

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Peace Like A River
by Lief Enger

BOOK GROUP

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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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.

BOOK SUMMARY

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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 lookout 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.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. In what ways is this novel a classic coming-of age story?
2. Was Davy's shooting of Israel Finch and Tommy Basca justified?
3. What miracles does Jeremiah Land perform in the story? How are they presented?
4. What role does fame play in this story?
5. How is Swede's story a reflection of her changing mindset throughout the story?
6. What is paradise like?
7. How is the final meeting of father and son described?
8. How did you feel about the novel's ending?

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