

The 'Peace' maker

Hit debut novel by Leif Enger features old-fashioned virtues

By MICHAEL GILTZ

If ever there was a time for a novel of faith and redemption — a quiet book of old-fashioned verities — this is it.

Leif Enger's "Peace Like a River" has struck a chord with booksellers, received raves from Publishers Weekly (which called it "a stunning debut") and garnered strong recommendations from authors Frank McCourt, Jim Harrison and Rick Bass, who calls it "a truly great book" and compares it to the gripping best seller "Cold Mountain."

And a Hollywood producer has already bought the film rights to the book.

"Peace" is set in Minnesota during the '60s but seems to belong more to the Old West.

The story centers on some marvelous characters: Reuben Land, the 11-year-old narrator who suffers from severe asthma (just like one of Enger's children); his sister, Swede, who is obsessed with Zane Grey Westerns; and their older brother, Davy, who goes on the lam after killing two guys who raped his girlfriend.

Most memorable of all is their father, Jeremiah Land, a simple janitor, perhaps, but a man who

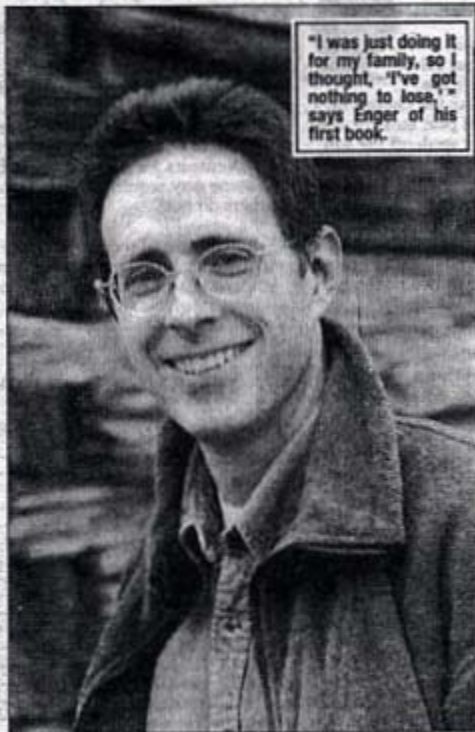
looms large in Reuben's eyes. Jeremiah has a real and active faith (he argues loudly with God when praying) and — if we believe Reuben's eyewitness accounts — is truly blessed.

Written in lyrical, open-hearted prose, "Peace Like a River" even has a comforting, remarkable glimpse into the afterlife. So it's little surprise you could spot people reading this book while they waited in line to give blood after the tragic events of Sept. 11.

Enger's novel is clearly a gamble that has paid off: Atlantic has gone back to press twice and now has 100,000 copies in print. But the author knows his book is out of step with these cynical times and might easily have been dismissed.

"I was not conscious of it early on, because I was not thinking of publication," admits Enger, calling from his home in Aitkin County, Minnesota, where he lives with his wife and two sons. "That really is what made it possible, in a way. I was just doing it for my family, so I thought, 'I've got nothing to lose.'"

Success has come unexpectedly now, but the 40-year-old Enger spent years pursuing it by pen-



"I was just doing it for my family, so I thought, 'I've got nothing to lose,'" says Enger of his first book.

ning a series of crime novels with his brother, Lin. "We started writing the mysteries because we thought it would be a fun, easy way to make a lot of money," laughs Enger. "The books didn't really gain an audience, but we got just enough audience to be offered another contract. We wrote five of the things, and by the fifth book we both had small children and we both had demanding full-time jobs." A reporter for Minnesota Public Radio since the

mid '80s, Enger finally gave up on commercial success and set out to write a story that would entertain his wife, Robin, and their two young sons. "This story just kind of popped into my head because my older son was suffering from asthma, badly," says Enger, who's had two debilitating episodes of severe asthma himself. "Of course, what I wanted to do was work a miracle for him. But all I could do was the hard

medical stuff. It seemed like the beginning of a good book, so I took off."

Others clearly agree, such as producer David Brown. A driving force behind the award-winning blockbuster movies "Chocolat," "Driving Miss Daisy" and the upcoming Broadway musical "Sweet Smell of Success," Brown discovered the book in manuscript form and quickly bought the film rights.

"We think the book will be very successful," says Brown, "though we don't rely on that. It has strong characters, a very big emotional panorama and a freshness about it, a kind of lyrical quality. I fell in love."

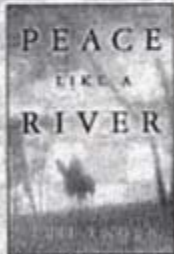
Enger seems to be taking his sudden change in fortune one step at a time. He's repainted the barn and — after initially taking a year-long sabbatical from his job — formally turned in his resignation.

