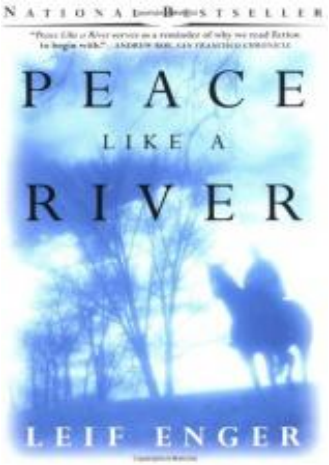
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Peace Like a River

by Leif Enger



About the 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.

Discussion Guide

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.

Author Bio

Leif Enger grew up in Osakis, Minnesota, and worked as a reporter for Minnesota Public Radio before writing his bestselling debut novel, PEACE LIKE A RIVER, which won the Booksense Award for Fiction and was named one of the Year's Best Books by *Time Magazine* and the *Los Angeles Times*. His second novel, SO BRAVE, YOUNG, AND HANDSOME, was also a national bestseller. It was a Midwest Booksellers Honor Book, and won the High Plains Book Award for Fiction. His third novel, VIRGIL WANDER, was longlisted for the Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction, and was named a best book of the year by Amazon, *Library Journal*, *Bookpage* and Chicago Public Library. He lives with his wife in Duluth, MN.

Critical Praise

"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."

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