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# *Peace Like a River*

by

**Leif Enger**

**2001**



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Diane Clapsaddle

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The Places: Roofing, Minnesota and the Badlands, North Dakota

The Time: predominantly the early 1960's around 1962, but also 1951 to the present day

### CHARACTER LIST

#### Major Characters

**God** - Although he never actually speaks to anyone of Jeremiah, his presence is a constant as He gives Jeremiah the ability to do miracles and is always with them. He leads Reuben when he goes to the "other country" and sends him home again. He is the one all but Davy turns to when they are most in need.

**Reuben Land** - Reuben is both narrator and main character of the story. He is eleven years old when the main events begin, although he gives us insight into events that happened from the time he was born until the present day. He is a severe asthmatic and witness to many miracles the least of which is his own cure.

**Jeremiah Land** - He is the father of the Land family and because of surviving being pulled into a tornado, he is very devout and as Reuben witnesses, the performer of many miracles.

**Davy Land** - After his girlfriend and later his family are attacked by Israel Finch and Tommy Basco, the town bullies, sixteen year old Davy sets a trap at his own home and shoots them both to death. He is arrested, because he is accused of not just defending his home, and put on trial. However, he escapes his jail cell and heads for the Badlands of North Dakota. Soon, his family follows, trying to find him and bring him home.

**Swede Land** - She is the nine year-old sister of Reuben and Davy and is extremely intelligent. She is a writer of an epic poem based on a character named Sunny Sundown whose exploits mirror what.....

Many additional major and minor characters are identified in the full study guide.

### CONFLICT

**Protagonist** - The protagonist of a story is the main character who traditionally undergoes some sort of change. He or she must usually overcome some opposing force. In this story, the protagonist is Reuben Land who believes he was revived at birth to be the witness to his father's miracles. He is also the....

**Antagonists** - The antagonist of a story is the force that provides an obstacle for the protagonist. The antagonist does not always have to be a single character or even a character at all. There are several antagonists in this story. The first are the bullies, Israel Finch and Tommy Basco. Their torment of the people in Roofing, especially the Land family set off the events that eventually cost them and....

**Climax** - The climax of a plot is the major turning point that allows the protagonist to resolve the conflict. The climax occurs when Reuben is shot, dies, and visits what he calls the "other country." He meets.....

**Outcome** - The outcome is the final resolution of the story or the denouement. Reuben lives, with perfect lungs, but Jeremiah dies. Roxanna stays with them as their mother, and Sara continues to live with them

### SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY

A young asthmatic boy named Reuben Land narrates the story of his family after his brother kills two bullies who had targeted them. His brother Davy is convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to prison. His brother escapes from prison and heads for the Badlands in North Dakota. Reuben and ....

## THEMES

**Miracles are only miracles if they are witnessed** - The first and most important theme is: miracles are only miracles if they are witnessed. Reuben learns this first from the story of his birth when Dr. Nokes witnessed Jeremiah bring Reuben back to life after not breathing for twelve minutes. Later, Reuben.....

**Decisions always have consequences** - Another theme tells us no matter whether our decisions are good or bad, they always have consequences. This is a constant idea every time one of members of.....

**God is ever-present** - A third theme is that God is always with us. Whenever anyone is in trouble or is even expressing joy and happiness, the reader knows that God led them there and helps them....

## MOOD

The mood is at times troubling and even quite sad, but for the most part is....

## Leif Enger - BIOGRAPHY

Leif Enger was born in 1961 in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, and raised in Osakis, Minnesota to Don and Wilma Enger. He attended Moorhead State University in Minnesota and majored in English. He worked as a local news reporter and producer for Minnesota Public Radio for nearly twenty years. He lives on a farm in Minnesota with his wife (Robin Reed) and two sons (Ty and John). Peace Like a.....