Now he's working on his second book and preparing for a reading tour that brings him to New York City on Oct. 1.

Success or failure, good times or bad, Enger seems to take it all in stride, just like a favorite song of his that gives the book its title.

"It comes from an old beloved hymn called 'It Is Well With My Soul,'" says Enger, who was raised in a nondenominational Christian church.

He begins to recite the words: "When peace like a river attendeth my way/ When sorrows like sea billows roll/ Whatever my lot, He has taught me to say/ It is well, it is well with my soul."



Atlantic Monthly Press
320 pages, \$24

"It's not likely you'll read a better piece of fiction this year."*

"Reuben Land, the narrator of *Peace Like a River*, believes in miracles. To enjoy this winsomely lyrical novel, you don't have to. But a certain amount of faith is required.

Even if you believe only in **stirring, heart-thumping storytelling and sentences that sing**, this book will work for you. If you're a devotee of boys' adventure books—bruised innocents confronting scoundrels round every bend—all the better.

But what allows *Peace Like a River* to transcend any limitations of belief and genre is its broad, sagacious humanity. Within the context of an adventure-filled tall tale, oddly enough, the book stretches out to gently explore the ancient mysteries of family. Independence and possession, loyalty and treachery, love and loathing—they're all here, even if it's not always clear which is which. . . .

There is magic here, none more potent than Leif Enger's prose."

—Dan Cryer, *Newsday*

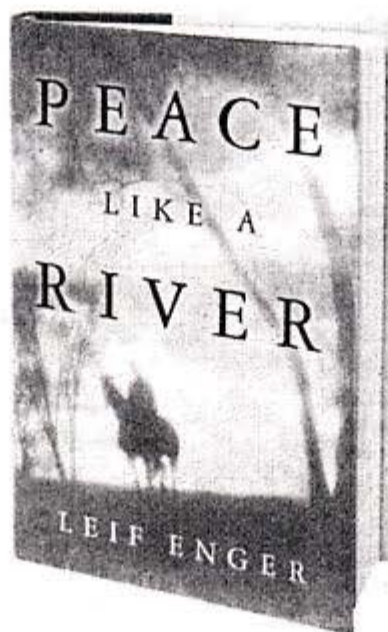
"Leif Enger may have unwittingly written the perfect book for an anxious time. . . .

It has a generosity of spirit that is most welcome in a dark time. . . . A book of deep faith in faith, yet it is neither simple nor sentimental. . . . **It is the surest thing to a winner this fall,** a book of great literary merit that nonetheless restores readers' faith in the kindness of stories." —Marta Salij, *Detroit Free Press*

"If ever there was a time for a novel of faith and redemption—a quiet book of old-fashioned verities—this is it.

Written in lyrical, openhearted prose, *Peace Like a River* even has a comforting, remarkable glimpse into the afterlife."

—Michael Giltz, *New York Post*



"Enger has written a novel that's boldly romantic and unabashedly appealing, a collage of legends from sources sacred and profane—from the Old Testament to the Old West, from the Gospels to police dramas. **It's a journey you simply must not miss."**

—Ron Charles,

The Christian Science Monitor



"Enger has written one of the year's best novels. . . .

Once in a great while, a book comes along that has such wonderful characters and marvelous prose that you read it as much for the pure joy it offers on virtually every page as to find out how it ends, Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* was like that. So was *Plainsong* by Kent Haruf. Add Leif Enger's terrific new novel *Peace Like a River* to that short list. You'll be sorry if you miss it. . . . Go out and get a copy; savor it. This one is special."

—Tom Walker, *The Denver Post**

"It's dangerous work, writing about faith. . . . To get it as right as Leif Enger does in **his novel is nothing short of miraculous. . . .**

What could be unbelievable becomes extraordinary in Enger's hands. . . . If words can bolster lapsed faith, if a story can sturdy a shaky foundation, then the flow of Enger's amazing new novel may bring more than a few of us to his promised peace."

—Connie Ogle, *The Miami Herald*

"You don't see novels like this one very often. *Peace Like a River* reminds a reader of Kent Haruf's *Plainsong* or even Norman MacLean's *A River Runs Through It*. It's got that pure American loss of innocence theme, that belief in and fascination with miracles, that insistence on the goodness of men outside of the law."

—Susan Salter Reynolds,
Los Angeles Times Book Review

**NATIONAL BESTSELLER
Over 125,000 copies in print**

A Atlantic Monthly Press
an imprint of Grove/Atlantic, Inc.
distributed by Publishers Group West