underground trolls, anvils, and long-fingered hands that might snake out and grab a boy's ankle. The coal-vein scene in the book is one of great hope, but at the same time the surface of Reuben's confidence in the family's quest is beginning to crack, and steam to issue forth.

ML: Although the narrator tells the story in retrospect, we see the world through the eleven- year old eyes of Reuben. How were you able to capture the wonder, fears, and curiosity of such a young protagonist?

LE: First, my parents gave me the sort of childhood now rarely encountered. Summers were beautiful unorganized eternities where we wandered in the timber unencumbered by scoutmasters. We dressed in breechclouts and carried willow branch bows, and after supper Dad hit us fly balls. It was probably most idyllic for me as the youngest of four, since three worthy imaginations were out beating the ground in front of me -- who knew what might jump up? Now I see that same freedom in the lives of our two sons, whose interests cover the known map. It's easy to witness the world through the eyes of a boy when you have two observant ones with you at all times. But the ruinous thing about growing up is that we stop creating mysteries where none exist, and worse, we usually try to deconstruct and deny the genuine mysteries that remain. We argue against God, against true romance, against loyalty and self-sacrifice. What allows Reuben to keep his youthful perspective is that he's seen all these things in action -- he is the beneficiary of his father's faith. He is a witness of wonders. To forget them would be to deny they happened, and denying the truth is the beginning of death.

ML: Reuben's asthma figures prominently in the story. Unless you yourself are afflicted, how were you able to describe the condition with such detail?


LE: Our oldest son was gripped by severe childhood asthma when I started the novel -- he was seven years old and working hard just to get his breath. Of course we'd have given anything for a gigantic, lung-clearing miracle, but since it didn't happen the only course was to treat him medically the best we could, and try to comprehend his struggle. That wasn't difficult because twice in my life, at 13 and again at 21, I had isolated, terrifying asthmatic episodes -- times when breathing was wrenching muscular effort and I didn't dare go to sleep. But for me it never became chronic,

and the good news is that our son just turned 14 and his asthma has diminished to the point where he rarely needs medicine. Teddy Roosevelt is much admired in this house, and we aspire to the strenuous life.

ML: Reuben's sister, Swede, is perhaps the most engaging character in the book and the only female in the motherless Land family. Her personality is so vibrant that she feels very real. Is she or anyone else in the story based on people you've known in your life?

LE: Swede is the potent mixture of several remarkable women, most notably my own sister, mother, and wife, who share the qualities of cleverness and brute honesty. This wasn't intentional; Swede just stepped into an early scene and wouldn't leave. The other characters are also composites of adventurers among my family and friends, of coworkers, of people met once and not forgotten. To lift someone whole from life and drop them into a novel would be difficult, and also impractical in a legal sense.

ML: Swede has a penchant for epic poetry. How does her poetic saga of Sunny Sundown relate to or parallel the family's struggle after Davy's trouble with the law?

 **LE:** The poetry began simply because my son, who was four at the time, thought there should be a cowboy named Sunny Sundown in the book. But the verse quickly became useful both in foreshadowing coming events and in revealing Swede's response to Davy's actions. In any family there's the real unfolding of life, and then there are the rewrites, the way each person tells himself what happened. Swede believes we all live epics, and I agree. A few heroic stanzas would do most families a lot of good.

ML: Magic plays such a great role in this story. Is it important that we as readers believe the veracity of these events: e.g. the tornado, Jeremiah walking off a platform into space, Reuben's journey to the beyond, to name a few, or just that Reuben believes?

LE: I hope even skeptical readers will enjoy the novel, but my own suspicion is that miracles, big obvious ones as well the more comfortable variety (kittens in springtime, Puckett's homer in Game Six) are underway around us. I was raised to this belief and have as yet no proof that it is not so. Why lessen our joy by throwing out what the author of Hebrews called "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"?

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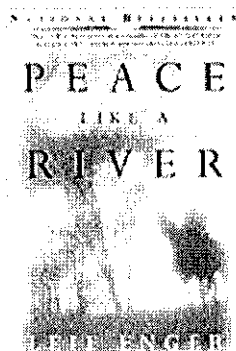
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PEACE LIKE A RIVER



Author: Leif Enger

Publisher: Grove/ Atlantic, 2001

Website: www.groveatlantic.com

Available in: Paperback, 312 pages. \$13
(ISBN 0-8021-3925-6)

Genre: Fiction/Family/Faith/ Americana

Summary

*Set in the Minnesota countryside and North Dakota Badlands of the early 1960s, **Peace Like a River** is a story about one family's quest to retrieve its most wayward member. Reuben Land, the novel's asthmatic and self-effacing eleven-year-old narrator, recounts a journey riddled with outlaw tales, heartfelt insights, and bona fide miracles. Born without air in his lungs, Reuben is keenly aware of the gift of breath—and, by extension, the gift of life. Time and again, both gifts are bestowed on Reuben by his father, a gentlemanly soul who works as a school janitor and has the power—and faith—to bestow true miracles. But when Davy (Reuben's brother) kills two intruders who break into the Land home with evil intent, and then escapes from prison while his trial is in progress, events seem to have worsened beyond the aid of miracles. Or have they? For, once Reuben and his family set out to find Davy, the reader eventually witnesses rivers, plains, and city lights unseen by mortal eyes.*

Recommended by: Tom Walker, The Denver Post

"Once in a great while, a book comes along that has such wonderful characters and marvelous prose, that you read it as

much for the pure joy it offers on every page as to find out how it ends."

Author Biography

Leif Enger was raised in Osakis, Minnesota, and has worked as a reporter and producer for Minnesota Public Radio since 1984. He lives on a farm in Minnesota with his wife and two sons.

Topics to Consider

- 1. Begin your discussion of this book by recounting the major and minor miracles that occur throughout. What role do they play in *Peace Like a River*?*
- 2. Does Reuben see Davy as a murderer, or as one who acted in self-defense? Does he want Davy brought to justice, or does he think justice has already been served? Discuss how the novel explores the idea of loyalty.*
- 3. How does the Land family contend with the raw, uncivilized, and sometimes brutal landscape of rural Minnesota and the Badlands of North Dakota? Identify events or circumstances in which the novel's setting contributes to its elemental or mythic quality.*
- 4. Besides the *Sunny Sundown* text, several other outlaw tales, literary allusions, biblical legends, and historical asides are offered—by Swede or by Reuben himself. Identify a few of these stories-within-the-story, explaining how each enriches or influences the main narrative.*
- 5. Discuss the character of Jeremiah Land, Reuben's father—and the center of his moral compass. What are Jeremiah's strengths, as a person and a parent? Does he have any weaknesses? Why did his wife leave him, all those years ago? Explain how the novel's dual themes of familial love and ardent faith are met in this character.*
- 6. Discuss the impact prayer has on Reuben, and how it transforms him. Reading this book, did you discover anything about the activity of, reasons for, or consequences of prayer?*
- 7. What does the character of Roxanna bring to the Land family?*

What does she provide that the Lands had lacked before her arrival?

8. Much of this novel concerns the inner life of childhood: imagination, storytelling, chores, play, and school life. Discuss the author's portrayal of childhood. Do the children depicted here seem realistic? Why or why not?

*9. Conclude your discussion by comparing and contrasting *Peace Like a River* with the traditional morality play—the symbolic drama (dating back to medieval times) based on the eternal struggle between Good and Evil.*

Reading Group Choices 2003