

# So Brave, Young, and Handsome

by Leif Enger

## About the Book

In 1915 Minnesota, Monte Becket, a novelist, joins Glendon Hale, an outlaw intent on reconciling with his family, whom he had abandoned more than two decades earlier, but on their journey Becket leaves his own family behind and Glendon Hale is pursued by Charles Siringo, a relentless former Pinkerton agent.

## Praise for the Book

“So Brave, Young, and Handsome is a fine novel, beautifully done, a serious Western story worthy of comparison with *Shane* and *Monte Walsh* and *True Grit*.”

— **Bryan Woolley**, *The Dallas Morning News*

“[An] expansive saga of redemption in the early twentieth-century West...An adventure story [that is] so rich you can smell the spilled whiskey and feel the grit.”

— **Publishers Weekly**

“If you want a picaresque tale similar in flavor to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Read Leif Enger’s new book *So Brave, Young and Handsome*...Complete with reversals of fortune, shootouts, and colorfully drawn characters, this Western yarn is a fun ride and yet poignant too.”

— **Elissa Elliott**, *Christianity Today*

“An old-fashioned, swashbuckling, heroic Western, with pistols and ponies and señoritas and sharpshooters—an adventure of the heart and mind.”

— **Carrie Brown**, *The Washington Post Book World*

*Courtesy of Grove Press*

## About the Author

Leif Enger

Known As: Enger, L.L.; Enger, Leif

American Novelist ( 1961 - )

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## Personal Information

Born 1961, in Osakis, MN; son of Don (a school band director) and Wilma (an elementary school teacher) Enger; married; wife's name Robin; children: two sons. Education: Minnesota State University, Moorhead, B.A., 1983; University of Iowa, M.F.A. Addresses: Home: Near Brainerd, MN. Agent: Paul Cirone, Aaron Priest Agency, 703 3rd Ave., 23rd Fl., New York, NY 10017.

## Career

Writer and novelist. Minnesota Public Radio, reporter and producer, 1984-2000; Minnesota State University, Moorhead, professor and director of the M.F.A. writing program.

## Works

### Novels

- *Peace like a River*, Atlantic Monthly Press (New York, NY), 2001.
- *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*, Atlantic Monthly Press (New York, NY), 2008.

### **"GUN PEDERSEN" MYSTERIES; WITH BROTHER, LIN ENGER, UNDER JOINT PSEUDONYM L.L. ENGER**

- *Comeback*, Pocket Books (New York, NY), 1990.
- *Swing*, Pocket Books (New York, NY), 1991.
- *Strike*, Pocket Books (New York, NY), 1992.
- *Sacrifice*, Pocket Books (New York, NY), 1993.
- *The Sinners' League: A Gun Pedersen Mystery*, O. Penzler Books (New York, NY), 1994.

## Media Adaptations

*So Brave, Young, and Handsome* was adapted as an audiobook, released by Random House Audio in 2008.

## Sidelights

Leif Enger is a writer who won acclaim for his first solo novel, *Peace like a River*. Enger's literary debut, which is set 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 shoots two home invaders and leaves town, Reuben begins a search for the runaway brother with 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. 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 its publication, *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 for *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 for *Capital Times Online*, described Enger's novel as "an odd little novel that mixes a wintry Minnesota setting with flashes of magical realism." Greg Changnon, writing for 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, also writing for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 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 commented in a *Booklist* review that "Enger's profound understanding of human nature stands behind his compelling prose."

Enger followed *Peace like a River* with *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*. Once again, the author received praise for his effort. For example, Veronique de Turenne, writing for the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, noted: "Enger's managed an elusive feat. This book is different enough from *Peace like a River* to dispel all thoughts of beginner's luck. Yet it's similar enough in theme and tone--a gently heightened Western realism--that he's laid claim to a musical, sometimes magical and deeply satisfying kind of storytelling."

The novel takes place in 1915 and revolves around Monte Becket, a novelist who is struggling to write a sequel to his first successful novel, and an old man who may or may not be the outlaw

Glendon Hale. Glendon and Monte meet when Glendon rows past Monte's home on a Minnesota riverfront. Eventually, Monte is invited to join Glendon on an adventure as the old man heads west, seeking to reunite with the family that he left behind many years ago. In the meantime, Glendon is being pursued by a dogged former Pinkerton agent named Charles Siringo, who also has had some literary success writing about his own real-life exploits.