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES AND ANALYSIS

### CLAY

#### Summary

The novel opens with the narrator – Reuben Land – being born. He says that from the very beginning all he wanted was a good set of lungs and the air to fill them with. (pg. 1) Unfortunately, when he was born in 1951, to Jeremiah and Helen Land, his lungs refused to work. His father was pacing outside Wilson Hospital when, as he tells the story later, God told him Reuben was in trouble. It was such a tragedy in the making that Dr. Nokes, who delivered him, still had nightmares about it. When his father entered the room at a dead run, Dr. Nokes was comforting his mother and he lay uncovered on a steel tray, beginning to cool, like a little clay boy. His father commanded him to breathe while the doctor insisted that he had been dead for more than twelve minutes. Even if he started breathing now, he would have brain damage. However, Jeremiah Land wasn't ready to give up. He wrapped Reuben's little body in his own jacket as Dr. Nokes tried to stop him with the words that we have to trust in the Almighty to do what is best. At this, Jeremiah struck the doctor with a right hand so that he went down hard. Then, his father turned back to the baby and said in a normal voice, "Reuben Land, in the name of the living God I am telling you to breathe." (pg. 3)

The story of his birth only ever entered his thoughts when Reuben used it to impress his classmates. Otherwise, it wasn't until later events that it occurs to him to wonder why he was allowed to breathe and keep breathing. Now he believes that the answer lies in miracles – an idea that has nothing to do with anything that's normal, but instead with events which bother people and rebut every rule we all take comfort in. They contradict the will of earth. Reuben also asserts that no miracle happens without a witness and that miracles sometimes flowed from his father's hands with no other witness than him. That's why he now believes that he was allowed to live with no brain damage after twelve minutes without oxygen – to be a witness to miracles that were no cute things, but a swing of a sword. Now if his father were to begin the account, Reuben thinks he will say just as he did on the worst night of their lives, "We and the world, my children, will always be at war. Retreat is impossible. Arm yourselves." (pg. 4) (war motif).

## Notes

The motif of miracles begins with the birth of Reuben Land. The dramatic events, that include his father striking the doctor, are a foreshadowing of Reuben's role of witness. His assertion, that miracles are never miracles without a witness, prepares the reader for momentous events that occurred when he was eleven years old. Now, as an adult, he lays down the account of his family's discovery that there are indeed miracles.

Some important motifs are introduced in this chapter: miracles and the idea of war and battles.

The title of the chapter is also important to note. He tells us his father described him as a little clay boy, which is reminiscent of God's creation of Adam. Like God who made Adam from clay and blew air into him, Jeremiah Land blew air and life into his motionless, clay-like son as well.

## HIS SEPARATE SHADOW

### Summary

Reuben tells us that his survival is his father's first miracle. The second is that the doctor was wrong about him being brain damaged. The third is a bit more startling to Reuben than Jeremiah saving his son's life. It is the trip when he shot his first goose. He, his sixteen year-old brother, Davy, his eight year-old sister, Swede, and his father are on their way to the farm of a friend, August Schultz, to go goose hunting. They are riding in their old Plymouth, which has a defective heater, and so Reuben and his sister, Swede, are all wrapped up in blankets in the back seat. In the front seat sit his father and Davy, who never speak a word to each other for the entire trip.

Before dawn, they are settled among decoys in one of August's barley fields. It is a cold morning with freezing rain. Reuben, who had never yet shot his first goose, is nearly asleep on the ground when suddenly a lone goose approaches them. Davy spins Reuben from his stomach to his back as the bird takes off and shoves the rifle into his hands. Reuben misses the first two shots, and then because he doesn't want to bear the shame of having lost the bird, he desperately shoots again even though he thinks the bird is out of range. Unbelievably, the bird is hit and makes a controlled flight to the ground and Davy tells Reuben to go finish it off. Instead, Swede jumps up and chases the bird. The bird sees Swede coming and begins to run faster than Reuben could ever have believed. That just makes Swede run harder and causes Dad to begin laughing. That goose still owns its spirit and Swede says later that it had decided to kill her. Dad continues to laugh so hard that he has to sit down hard on the ground wiping his eyes. Suddenly, Davy leans out and captures the bird behind its head and quickly snaps its neck. He hands it to Reuben with the words, "All yours, Natty Bumppo" after the character in the novel by James Fenimore Cooper. It is a wonderful moment for Reuben who feels a change in his life.

