

Leif Enger Interview



Photo by Robin Enger

*Leif Enger, the Osakis, Minnesota, native and Minnesota resident wrote the hugely successful *Peace Like a River* in 2002, and has just written his most recent novel, *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*. In an interview with Scott Noble of Noble Creative, Enger talked about his childhood, his writing process and his faith.*

Noble Creative: As a child growing up in Minnesota, when did your interest in stories and narrative emerge?

Leif Enger: I think I always loved stories, because my parents were both good storytellers. Dad would tell stories about his days growing up and hunting and so forth in North Dakota. Great fishing stories were part of the daily diet.

And then my mom, besides being a good storyteller, constantly read...great literature to us. Often in the evenings when we were getting ready to go to bed, Mom would read us stories. Particularly I remember stories by Robert Stevenson and Jack London. I think when you have that sort of basis, stories kind of make sense to you and you begin to acquire the rhythms.

NC: Where did the genesis for the hugely successful *Peace Like a River* come from?

Leif Enger: It came about because our son was going through a terrible time with childhood asthma just then. We were quite confused about it and didn't know how to handle it. It was like nothing we had seen before. We were young and ignorant and naïve.

What we really wanted was, of course, a miracle. This is what you want when your kids are ill. We had to make due with not a miracle, but with doctors taking care of him and us learning how to deal with that situation. So that was really the genesis.

My brother Lin, who also has a book coming out this summer [*Undiscovered Country: A Novel*], has said that you write about things in order to understand them. And I think what I wanted to do was to understand what he was going through and understand my own desires for his healing.

NC: How does your faith interact with your work?

Leif Enger: I think that no matter what your work is, it's informed by your belief. And I think that's true for carpenters and people who work for the phone company and artists of all kinds. It comes out not necessarily purposefully. I never think about writing a book in order to proselytize or to persuade. But certainly my faith emerges thematically in everything I do.

NC: What advice would you give to writers and artists who are trying to strike a balance between their faith and their work?

Leif Enger: If you're a writer, your job is to be truthful about human character, to perform your work honestly and without guile and in a way that reflects the best stuff our Creator used in building us.

So for me that means creating characters on a foundation of love—loving my characters—and then proceeding to show every side of them that I can get access to. The selfish, the unwholesome, as well as the good, and allowing them to go through whatever crisis the story brings their way. And so far that's worked pretty well for me.

NC: How does your writing process work? How do you come up with a book idea?

Leif Enger: Well for me it usually starts with something very simple: a character trait, a type of character. In the case of my new book, I was thinking about a man who is aging and who sees the end of his life coming before too long and feels a need to make things right before he goes.

So I've always been interested in the West—the Old West—and I've always been fascinated by the idea of these old guys who had long careers, in some cases as outlaws, and the sense of need they must have had as they got older, a need to put the past behind them, a need to find fulfillment and forgiveness. And so that was seed of this story; it was just that character.

I begin to write character sketches and begin to write down everything about them that I can think of. And it's interesting because, at that point, the only way I can really come up with a character is to be writing it down as I go.

It's difficult for me to form a character in my mind unless I have a pencil in my hand or my fingers on a keyboard. And once I begin to write, then more and more character traits emerge. And soon I have a big pile of notes. And then once I have a big pile of notes for each of the characters, then they kind of tell me what the story is going to be. And I take off from there.

NC: Who do you read when you're sitting down to relax and pick up a novel?

Leif Enger: Tobias Wolff. I really love Tobias Wolff. I think he is incredibly generous to his characters and economical with his language.

I love Graham Greene, who I think is also incredibly kind to his people and doesn't hesitate to show their bad sides as well as their good sides, and yet you can't be against them; you love his people, which means he did, too.

I think Walker Percy is exemplary; I love his books, particularly *The Moviegoer*, which I thought was enormously powerful. Plus he could be terribly funny.

Charles Portis was a terrific writer; he wrote *True Grit*, *The Dog of the South*, and *Norwood* and some other books. I think *The Dog of the South*, while it has almost no forward momentum, is one of the funniest books I've ever read. I just absolutely howled all the way through. I love him.

I like to read Anne Tyler from time to time, although I haven't read her last couple but I'm due for another. So those are some of my favorites.

NC: So what's next for you?

Leif Enger: I'm in the midst of another stack of character notes. So I'm writing another novel.

A shorter version of this interview originally appeared in The Minnesota Christian Chronicle.