"There's not as much poetry--cowboy or otherwise--as in *Peace like a River*, but *So Brave, Young, and Handsome* has charm to spare," wrote Yvonne Zipp for the *Christian Science Monitor*, adding: "Minor characters, ranging from a blond teenage desperado to an aging female sharpshooter will beguile readers before they get restive on the long journey to the Pacific." A *Publishers Weekly* contributor noted that "Enger crafts scenes so rich you can smell the spilled whiskey and feel the grit."

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; March 15, 2008, Kevin Clouter, review of *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*, p. 29.
- *Christian Century*, October 21, 2008, Brian Doyle, review of *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*, p. 37.
- *Christian Science Monitor*, April 29, 2008, Yvonne Zipp, "On the Dusty Road to Redemption," review of *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*, p. 13.
- *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; April 25, 2008, Ben Spier, review of *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*, p. 121.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, February 15, 2008, review of *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*.
- *Library Journal*, April 1, 2008, Amy Ford, review of *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*, p. 73.
- *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, September 2, 2001, Susan Salter Reynolds, review of *Peace like a River*, p. 11; May 18, 2008, Veronique de Turenne, review of *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*.
- *New York Times Book Review*, September 9, 2001, Katherine Dieckmann, "Miracle Worker: A Father Trying to Keep His Family Together in Minnesota Needs Some Help from an Angel," 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; January 28, 2008, review of *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*, p. 38; May 26, 2008, review of *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*, p. 59.
- *Ruminator Review*, fall, 2001, C.K. Hubbuch, "Magical Mystery Tour," review of *Peace like a River*, p. 48.
- *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis, MN), August 6, 2008, Sarah T. Williams, "Brothers Bonded by Love of Storytelling," author interview.
- *Tribune Books* (Chicago, IL), April 19, 2008, Bruce Olds, "Heartland Novelist: Leif Enger Continues to Display His Faith in Life's Worth and the Decency of Human Nature," review of *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*, p. 7.
- *Washington Post Book World*, June 8, 2008, Carrie Brown, review of *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*, p. 4.

## Online

- *BookPage*, <http://www.bookpage.com/> (December 2, 2001), Alden Mudge, "Riding the Wave of Leif Enger's Dazzling Debut."
- *Bookreporter.com*, <http://www.bookreporter.com/> (December 3, 2008), Stephen Hubbard, review of *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*.
- *Capital Times Online*, <http://captimes.com/> (September 14, 2001), Rob Thomas, "*Peace like a River* Just Too Unreal."
- *Leif Enger Home Page*, <http://www.groveatlantic.com/grove/enger> (December 3, 2008).\*

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<[http://go.galegroup.com/ps/start.do?p=LitRC&u=lom\\_kentdl](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/start.do?p=LitRC&u=lom_kentdl)>.

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## Author Interview

Interview with Leif Enger

Conducted by Megan Sullivan, Harvard Bookstore, Cambridge, MA

**Megan Sullivan:** What inspired the setting for *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*? Why did you choose this setting? Can you explain why you like Westerns so much?

**Leif Enger:** Until the age of eighteen, I never traveled further west than Glendive, in eastern Montana, but knew, from Dad and my brothers and from Zane Grey, not to mention Little Joe Cartwright, that the West was where everything is possible. There's just so much room in it! Even in the age of interstate highways and air travel the Great Plains are so large, so open—so unsupervised—that they must contain whatever a person needs, if the person looks hard enough. So it was easy to choose the West as a setting, and easier still to choose one of its prettiest and most melancholy moments, just before our entry into the Great War, when the cowboys were passing and the outlaws were looking around for easier work. Part of the beauty of the Western myth is that it offers no guarantee—you might get a happy ending or you might get a rattlesnake in your blanket. Either way you are out of the office.

**MS:** What's the significance of the boats? Building boats seems to redeem the characters. Are you a boat builder yourself?

