

Interview with Leif Enger, author of PEACE LIKE A RIVER

Conducted by Mark LaFramboise, of Politics & Prose Bookstore, Washington D.C.

Q: Booksellers I know have been raving about PEACE LIKE A RIVER for a while now. Now that you know how well the book is being received, how is the inevitable prepublication waiting affecting your life? Are you about to burst, or maybe even a little frightened?

A: I'm a little anxious; when you've put so much work into a novel, and been backed so generously by your publisher, naturally you hope it doesn't disappoint. But the waiting's been relaxed and pleasant. Robin, my wife, and I home educate the boys and I've been able to take a bigger role in that. Our youngest is building a canoe -- I'm there to cut the tricky angles. We've camped lately in Minnesota's Boundary Waters and also the Teton and Bighorn ranges of Wyoming, and now we're painting the farmhouse and hanging some wallpaper. Grove/Atlantic introduced me to a number of booksellers over the summer, which was enormous fun, but until the past few weeks publication has seemed like something sweet and far-off and hazy. It's exciting, now, to have things coming into focus -- to be thinking of the book tour, and seeing new places.

Q: This isn't your first book. What was your earlier experience in writing and publishing?

A: Back in the 80s my brother Lin, then at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, wrote to me suggesting we have some fun and collaborate on a crime novel—he had a character in mind, an ex-major-league ballplayer living reclusively in the north woods. We sketched out the plot on note cards, one card per chapter, and sent each other chapters through the mail. We ended up publishing five books with Pocket and Simon & Schuster. They were widely ignored, but we had a great time -- we'd get together, rub our hands over sinister plots, and then pitch batting practice to each other until dark. Lin's the better hitter, and also taught me most of what I know about writing fiction.

Q: How do you think your role as husband and father affected the telling of PEACE LIKE A RIVER? Are there insights into character that you couldn't have gained any other way?

A: Robin and the boys were the book's first audience. I read them almost every scene in first draft, and usually based my rewriting on their responses. Kids have a dead-on instinct for what makes a good story (outlaws on horseback, hidden treasure, secret caves, dynamite) and Robin, who would rather praise than criticize, was always brave enough to recognize when I'd gotten off track or written needless pages. Also, without my own family it's doubtful I could've written convincingly of Jeremiah's relationship with his children, or with Roxanna. What father hasn't wished he could take a child's pain on himself? Who knows better than a husband what's gained by courtship, or lost when courtship ends?

Q: Setting is so important in this novel. The family's name, Land, even suggests this. Are there certain personal characteristics that you think arise from the upper Midwest, from Minnesota in particular?

A: Acceptance, probably. Perseverance. 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 -- it's a perfect landscape for cultivating gratitude.

Q: Also, while the book is contained geographically within western Minnesota and the Dakotas, a variety of landscapes are described: the town, the country, and open road, and the nearly mystical place of snow and steam where the family occasionally gathers. Can you suggest any way(s) these different places inform the story, or the interior lives of its participants?

A: It's hard for me to fully picture a character without the ground he occupies, or his responses to new landscapes. When I was seven or eight we visited family in Montana, where my uncle showed us a lignite vein that had caught fire years before and was burning still. The fire had worked so deeply into the ground flames were no longer visible and what we saw was a blackened cut through the badlands where heat shimmered out. Though old enough to realize this was geography and not Hell itself I confess to many fearful imaginings involving underground trolls, anvils, and long-fingered hands that might snake out and grab a boy's ankle. The coal-vein scene in the book is one of great hope, but at the same time the surface of Reuben's confidence in the family's quest is beginning to crack, and steam to issue forth.

Q: Although the narrator tells the story in retrospect, we see the world through the eleven- year old eyes of Reuben. How were you able to capture the wonder, fears, and curiosity of such a young protagonist?

A: First, my parents gave me the sort of childhood now rarely encountered. Summers were beautiful unorganized eternities where we wandered in the timber unencumbered by scoutmasters. We dressed in breechclouts and carried willow branch bows, and after supper Dad hit us fly balls. It was probably most idyllic for me as the youngest of four, since three worthy imaginations were out beating the ground in front of me – who knew what might jump up? Now I see that same freedom in the lives of our two sons, whose interests cover the known map. It's easy to witness the world through the eyes of a boy when you have two observant ones with you at all times. But the ruinous thing about growing up is that we stop creating mysteries where none exist, and worse, we usually try to deconstruct and deny the genuine mysteries that remain. We argue against God, against true romance, against loyalty and self-sacrifice. What allows Reuben to keep his youthful perspective is that he's seen all these things in action -- he is the beneficiary of his father's faith. He is a witness of wonders. To forget them would be to deny they happened, and denying the truth is the beginning of death.

Q: Reuben's asthma figures prominently in the story. Unless you yourself are afflicted, how were you able to describe the condition with such detail?

A: Our oldest son was gripped by severe childhood asthma when I started the novel -- he was seven years old and working hard just to get his breath. Of course we'd have given anything for a gigantic, lung-clearing miracle, but since it didn't happen the only course was to treat him medically the best we could, and try to comprehend his struggle. That wasn't difficult because twice in my life, at 13 and again at 21, I had isolated, terrifying asthmatic episodes -- times when breathing was wrenching muscular effort and I didn't dare go to sleep. But for me it never became chronic, and the good news is that our son just turned 14 and his asthma has diminished to the point where he rarely needs medicine. Teddy Roosevelt is much admired in this house, and we aspire to the strenuous life.

Q: Reuben's sister, Swede, is perhaps the most engaging character in the book and the only female in the motherless Land family. Her personality is so vibrant that she feels very real. Is she or anyone else in the story based on people you've known in your life?

A: Swede is the potent mixture of several remarkable women, most notably my own sister, mother, and wife, who share the qualities of cleverness and brute honesty. This wasn't intentional; Swede just stepped into an early scene and wouldn't leave. The other characters are also composites of adventurers among my family and friends, of coworkers, of people met once and not forgotten. To lift someone whole from life and drop them into a novel would be difficult, and also impractical in a legal sense.

Q: Swede has a penchant for epic poetry. How does her poetic saga of Sunny Sundown relate to or parallel the family's struggle after Davy's trouble with the law?

A: The poetry began simply because my son, who was four at the time, thought there should be a cowboy named Sunny Sundown in the book. But the verse quickly became useful both in foreshadowing coming events and in revealing Swede's response to Davy's actions. In any family there's the real unfolding of life, and then there are the rewrites, the way each person tells himself what happened. Swede believes we all live epics, and I agree. A few heroic stanzas would do most families a lot of good.

Q: Magic plays such a great role in this story. Is it important that we as readers believe the veracity of these events: e.g. the tornado, Jeremiah walking off a platform into space, Reuben's journey to the beyond, to name a few, or just that Reuben believes?

A: I hope even skeptical readers will enjoy the novel, but my own suspicion is that miracles, big obvious ones as well the more comfortable variety (kittens in springtime, Puckett's homer in Game Six) are underway around us. I was raised to this belief and have as yet no proof that it is not so. Why lessen our joy by throwing out what the author of Hebrews called "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"?