

*Undiscovered Country*

Lin Enger, 2008

Little Brown & Co., 304 pgs

Review by David Eaton Mauk

The crunch of snow underfoot, breath frozen like a dagger of ice, and a landscape of bare trees silhouetted above gray tundra reminds us that, “revenge is a dish best served cold.” *Undiscovered Country* seems to be cooked from a kitchen warmed in the scent of earthy food, as that winter chill seeps past frosted window panes. Our narrator, Jesse writes about his life-changing year as a teenager living in the family home in the upper Midwest. Readers are quickly immersed in the chilly scenes.

This first novel from Lin Enger is starkly descriptive in a Hemingway style, much as the acclaimed, best-selling first novel, *Peace Like a River*, from his brother Leif in 2001. Each story has a violent family saga and youthful participatory narrator co-anchoring the morality tale. The quotation-free writing comes across almost as body language. “. . . he looked like a boy who’d been spanked. Somehow his pinched movements and uncertain gait made it impossible for me to summon the feeling of triumph I’d been dreaming of all week.”

We feel the claustrophobic chill of an ice fishing shack occupied by three family members who have less than a monofilament of trust in each other. Moments like these are painted against the warmth of a cozy, woody restaurant filled with the rich aromas of coffee, cooked food and wet wool fresh from falling snow or rain. Then, it’s as if a storm door bangs closed, as we shift to the drunken outbursts of a man slamming his fists with abuse against his wife and daughter.

The cadence of clear writing fits the crisp story like a flannel lined glove in winter. It all works because we feel the angst of young Jesse. The unevenness of his first love. The bitterness of a parent’s betrayal. And the reverence towards the other parent, built from a deep well of love, respect and grieving emptiness of profound loss. I felt like I was sitting by a toasty fire, looking out an iced window at falling snow, glad to be inside, but unable to turn away from the storm. The story pulls us along, unsure of the ending, for Jesse makes choices that puts himself in peril, while risking the love of Christine and security of his little brother, Magnus.

Jesse’s torment covers us like a blanket, with death, betrayal, love and revenge tucking at the corners. We wonder whether “the truth will set you free” as it applies to this young man. It is a burden we share through the last liberating pages. Jesse asks himself near the end of the book, “I wonder if she can possibly know how her words, simple as they are, have thrown me off balance, caused me for the first time in memory to look ahead instead of back.” At least one question remains. Can the ghosts of the past haunt a lifetime to come?