**LE:** Well, 'boatbuilder' is a term reserved for people with specific enviable skills; I am not one of those. But I did once build a canoe with my brother Lee, and helped each of my sons build small boats when they were younger, and enjoyed the shaping of wood pieces and the way they fit together to make a simple, beautiful shape. What line is more pleasing than a boat's sheer? And if there's any better proof of time redeemed than the pleasure of rowing the craft of your hands through calm water, I don't know what it is. Of course not everyone is happy in a boat, but many people are; paddling along a mossy shoreline at dusk is large medicine. So I'm not sure whether working on boats redeems these characters, but it gives them something pleasant to do and helps set their minds at ease.

**MS:** Explain the character of Siringo? Why does Becket remain with him?

**LE:** Charlie Siringo was a real Pinkerton agent of the time who wrote a terrific slam-bang memoir called *A Cowboy Detective*, which is still in print. Charlie was clearly a man with confidence about his place on the big stage—his tale spinning is magnetic, coarse and vulnerable, noble and cruel, and feels completely extemporaneous. It's also cheerfully self-serving; I suspect nothing made him happier than the care and feeding of his own legend. He's a layered old villain whose company is both harsh and fascinating. So Monte stays with him for any number of good reasons: initially fear, then a creeping curiosity, and at last, empathy.

**MS:** Is this a cowboy romance? Do you mean to point out the difference between the romanticized West and the real West? Glendon and Hood seem to represent these two disparate ideas.

**LE:** I'm not contrasting real and romantic so much as reconciling the two, marrying them together. Absolutely the West was brutal, unfair, and inhospitable, and its people commonly died young of deprivation and disease and violence. How many of them would've described it as romantic? But if romance is defined as a story or fiction of the wide and colorful world, in which conflicts are played out and character is revealed through action, then such bitter realities are not only inherent but necessary to the form. You actually can have it both ways—that's my hopeful proposition.

**MS:** Is Becket's writer's block autobiographical? It's been seven years since *Peace Like a River*. How difficult was writing another novel?

**LE:** Can it be called writer's block if you're writing hundreds of pages the whole time? The problem was, the pages didn't hold together. They didn't matter. It was as if there was some magic number of words I had to throw away. Then one morning Glendon rowed up the Cannon River in his little swift, and the story carried me off.

**MS:** So in a way, your experience writing this book mirrors Becket's writing experience. That was intentional?

**LE:** Not really. When writing a novel, you have to stay where the current is running. I found Monte Becket's voice to be the best entry to the outlaw/pursuit/redemption story I had in mind—it had spirit and doubt and momentum—so I went with it.

**MS:** What characters and places are based on real historical ones? Which character did you sympathize with most and which one do you expect readers will sympathize with most?

**LE:** Besides Siringo, some of the characters at the Hundred and One Ranch were real, and worked at the ranch at some point—the Ponca chief Iron Tail, Mexican Joe Barrera, and Colonel Miller, who owned the ranch with his brothers. The Hundred and One epitomized the flamboyant Wild West show, and it actually did flood in a dramatic way that sent monkeys climbing to rooftops, though I moved that event backward in time by several years. I chose to begin the story in Northfield, Minnesota, the town, for me, where the Old West transects the Midwest; the James and Younger gang attempted to rob the First National Bank there in 1876 and were rebuffed, an event Northfield still celebrates. Regarding the characters, I am especially fond of Glendon Hale, whose regrets have formed a man of character, Siringo for his pepper and wit, and Susannah, Monte's wife, who has the strength and confidence to send her man away. Who will readers like? I honestly don't know—and experience counsels me not to guess.

**MS:** You focus a lot on identity, particularly with names. Many of the characters have alternate names and egos. Can you talk about the connection and why so many characters have different names?

**LE:** One thing the West offered was rebirth. If you'd failed elsewhere—failed to rise in society, or satisfy your family, or live within the law—you had the option then of getting on a train and acquiring a new name, a new self. That sort of clean beginning isn't available anymore. On the other hand, there were downsides to all those fresh-minted identities. It must've been awkward to invite old friends to visit. With new friends, you had to invent your history and then remember it. At bottom, though, people retain the soul assigned them at the beginning, and life becomes a matter of sloughing off whatever is not true, not genuine. I suppose that peeling away is inevitable, and not only for those who've consciously reinvented themselves. No wonder Glendon is worried that he never told God his true name. Who wants to die with explaining still to do?

**MS:** The women in your book seem more grounded than the men, especially Becket's wife, Susanna. She feels free enough to send off her husband for weeks and then to take off from home with little warning. Even Blue seems to know who she is and what she wants. Can you comment on that?

