



**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 9-12**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# Peace Like a River

Leif Enger

**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# Peace Like a River

Leif Enger

## TEACHER GUIDE

**NOTE:**

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Skills and Strategies

### Critical Thinking

Analyzing, inference, research,  
opinion, prediction

### Comprehension

Plot development, pros/cons,  
relating themes to other works

### Literary Elements

Symbolism, theme, irony,  
story within a story, conflict,  
foreshadowing, static vs.  
dynamic characters, heroic/  
tragic characters

### Vocabulary

Definitions, application,  
synonyms/antonyms

### Listening/Speaking

Presentation, play, discussion

### Writing

Essay, poetry, research paper,  
letter, synopsis

### Across the Curriculum

Literature—related novels and  
authors, book review, author  
interview; Science—volcanic  
landscapes, constellations and  
stars; History—the Old West,  
famous outlaws (Butch Cassidy,  
Cole Younger, etc.); Religion—  
prayer, miracles, Heaven; Art—  
poster, photography, painting,  
collage, comics

**Genre:** fiction

**Setting:** 1962–1963; Roofing, Minnesota and the Badlands, North Dakota

**Point of View:** first person

**Themes:** the power of faith, the existence of miracles, incredulity vs. acceptance, familial bonds, justice, love, death, redemption, guilt and innocence, loyalty and betrayal, the existence of an afterlife

**Conflict:** person vs. society, person vs. self, person vs. person, person vs. nature

**Style:** family drama told from the perspective of an 11-year-old boy; includes a parallel, secondary story-within-a-story written by his younger sister

**Tone:** innocent and naïve, hopeful, spiritual, curious, fearful, humorous

**Date of First Publication:** 2001

## Summary

The Land family—spiritual and reverential Jeremiah, his strong and practical son Davy, his ailing but positive son Reuben, and his wise and poetic daughter Swede—find themselves the target of Israel Finch’s and Tommy Basca’s ire when Jeremiah stops the boys from raping a girl in the school locker room. The harassment escalates to kidnapping and death threats, peaking when the two boys sneak into the Land home at night and Davy shoots and kills them. Davy is arrested, and the media alternates between calling Davy a hero and a cold-blooded murderer. While most of the town turns away from the Lands in their time of need, the family bonds through its religious beliefs and the charity of a few close friends. Davy, knowing his fate looks bleak, escapes from jail and goes on the lam. The Lands head into the Badlands to find him and soon meet Roxanna, a strong-willed and welcoming gas station owner who takes them in during a blizzard. Reuben discovers that Davy is living nearby with Jape Waltzer, another outlaw. After wrestling with his conscience and the disappearance of a federal agent, Reuben agrees to lead the other agents to Davy, to no avail. The Lands return home where, unexpectedly, Davy arrives. Jape, having lain in wait outside, begins to shoot at them, killing Reuben and Jeremiah. Reuben wakes in Heaven and finds his father there. They rejoice at how wonderful they feel—healthy, strong, and happy—but Jeremiah sends Reuben back to the world of the living, this time with healthy lungs. Reuben grows up to live a long, healthy life, raising children with Sara, meeting Davy once a year in a remote Canadian hunting village, and waiting for his time to return to the glory of Heaven to see his father.

## About the Author

Born in 1961, Leif Enger grew up in Osakis, Minnesota. Enger says that growing up in the Midwest gave him a sense of “perseverance,” adding that the upper Midwest is “a perfect landscape for cultivating gratitude” because its vast horizons instill a sense of humility. Enger worked as a producer and reporter for Minnesota Public Radio for nearly 20 years before he sold the manuscript for *Peace Like a River*. Although he wrote and published a series of mystery novels with his brother in the early 1990s, *Peace Like a River* was Enger’s first major success as an author and it allowed him to write full-time. Enger read “every sentence aloud” to his wife and sought the advice of his two children as he wrote the novel. *Peace Like a River* became a bestseller, and

## Clay—Your Toughened Heart

Reuben explains the origins of his asthma and the miracle of his birth—he was stillborn for 12 minutes before, at the urging of his father, his lungs opened and he began to breathe. Reuben explains other miracles he witnesses, including one involving his father walking on thin air after a day of hunting geese. During the trip, Reuben and Swede discuss the bullies that have hounded the Land family since their father prevented two teens from raping a girl in a locker room. The two teens, Israel Finch and Tommy Basca, continue to harass the family when they return home, going so far as to kidnap Swede. One night, Israel and Tommy break into the Land house, set on attacking Davy. As they enter the bedroom, Reuben watches as Davy shoots both boys with a hunting rifle, gets up from his bed, and fires again to make sure the boys are dead.

