

Peace Like a River

by Leif Enger

About the Book

Leif Enger's best-selling debut is at once a heroic quest, a tragedy, and a love story, in which "what could be unbelievable becomes extraordinary" (Connie Ogle, *The Miami Herald*). Enger brings us eleven-year-old Reuben Land, an asthmatic boy in the Midwest who has reason to believe in miracles. Along with his sister and father, Reuben finds himself on a cross-country search for his outlaw older brother who has been controversially charged with murder. Their journey unfolds like a revelation, and its conclusion shows how family, love, and faith can stand up to the most terrifying of enemies, the most tragic of fates.

Praise for the Book

"*Peace Like a River* serves as a reminder of why we read fiction to begin with."
— **Andrew Roe**, *San Francisco Chronicle*

"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."
— **Tom Walker**, *The Denver Post*

"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*

"A rich mixture of adventure, tragedy, and healing . . . a journey you simply must not miss."
— **Ron Charles**, *The Christian Science Monitor*

"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 Enger's prose."
— **Dan Cryer**, *Newsday*

Courtesy of Grove Press

About the Author

Leif Enger

American Writer (1961–)

Also known as: Leif Enger, L. L. Enger

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Personal Information: Born 1961, in Osakis, MN; married; wife's name Robin; children: two sons.

Education: Minnesota State University, Moorhead, B.A., 1983.

Addresses: Home: Brainerd Lakes area of Minnesota. Agent: Paul Cirone, Aaron Priest Agency, 703 Third Ave., 23rd Fl., New York, NY 10017.

Career: Novelist. Minnesota Public Radio, reporter and producer, 1984–2000.

Awards: Best Book of the Year, *Amazon.com*, 2001, for *Peace like a River*. *Peace like a River* was also chosen for the “One Book, One Denver” reading program in 2004.

WRITINGS

- (With brother, Lin Enger, under joint pseudonym L. L. Enger) *Sacrifice* (novel) Pocket Books (New York, NY), 1993.
- (With brother, Lin Enger, under joint pseudonym L. L. Enger) *The Sinners' League: A Gun Pedersen Mystery* (novel), O. Penzler Books (New York, NY), 1994.
- *Peace like a River* (novel), Atlantic Monthly Press (New York, NY), 2001.

Also author, with brother Lin Enger, under joint pseudonym L. L. Enger, of the mystery novels *Swing*, *Comeback*, and *Strike*, all published by Pocket Books (New York, NY).

Sidelights

Leif Enger is a writer who has won acclaim for his first solo novel, *Peace like a River*. Enger's literary debut, which begins in rural Minnesota during the early 1960s, tells the story of Reuben Land, an adolescent beset with a chronic respiratory disorder and a wayward brother, Davy. When Davy guns down two home invaders and leaves town, Reuben joins his father, a poetry aficionado working as a school janitor, and his little sister, a tomboy obsessed with reading cowboy novels and preparing her own verse about a gunslinger, in searching for the runaway brother. The family's ensuing travels lead them into strange and miraculous experiences, including an encounter with a seemingly bottomless soup pot at a roadside eatery. “By the end,” reported Susan Salter Reynolds in the *Los Angeles Times*, “life itself seems miraculous and strange: from the fact of breath to the possibility of justice.”

Upon publication in 2001, *Peace like a River* received recognition as a uniquely entertaining novel. “The miracle of *Peace like a River* is the irresistibility of a well-told tale,” wrote C. K. Hubbuch in *Ruminator Review*. Hubbuch noted, “Enger writes on the precarious edge of traditionalism. He veers toward sentimentality, but the strength of his story and characters keeps his novel real.” Another reviewer, Rob Thomas, described Enger’s novel, in a *Capital Times* assessment, as “an odd little novel that mixes a wintry Minnesota setting with flashes of magical realism.” But Greg Changnon, writing in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, praised *Peace like a River* as “a book full of wisdom and grace, a literary potboiler that celebrates the glory of faith.” Michael Pearson, in another *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* review, expressed similar praise, stating that Enger’s novel “has the power to convince that, despite sorrow, human experience is a miracle of ordinary truth and extraordinary love.” Katherine Dieckmann was less impressed, commenting in the *New York Times Book Review* that “Enger’s world . . . seems unlikely to have ever existed,” though she thought, “he manages to infuse sections of this novel with some surprisingly lively writing and deftly turned sentences.” Brad Hooper concluded in another *Booklist* appraisal, “Enger’s profound understanding of human nature stands behind his compelling prose.”

Enger — in collaboration with his brother Lin Enger — has also published several mystery novels centering on the exploits of a former baseball player. “It was one of those mercenary adventures that comes up empty-handed,” Enger told *BookPage* interviewer Alden Mudge. “Nobody really read them and they didn’t get much attention and we didn’t get paid very much for them.” He added, “We had a lot of fun doing it, and it was a fabulous apprenticeship for me.”

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 14, 2001, Michael Pearson, “A Miraculously Good Tale with a Western Twang,” p. B5; November 25, 2001, Greg Changnon, review of *Peace like a River*, p. C5.
- *Booklist*, May 15, 2001, Brad Hooper, review of *Peace like a River*, p. 1707; June 1, 2001, Joanne Wilkinson, review of *Peace like a River*, p. 1838.
- *Economist* (London, England), September 8, 2001, “Big, Bold, Bare, and Spare,” p. 112.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, September 28, 2001, Karen Valby, review of *Peace like a River*, p. 68.
- *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, September 2, 2001, Susan Salter Reynolds, review of *Peace like a River*, p. 11.
- *New York Times Book Review*, September 9, 2001, Katherine Dieckmann, “Miracle Worker,” p. 19.
- *People*, October 8, 2001, Bella Stander, review of *Peace like a River*, p. 59.
- *Publishers Weekly*, July 16, 2001, review of *Peace like a River*, p. 166; September 3, 2001, Daisy Maryles, “An Indie Favorite,” p. 20.
- *Ruminator Review*, fall, 2001, C. K. Hubbuch, “Magical Mystery Tour,” p. 48.

OTHER

- *Amazon.com*, <http://www.amazon.com/> (April 22, 2002), Claire Dederer, "Amazon.com's Best of 2001."
- *BookPage*, <http://www.bookpage.com/> (December 2, 2001), Alden Mudge, "Riding the Wave of Leif Enger's Dazzling Debut."
- *Capital Times*, <http://www.captimes.com/> (September 14, 2001), Rob Thomas, "Peace like a River Just Too Unreal."

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Detroit: Gale, 2007.

Source Database: Literature Resource Center

Author Interview

Q: 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?

Leif Enger: 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.

Q: 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.

Q: 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?

Q: 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.

Q: 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.

Q: 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.

Q: 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.

Q: 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.

Q: 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.

Q: 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"?

Courtesy of Grove Press

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.

Courtesy of Grove Press