



## Peace Like a River (2001)

By Leif Enger

(Winner, 2002 Alex Award)



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### Discussion questions taken from *ReadingGroupGuides.com*

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.

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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?

### Author Bio:



- Birth—1961
- Where—Sauk Centre, Minnesota, USA
- Education—Moorhead State University
- Currently—lives near Aitkin, Minnesota

Since his teens, Leif Enger has wanted to write fiction. He worked as 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 early 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. *Peace Like a River*, published in 2001, has been described as "high-spirited and unflagging" and has received some notable acclaim in literary circles. He is married and lives on a farm with his wife and two sons. (From Wikipedia)

### Read Alikes:

*The dog stars* by Peter Heller

*Canada* by Richard Ford

*The cat's table* by Michael Ondaatje



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