When they return to the farm, Reuben is expected to clean the bird himself. Davy offers to help him, but Reuben refuses even though he'd like his help. He wants to continue this rite of passage that will help lead him to manhood. Swede stands with him, telling him each step, until he tells her to let him do it. She sticks around, because she wants him to forgive her for running from the goose. He loudly forgives her and then asks the question they both have to have been thinking about: "What's wrong with Davy?" Finally, she tells him what she knows that he doesn't – two boys named Israel Finch and Tommy Basca walked into the girls' locker room after the football game and beat up Davy's girlfriend, Dolly. Jeremiah, the school janitor, saw them go in and followed them. He chased them off, but none of them have any details, because Dad won't talk to Davy about it.

The next morning, Reuben wakes up from a dream he'd been having of a reptile of some kind to Davy wiping down his rifle. They heard there are some Canadian geese on the west quarter and they're going out again. Davy brings up the subject of the two boys who had hurt Dolly by warning him that they had threatened to harm Dad and his family. He wants to make sure that Reuben and Swede look out for them. They walk to the west quarter and see a whole flock of the geese. Unfortunately, something spooks them, and they fly off. (Strangely, Reuben had never thought of the fact that he was going to kill a living being until he sees these geese.) Then his father

tells them to lie back down, because again, a goose had broken off from the group. The goose begins a wide swing around the field while Reuben watches his brother seem to melt into a rock pile, hunting as if alone, and when it makes another swing around them heading south, Davy calmly gets to one knee and shoots it out of the sky.

That night as he and his sister lay under mounds of quilts in August's house, he asks her what she thinks Davy will do about those guys. Swede thinks they're just windbags and bullies and that Dad punished them enough. But Reuben feels like Davy thinks Dad didn't go far enough. Swede's response is that she'd hate to be those guys when Davy gets ahold of them. Reuben still worries, because he doesn't think those two are as unimportant as Swede describes them. They are serious trouble in their little town of Roofing, Minnesota, not just bullies.

Reuben can hear the adults talking quietly in the kitchen about their memories of their youth together and how after the Dust Bowl, they were no longer farm owners, but renters, or in their case, a school janitor. As Swede returns to her own room to sleep, she kisses her brother sweetly and says he's almost like Davy now that he's gotten his first goose. Reuben, however, feels otherwise. Davy aiming and shooting that goose is an image that Reuben will keep with him forever. He says about his brother, "Not confidence – I understand confidence. What Davy has is knowledge." (page 16)

Reuben has a terrible dream that night in which he is crossing a shallow river that smells of dying plants. He is surrounded by mist that suddenly lifts and he sees a dead horse on the shore, its tail in the river. He awakes gasping and is afraid to go back to sleep in fear that there is something worse on the shore than the dead horse. He realizes that he has to go to the outhouse and something that he usually dreads because of the dark, now relieves him. On his way, Reuben witnesses the third miracle. His father is pacing the bed of the old grain truck and praying. This is nothing unusual about his father pacing and praying. He often does so and especially when he is suffering from a troubled heart. Then, as Reuben stands watching, his father walks right off the edge of the truck. He wants to shout out a warning just before it happens, but Reuben is frozen tight. Then, his father goes over the edge, but does not fall! He goes on pacing and praying relentlessly about three feet off the ground. Reuben believes he is praying for Davy and the situation with the town bullies, but unbelievably, he hears his own name just as his father's boot soles strike the boards of the truck bed again.

## Notes

There are several important factors to this chapter. The first concerns the miracles Reuben witnesses in connection with his father. This will be a motif throughout the novel. The second concerns Reuben's dreams. Like his father, who seems to be able to perform miracles as a result of his deep love of God, Reuben has a kind of premonition of events because of his dreams. They are often indicative of coming danger. The third and last factor is the sense that something bad will happen because of Davy's feeling about the bullies and his skill with a rifle.

