

*Peace Like a River*

Leif Enger, 2001

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Review by David Eaton Mauk

Every so often a book pleasantly rings in our ears like good poetry or song. The pace is melodic. The language rhythmic. Words weave like a gentle brook through a forest painted in the glorious colors of a late autumn afternoon under a crisp, clear sky. *Peace Like a River* is such a book.

Allegedly the runner-up of the most recent Oprah Book Club selection, the reader is drawn into a family saga lasting through a cold, windy winter stretching from Minnesota to the Badlands of North Dakota. Set in 1963, the story is told in the first person by Ruben Land, an asthmatic, innocent eleven-year old. He, his younger sister Swede, and older brother Davy, are being raised in a motherless home by their evangelic father, Jeremiah.

The elder Land seems to have been touched by God, as that power is applied through him to heal others, as told by the wide-eyed Ruben. We are carried further into this charmed world by Swede's epic poetry, dramatizing the exploits of an outlaw cowboy through-out the book. Readers soon realize that this saga parallels Davy's plight, after he shoots two loathsome boys causing trouble for the family. Davy is jailed, brought to trial, and then flees, sending the story into an edgy pursuit across the drifting snow of the plains.

One among many well-staged scenes is Swede and Davy keeping warm under a blanket on an open ceiling grate, as they eavesdrop on the adult conversation below them. *"I already had the covers tugged hoodlike round the top of my head. A wind had risen outside and was mourning in the eaves; the curtains were ghosting out from the wall, that's how leaky those old windows were... More laughter below, quickly subsiding to a more serious tone... I thought I heard Davy's name. 'What is it?' I whispered. 'What's they say?'"*

The family's western journey is followed as providence befalls them time and again in their travels through the northern blizzards in pursuit of Davy. The American landscape is lovingly laid out in simple, earthy images. No flowery descriptions here. Straightforward, like the harsh winter winds across the frozen plains. *"The moon was what Swede called a gibbon moon, meaning not quite full but oval like a monkey's head, and it showed us a white hillside... and so we climbed, topping the hill at last to look down at what seemed a garden of fire."* This narration prefaced an astonishing picnic, where a smoldering mineral vein broke through a rock fissure, melting snow whose steam warmed the icy air. More of the story's wondrous enchantment.

Just as Ruben is concerned that his father has lost favor with God, Roxanna, her gas station, and boarding house cross the family's path, and with this, a new warmth embraces the characters. We watch as a woman transforms in appearance before the eyes of hopeful children, and a proper courtship follows in a manner consistent with the times.

Davy's peril is never far from these joyful moments. Tied to mystery and menace, people within and outside the law change the peaceful landscape into one of violence and pain. The book opens with a hunting scene that foretells the last two thirds of the novel, where the family's great hunt for Davy plays-out. The abrupt conclusion is filled with the same sense of awe, miracle and spirit that captured the reader from the first chapter.

There is some dying, some near-dying, and some full living flowing from the original prose of this first-time author. The story is an uncomplicated one exquisitely told, where the characters come to life like distant relatives. Personally, a book such as *Peace Like a River* is the reason I read. It is like a pot of gold at the end of the first spring rainbow. It's a book that might warm your heart and fortify your spirit, as the downeast winter now draws near.