Peace Like a River
Leif Enger

STUDY GUIDE

Part I Answer each of the following questions in a paragraph. The initial response from one of these paragraphs will be turned into an essay upon your return to school.

1. Throughout the novel, breathing is employed as motif. From the moment Reuben is born onward, he struggles to breathe. Jeremiah Land encounters severe breathing problems during his bout of pneumonia. What thematic purpose might Enger have for the symbol of breathing?

2. Reuben Land says that miracles are happening all around people and that it is up to people to “make of it what [they] will.” What miracles occur in the novel? How is Jeremiah Land connected to many of these miracles? When do the miracles seem to cease? Does Enger suggest that Jeremiah is a Christ-figure? What text evidence supports this suggestion?

3. The novel deals with the ancient conflict of Good vs Evil. In what ways does this archetypal conflict appear in the novel and how is it resolved?

4. The journey motif is a common pattern found in a variety of novels about American life. Works, such as The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Moby-Dick, Their Eyes Were Watching God, and The Grapes of Wrath deal with Americans on the move. How does Enger employ the archetype of the journey and make it distinctively American?

Part II Answer each of the following questions.

1. Why does Jeremiah decide to leave medical school after he survives the devastating tornado? How does his decision lead to his wife leaving him and their three children? What effect does abandonment by their mother have on the Land children?

2. Recount the chain of events that lead to Davy shooting and killing Israel Finch and Tommy Basca.

3. Explain the contradictory responses to Davy’s arrest as witnessed by newspaper accounts and letters sent to Davy and the victims’ families.

4. How does the epic of Sunny Sundown written by Swede comment on or parallel the adventures of the Land family?

5. Besides the epic Swede pens, there are several other stories within the chronicle of the Land family, including Biblical and mythical tales. What are these other stories and how do they help to further the narrative?

6. The novel opens and closes with Jeremiah Land saving Reuben’s life. How does the connection of these grand events work to bring the novel full circle?
7. How does Roxanna enter the story? How does Reuben’s view of Roxanna change over time? Does he find something in the way she cares for him that he did not realize had been missing?

8. How does the history of the settlement of the American West figure in the story?

9. How does prayer function in the novel for each of the characters?

10. The adventures of Davy are woven into the story once the Land family as hit the road in their inherited Airstream in search of their lost kin. When does Davy remain in the foreground of the story and when does he recede into the background?

11. Throughout the novel, the Land family is aided by compassionate people. Who are some of the characters who assist them? How do these characters help further the story?

12. The characters’ first names hold important symbolic value. In what ways is this true?

13. How does violence figure in the novel? How does Swede deal with violence in her epic poem?

14. Upon arriving at August’s house in North Dakota, Reuben asks his father where they will go from there. Mr. Land replies that they are a bit like the Israelites leaving Egypt during the Exodus. “Just like us,” Reuben notes, “they were traveling by faith.” How does faith carry the family forward? How is faith challenged, shaken even, as the novel progresses?

15. In what ways is the end of the novel foreshadowed? How does Reuben deal with his faith once his father is gone?

16. What symbolic significance does the Land family’s surname hold? How does the author connect the Lands to the landscapes of the novel?

17. Explain the connection of the title to the novel.