The title is a sign that Jeremiah Land is different from his family and other people. His has this deep abiding love for God, talks to Him regularly, and is rewarded with the ability to create miracles. There will be others as the plot unfolds.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES CHARACTER ANALYSES

**God** - The presence of God is seen through the miracles Jeremiah performs and that Reuben witnesses. He leads the family down the path He feels best fulfills their purpose on earth. For example, through Jeremiah, Reuben lives even after twelve minutes of not breathing. He brings Jeremiah even deeper into His fold by saving him from a tornado. He allows the family to drive for hours when they know there is.....

**Reuben Land** - He narrates the story as an adult looking back on miraculous events that unfolded in his life. He is only eleven when the greatest of these events occurred, but he knows the story of his birth and how important it was for him to live. He should have died at birth but lived through the miraculous hand of his father in order to witness and tell about the power of God. He is a normal little boy in 1962 when his brother, Davy, lures two bullies who have been tormenting the family, to their house and then.....

**Jeremiah Land** - He is the father in the family and is a very good man. He intends to become a doctor, but when drawn up into a tornado and living to tell about it, he gives up this career, becomes a janitor, and waits for direction from God. His wife leaves him and their children and so Jeremiah faces life alone with three children. He reads his Bible every day and lives a generous and loving life. Then, his.....

**Davy Land** - Davy is the only member of the family who has a hard time finding God and recognizing His miracles. He is a very protective soul who knows that the Israel Finch and Tommy Basco won't stop tormenting them without serious intervention. That's why he knowingly sets a trap to have the boys break into the Land home. That gives him the excuse to kill them both. Davy never feels any .....

Additonal characters are analyzed in the complete study guide.

## PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The novel is divided into twenty-three chapters that are not numbered but instead entitled, and the titles are particularly meaningful. The narrator, Reuben, tells the story in the form of flashback. It is....

## THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

**Miracles are only miracles if they are witnessed** is the most important theme. The entire narrative is not only a story of the Land family's experiences, but also Reuben's way of telling God's story as presented through the miracles of Jeremiah Land. Reuben witnesses many of these miracles and insists that he was allowed by God to live when he should have died at birth, because his purpose was to witness the miracles and tell those in search of faith about them. So as the plot unfolds we see such miracles as Jeremiah's survival after being drawn up inside a tornado, his ability to walk on air while deep in prayer, his healing.....

**No matter if our decisions are good or bad, they always have consequences** is another important theme. Throughout the story, the children and their father make decisions that impact in some way not only on themselves, but on others as well. The most obvious, of course, is Davy, who makes the decision to kill Israel Finch and Tommy Basco to protect his family from their continuing harassment. This.....

**God is always with us** is the last theme and the major message of the book. Whenever the Land family finds themselves in trouble or in need of support, they only have to turn to prayer and.....

## AUTHOR'S STYLE

Leif Enger writes a reader-friendly story, incorporating the common language of a lower middle-class family in 1962 Minnesota. He pulls us into the family ourselves, but doesn't leave.....

## RISING ACTION

The rising action begins with Reuben's explanation of how his father brought him back to life in God's name when he had been born dead and hadn't breathed for twelve minutes. He believes god saved him to be....

## FALLING ACTION

The falling action involves Reuben's time in the "other country" where he tells his father goodbye and is sent back to the real world. Then, he tells us how he, Swede, and Sara lived together with Roxanna until Swede became a published author and he married Sara and settled into a.....

## POINT OF VIEW

The point of view is first person, told from Reuben's viewpoint. He is the narrator and this.....

## OTHER ELEMENTS

### FORESHADOWING

There are several literary devices that pop up at various times in the story. One of the most prevalent ones is foreshadowing, which frequently presents clues of something that will happen later in the novel. Some examples of foreshadowing include:

1. It wasn't until later events that it occurs to Reuben to wonder why he was allowed to breathe and keep breathing. This foreshadows his role as a witness to Jeremiah's miracles
2. On the way to August's house to hunt geese, in the front seat sit his father and Davy, who never .....

