

Christ Presbyterian Academy
Honors English 8 Summer Reading Assignment
Peace Like a River by Leif Enger

ABSTRACT:

Leif Enger's debut novel is of uncommon wisdom – equal parts tragedy, love story, faith and meditation – unfolding like a revelation in the midst of miracles and magic. Set against the Minnesota countryside and North Dakota Badlands in the early 1960s, *Peace Like a River* is a story about a family whose lives are upended when Davy, the oldest son, kills two marauders who have come to harm his family. Hailed a hero by some, a murderer by others, Davy escapes from his cell the morning of his sentencing.

Narrated by 11-year-old Reuben Land – an asthmatic "born without air in his lungs" – the story recounts the journey he takes with his father, Jeremiah, and 9-year-old poet sister, Swede, to rescue one of their own. Reuben has little doubt that miracles abound and suspects his father, a school janitor, "is touched by God and can overturn the laws of nature." Yet as their voyage intersects with the beauty and cruelty of the natural world, they are forced to face their own ideals of love, family loyalty, sacrifice and faith.

AUTHOR:

Enger was born in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, to Osakis High School bandleader Don and teacher Wilma Enger. He fell in love with language at a very early age after his mother's yearly reading of Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island. He went on to spend 16 years working as a writer/producer for Minnesota Public Radio. His debut novel *Peace Like a River* began with a basic, yet central desire: "As a parent you want to work a miracle." At the time, Enger's oldest son, then 7, was struggling with a distressing case of asthma. Enger lives in Minnesota with his wife and two sons.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

Essay. Choose one of the following questions and answer in a well-developed essay. Your response should be at least 500 words.

1. 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.

2. 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?

3. 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.

4. Remembering his own childhood, author Leif Enger recently noted: "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." Does this type of relationship between the individual and the natural world appear in *Peace Like a River*? If so, where? Identify key passages or scenes where the characters seem inferior to the landscape, or even at the mercy of it.

5. Finishing his story, Reuben notes: "You should know that Jape Waltzer proved as uncatchable as Swede's own Valdez" (309). What do the characters of Jape and Valdez represent in this novel? Be sure to discuss the eternal struggle between Good and Evil.