### Vocabulary

smote  
consequential  
wrathful  
whetting  
penitent  
judiciousness  
transient  
colluded  
invective  
atrophied  
supine  
interlude  
reformatory  
garrulous  
denigrate

### Discussion Questions

1. What happened during Reuben's birth, and what role does Reuben believe his father played in his survival? (*When Reuben was born, his "lungs refused to kick in" [p. 1]. His mother was too dazed to comprehend what was happening, but Jeremiah raced into the room and took Reuben into his arms, demanding that his newborn son breathe. Dr. Nokes tried to tell Jeremiah what was wrong, but Jeremiah knocked him down. Jeremiah simply commanded his son to breathe, and Reuben began to breathe. Reuben escaped this near-death experience with no brain damage at all, even though Dr. Nokes said, "There would be brain damage..." [p. 2]. Reuben believes that his father performed a miracle that day by bringing him back to life.*)
2. What do Reuben and Swede say about miracles and how people react to them? Whom do you agree with, and why? (*Reuben says the small things that most people consider miracles, such as "chicks at Easter time, spring generally, [and] a clear sunrise" [p. 3], are not miracles at all. They deserve our attention as nice things to witness but do not qualify as miracles. Miracles should challenge our beliefs, "rebut" the rules we believe in, and should "bother people." Reuben believes that, "A miracle contradicts the will of earth" [p. 3]. Swede offers: "People fear miracles because they fear being changed—though ignoring them will change you also" [p. 3]. Answers will vary, though most students will likely agree that true miracles are grand, awe-inspiring events and not simple, everyday things.*)
3. Discuss the altercation between Jeremiah, Israel Finch, and Tommy Basca. How does Davy respond to the situation? What might Davy's words to Reuben about Israel and Tommy foreshadow? (*Jeremiah works as a janitor at the school, and he interrupts Israel and Tommy attempting to rape a girl named Dolly in the girls' locker room. Jeremiah subdues the boys and rescues Dolly. Swede thinks Davy is mad because Dolly is his girlfriend and Jeremiah "wouldn't talk about it to Davy" [p. 11]. Davy later pulls Reuben aside and admits that Israel and Tommy threatened Jeremiah and his family. Davy tells Reuben not to worry, saying the two boys are "loudmouths" and "cowards" and that they "won't do anything" [p. 12] serious in retaliation. Reuben, however, is unsettled by the relaxed manner in which Davy speaks about the situation and the fact that he wants to keep it from Swede. Answers will vary, but students should recognize the potential for major problems at the hands of Israel and Tommy.*)

9. Discuss the reactions of the following to Swede's kidnapping: Reuben, Davy, and the police. Examine Jeremiah's admonition to the police. (*Reuben is pained every time he thinks of the ordeal. He reasons that "A nine-year-old shouldn't be dragged from her house by someone who hates her" or "...be forced to hear the language of the unloved" [p. 35]. Davy is livid at the situation, especially when the police fail to pursue the matter. He argues, "How many times does a dog have to bite before you put him down?" [p. 36] and looks at the police officers with contempt. The police react in a casual manner and claim that Israel and Tommy were just "kicking around," telling the Lands not to worry about it. Jeremiah repeats to the police officer, "You know Finch" [p. 37], indicating that he is very aware of the threat Israel poses to his family.*)
10. What crime does Reuben witness at home? Do you think the situation can be considered an act of self-defense? Why or why not? (*Reuben wakes in the night and hears someone walking through the house. The steps come closer and stop outside his and Davy's bedroom door. The door begins to open, and then Davy tells whomever is opening the door to "Switch on the light" [p. 49]. The light goes on, and Israel Finch and Tommy Basca are standing in the doorway. Israel lifts the baseball bat he is holding, and Davy shoots both him and Tommy. Israel is dead, but Tommy is only injured. As Tommy attempts to crawl away, Davy walks over to him and shoots him again, killing him also. Answers will vary. Davy was defending himself from people who intended him harm in his own home, as is evidenced by the bat. However, the cool manner of the killing muddies the self-defense claim. Note that this issue will become the crux of Davy's trial.*)
11. **Prediction:** How will the citizens of Roofing respond to Davy's crime?

### Supplementary Activities

1. In a brief essay, respond to Jeremiah's claim that "Everybody thumps something..." (p. 28). What do you think this statement means? Can you relate to this statement on a personal level?
2. Using the AABB rhyme scheme that Swede uses in her poems in "Beauteous are My Cakes Indeed," write a poem about one of the Land family members.

### Peeking at Eternity—A Boy on a Horse

Reuben tells of his father's miraculous experience during a tornado. The experience changed Jeremiah, and he quit his prosperous job and dedicated himself to God. Davy is arrested and jailed for killing Israel and Tommy. All but three members of the community turn away from the Land family, and things get worse when Jeremiah is fired by Superintendent Holgren. Even as he is losing his job, Jeremiah performs a miracle to cure his employer's skin disease, leaving Reuben to wonder why his father does not cure his asthma. Many people write to Davy, and the media calls him a hero, but the positive response soon fades. Swede and Reuben wonder if they will ever see Davy again, and Swede's writing turns bloody and full of doubt. Media stories defending Israel and Tommy arise, heightening the Land family's desperation and fear. The trial begins, and while Davy's kind and knowledgeable lawyer does his best, the case presented against Davy is strong. Reuben is called to the stand, and he feels as if he has betrayed his brother with his testimony. The next morning, Swede and Reuben wake to hear that Davy escaped from jail. Weeks go by with no news, and Jeremiah allows Reuben and Swede to stay home from school while they eagerly await any sign that Davy is alive.