## IRONY

Another important element is irony – when something happens, or is seen, or is heard that we may know, but the characters do not, or that appears opposite of what is expected. Some examples of irony include:

1. Ironically, all the squad cars arrive quickly after Davy kills the boys, the cars that weren't there for them when Israel Finch and Tommy Basco attacked Swede.
2. Ironically, as a result of losing his job allowing Davy to escape, Stube begins a new career as....

## PERSONIFICATION

Another element is **personification** which is the application of human characteristics to something or someone that is not human. Some examples include:

1. Only once in his life had he ever known grief so hard he could actually hear it inside, scraping at....

## QUOTES – IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS AND ANALYSIS

The following quotations are important at various points of the story (Grove Press, New York, 2001):

1. **"Reuben Land, in the name of the living God I am telling you to breathe."** (page 3; This is the first miracle performed by Jeremiah.)
2. **"We and the world, my children, will always be at war. Retreat is impossible. Arm yourselves."** (page 4; Here Jeremiah prepares his children for the change the world will bring them now that Davy has committed murder.)
3. **Dad tells Reuben now that the tar on the front door is escalation. Reuben wonders what they should do back. Dad just laughs and says, "What those fellows don't realize is, we've already won. The victory is ours."** (page 25; Dad tries to show Reuben that God has favored them .....

## SYMBOLISM / METAPHORS / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS

Other elements that are present in this novel include **symbols and metaphors**. Symbols are the use of some unrelated idea to represent something else. Metaphors are direct comparisons made between characters and ideas. There are many symbols and metaphors used by the author such as:

1. Like God who made Adam from clay and blew air into him, Jeremiah Land blew air and life into his motionless, clay-like son as well.
2. Reuben takes a moment to explain how it feels to try to breathe while having an asthmatic attack. He compares it to a bellows which has a tiny air-born seed suddenly stick inside it and slowly you.....

Another element that is very dominant in this novel is that of **a motif** or a recurring thematic element used in the development of a literary or artistic work. There are three motifs in this novel. The first is that of **miracles**. Some examples include:

1. Reuben's birth and how Jeremiah revives him.
2. Jeremiah walking on air as he.....

The second motif is that of **dreams**. Some examples include:

1. Reuben has a terrible dream in which he is crossing a shallow river that smells of dying plants. He is surrounded by mist, which suddenly lifts and he sees a dead horse on the shore, its tail in the river. He awakes gasping and is afraid to go back to sleep in fear that there is something worse on the shore than a dead horse.
2. Reuben awakes from a dream he'd been having of a.....

A third motif is that of **war**. The family finds themselves at war after Davy commits the murder and images of war appear at various points in the narrative:

1. "We and the world, my children, will always be at war. Retreat is impossible. Arm yourselves."
2. "What those fellows don't realize is, we've already won. The victory is ours."
3. Dad chuckles and says that now it's Reuben's chance to learn about the.....

## IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

**Title:** *Peace Like a River*

**Author:** Leif Enger

**Date Published:** 2001

**Meaning of the Title:** It refers to the idea that peace as opposed to war flows softly and gently and that we must give up the rigidity of war and find the soft flow of peace. This image is especially seen in the description of heaven where the joyous souls flow like streams of a river.

**Setting:** The Places: Roofing, Minnesota and the Badlands, North Dakota, predominantly the...

## STUDY QUESTIONS – MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1. Reuben believed he was brought back to life as a baby, because
    - a.) he was meant to witness his father's miracles.
    - b.) his mother would have gone mad at his death.
    - c.) he was meant to be a great lawyer like Mr. DeCuellar.
  2. The miracle that Jeremiah personally experienced was
    - a.) Reuben not being brain-damaged.
    - b.) walking on air.
- being drawn up inside a tornado...

## ANSWER KEY

- 1.) a. 2.) c. 3.) a. 4.) c. 5.) b. 6.) a. 7.) c. 8.) a. 9.) b. 10.) a. 11.) c. 12.) b. 13.) b. 14.) a. 15.) c.

## ESSAY TOPICS – BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Discuss the miracles that Jeremiah is responsible for performing. Why do you believe God chose him? Explain why Reuben thought he was meant to live. Does he fulfill his purpose especially with Davy?....

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