**LE:** I don't think men and women divide neatly into grounded vs. flighty, but do think that in couples where one is especially creative or romantically inclined the other is apt to develop a better hold on matters practical. In Susannah's case, she sees that it's important for Monte to go west with his friend; she understands he needs somehow to be made whole again, and so it is for her both a practical and a romantic consideration.

**MS:** Can you explain where the title *So Brave, Young, & Handsome* comes from?

**LE:** It's from a famous old song called "The Cowboy's Lament," which tells the story of a dying cowboy who fell in with wicked companions, took up card playing and drinking, and ends up killed. You may recognize the terrific melodramatic refrain:

So beat the drum slowly

And play the fife lowly

Play the death march as you bear me along

For we all loved our comrade

So brave, young, and handsome

We all loved our comrade, although he done wrong.

*Courtesy of Grove Atlantic*

## Discussion Questions

1. What elements of Enger's book play off the conventions of cowboy movies and cowboy novels? In Chapter 12, we read "And so it came down to a farmhouse. As it so often does!" (p. 232) Monte's son, Redstart, "knew which members of the James Gang had once ridden into our town to knock over a bank and been shot to moist rags for their trouble" (p.4). What other traditions of the cowboy genres do you recognize in the book? The lore of train robberies? Cattle rustling? The nugget of goodness under the outlaw behavior?
2. How does Enger make these outsized characters convincing? Is there value as well as mayhem in these renegades? In their diction, do you find an odd level of civility even as death and destruction are threatened? For instance, look at some of the rather elegant locutions, such as that of Siringo on p. 115: "I'm leaving, you gentlemen may have this rocky paradise to yourselves."
3. Does it make sense that it is Susannah who sets Monte free to make his journey with Glendon "because he dreamed of his wife" (p. 37)? But then, "Love is a strange fact—it hopes all things, believes all things, endures all things. It makes no sense at all" (p. 37). Talk about love in the book, relationships that occur or are recalled.
4. How does Enger give us characters' inner lives? Are there some characters we feel we know inside and out? Which ones? Who in the book is most adept at holding us at a distance? Is that part of the person's charm as well as enigma?
5. We read about a number of marriages in *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*. We begin and end with that of Monte and Susannah. Do you think it is a good marriage? Talk also about Mr. and Mrs. Davies. What about Blue and Glendon? And later Blue/Arandana and Soto, as well as Charlie Siringo and his wife who forgot who he was. Does Monte learn from each of these tales? You might look again at question #3.
6. Monte and Siringo are juxtaposed as both adversaries and an oddly linked couple. Even as a captive, Monte maintains communication. "In the meantime I tried to remain pleasant company. He loved talking about books, especially his own, and his other favorite, Ecclesiastes. That treatise with its severe rhetoric—♦all is meaningless—he had by heart, often enlisting its author, Solomon, in his arguments against bothersome ideas like altruism and honor and clemency" (p. 207). Does this passage set an important dichotomy between Siringo and Monte? Why does Monte prefer Proverbs? Look, too, at Siringo's catechism on honor on p. 191.
7. Royal Davies, the Kansas City policeman, says, "You're doing these youngsters no service, you know... you authors, I mean—this world ain't no romance, in case you didn't notice." But Monte later says, "I take issue with Royal, much as I came to like him; violent and doomed as this world might be, a romance it certainly is" (p. 51). Talk about

this idea. Think about the definition of "romance" as a medieval tale about a hero of chivalry. How has Enger explored "romance" in the book?

8. What is the result of Monte's weaving Susannah and Redstart into every turn of his story? Why do you think he consistently fails to write his wife? Ambivalence about what he's doing in this runaway adventure? Guilt? Another kind of writer's block?
9. How is Hood held up as a version of the chivalric hero? Is he almost a foundling for Monte and Glendon? How is he depicted as golden boy (cherubic, even), magnificent horseman, boon companion, and charismatic lover? After Hood's initial conquest on a horse, Monte says, "It was as stunning an ascension as any I have seen (p. 143). How is Hood like a comet? "A cowboy doesn't ask for much, that's my observation. A flashy ride, a pretty girl, momentary glory—for a day or two, I'm glad to say, Hood Roberts had them all" (p. 145). Was his reversal inevitable, do you think, given his character?
10. Describe Glendon as a phenomenon. What are traits you hold onto? Is it his melting disappearances? How are both Siringo and Glendon almost phoenixes, myths that resurface despite the odds?
11. In contrast to the romance of heroic exploits, what are some blasts of reality? Would you agree that this is not a comfortable fairy tale? "We were a dozen weary men in a damp room with one smoky candle for light and no prospect of rest" (p. 159). What are other times Monte and his cohorts are battered by weather, hunger, or assailants? Is the life of the outlaw worthwhile?
12. If you were to cast this book as a movie, who would play the principal roles? What would be essential scenes? As a director, how would you handle the frame tale of Monte, Susannah, and Redstart? Is there actually another frame tale?
13. Is it justice that Glendon is seeking in the novel? For whom? Do you think it is achieved? Is forgiveness as important as justice in the book?
14. The novel's humor is sometimes ironic or deadpan, other times pure slapstick. What purpose does recurrent comedy serve in a story with such violence and loss?
15. Almost every major character in the novel has more than one name, whether an alias (like Jack Waits), a stage name (Deep Breath Darla), or a translation (Blue). What is the significance of a person's "true name?" Does the revelation of one's true name put him, as Redstart claims, at the mercy of others? Is that a bad thing?
16. What is the time of the novel? Enger gives us a date, but what are other clues? Driving with pride eighty miles in a day? Pancho Villa?
17. How do books pervade the novel? Monte, of course, is an author, and we follow his discomfort about producing a second success. But books are important to other people,

too. Who are they? Emma Davies? Her grandmother as literary critic? (see p. 53). What happens to the book Monte had inscribed to Emma? How does Siringo's easy writing and reciting of his compelling narrative affect Monte? How does the library of Claudio and Arandana define them?

18. "Most men are hero and devil," says Siringo (p. 224). Does that statement hold true in the book? And in general? Is it a description better reserved for leaders? Politicians, even statesmen, outlaws, C.E.O.s, Hollywood stars, sports idols? Who else? Do people in this book understand and accept this idea of human nature?
19. How is Darlys the Sharpshooter a pivotal figure? Think about her deft explosion of the glass orb in Monte's hand as well as her well practiced aim later at Siringo who has cruelly spurned her.
20. Siringo blazes from the pages, always surprising. This is the man who "left off cowboying when the profession of detective was chosen for him at a public demonstration of phrenology" (p. 173). Who is this "dark personage" (p. 178)? When do we see his menace most startlingly? He's an "old vulture" who "ate like a scavenging bird in big swallows without evident pleasure" (p. 197). Does that image tell us something about Siringo's other actions in the book? We know about his treachery to Monte. "That he could trust me was my own disgrace" (p. 205). Other times, "the old monster was capable of gratitude after all" (p. 180), to both Dr. Clary and Monte. Talk about his brilliant manipulation of the town of Alva. What is your ultimate evaluation of Siringo?
21. "Say what you like about melodrama, it beats confusion" (p. 262). Is this how we feel after reading a page-turner? Enger's book has ambiguity to spare, but are you in doubt at the end about events or characters?
22. Where do our sympathies lie in *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*? Did you feel a loss as Hood sank deeper into runaway crime? Is everyone on the trail tainted except maybe Monte? Is he, as well?
23. At the end, Glendon is able to give himself to the service of others, to Soto and Blue. Do you think he is truly selfless at this point? Can you possibly think he is not maneuvering? What is his persuasive act that settles the point?
24. The rivers, from the Cannon in Minnesota to the Rienda in California, link the sagas of the book and provide a central theme. Did you find it inevitable to compare Monte and Glendon to Huck and Jim in the Twain celebration of the Mississippi? "People on riverbanks understand one another. "If you can't be on a boat, a dock will do" (p. 55). The Kaw in Kansas City provides a moment of respite as well as another escape. How? How does the Hundred and One disaster, the Salt Fork flood, create a scene of biblical proportions? How is the post-lapsarian world a turning point and a rebirth for some of the characters?

25. Do you see an analogy with Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in the book? (There are even recurrent windmills!) Can you talk about the idea of the Quest? The idealism, as well as the consistent blanket of reality? Give examples?

*Courtesy of Grove Press*