

Book Discussion Points for *Peace Like A River**

Characters & Motivation

Why does Jeremiah decide to leave medical school after he survives the devastating tornado?
How does this lead to his wife leaving him and their three children?

The narrator of *Peace Like a River* is a young boy, and his younger sister is another main character. How are children portrayed in the novel? Are their thoughts and actions believable?

The novel's narrator, Reuben, is 11 years old at the time of the book's events, but the story is being relayed by the adult Reuben. The perspective seems to shift at the end of the novel. Which view of the events is more accurate? Discuss why Enger might have made the choice to have the grown-up Reuben reflecting on those long-ago events.

Before committing the violent act that change the course of the book, Davy asks Rube, "Do you think God looks out for us?" When Rube answers in the affirmative, Davy asks him, "Do you want Him to?" What does this tell readers about these two characters and their different experiences of being raised in the same family?

How do each of Jeremiah's three children respond to their father's religious faith?

How does Reuben's asthmatic condition affect his actions and beliefs?

Reuben idealizes both of the older males in his family. How does this create conflict for him?

Nine-year-old Swede is the main female character throughout the majority of a book populated by strong male characters. Why was it important for the narrative that the mother of the Land children had deserted the family long before the novel begins? How does being motherless affect the attitudes and actions of each of the Land children? What in their character or position makes for differences?

Jeremiah Land is portrayed as a gentle, compassionate, self-sacrificing man. How is this evidenced in the narrative with each member of his family and community?

Jeremiah is in many ways a "touchstone" in the book. How are various minor characters clarified by how they react to him?

How do Reuben and Swede first react to Davy's arrest? When more information is later revealed, how do their feelings change?

After Davy is arrested, several members of the community ostracize the family, especially Jeremiah. Jeremiah's employer is particularly cruel to him. Although we are not told straight out why this is so. What might be his motives? How and why does Jeremiah heal him?

The adventures of Davy come in and out of the novel once the family hits the road in search of him. How and when does Davy remain a main character in the novel and how does he recede into the background?

Are there instances of Swede serving as the matriarch in the family? How does Roxanna do so later in the book?

How does Reuben's view of Roxanna change over time? Does he find something in the way she cares for him that he didn't know he was missing?

What role do Waltzer and Sara play in the family's story? What is the author saying about these very different characters and their place in the Land family history?

Are the characters' first names important or symbolic in the novel? In what ways?

Toward the end of the book, after a violent asthmatic attack, Reuben says, "The infirm wait always, and know it." How does this comment reflect the family's search for Davy? How does it clarify Reuben's difference from Davy?

What happens, in Reuben's perception, after he and his father are shot? Was this episode inevitable according to the previous narrative? In what ways has it been foreshadowed? In what ways is it shocking?

Plot

How does the saga of Sunny Sundown, as written by Swede, comment on or parallel the adventures of the Land family?

What purpose does Swede's epic poem about the cowboy Sunny Sundown serve in revealing characters or plot?

Besides the epic of Sunny Sundown, there are several other stories within the saga of the Land family, including Biblical and mythical tales. What are they and how do they work to further the narrative?

The novel opens and closes with Jeremiah saving Reuben's life. How do the events of the novel follow from that dramatic beginning? How does the connection of these two grand events work to bring the novel full circle?

Issues & Themes

How do the American traditions of vigilantism, “the code of the West,” “the right to bear arms and admired outlaws influence the views of various characters on Davy’s acts?

How does the family’s surname, Land, function to provide a tone or setting for the family?

How do the various landscapes become characters in the novel? How does landscape interact with the human characters and vice versa?

How does the landscape as it is presented affect the reader’s perception of the family’s situation?

How does the history of western settlement figure in the story?

How are various senses of isolation as experienced by the different characters portrayed?

How is the issue of familial love addressed through out the book, in both large and small ways?

The “miracles” performed by Jeremiah, or at least those witnessed by Reuben, seem to decrease in number over the course of the book. Reuben says that since arriving at Roxanna’s house, there had been “no miracles whatever.” What is the significance of this in terms of the narrative? Is it true, or perhaps only a matter of witnessing?

Is it necessary for readers to believe in the existence of magic or miracles to be convinced by the narrative of the book?

How does prayer function in the novel for each of the characters? How does it change for some of them over time?

Why is healing Reuben’s asthma a feat Jeremiah cannot accomplish, a miracle he cannot perform?

Consider some of the Biblical allusions present in the novel. How do they relate to the Land family story? How do they lead the family into (and through) their experiences at home and their adventures on the road?

Reuben says of his miraculous restoration to life from being a breathless newborn baby, “I believe I was preserved...in order to be a witness.” How does Reuben’s witnessing function throughout the novel?

Reuben also says, “a miracle is no cute thing but more like the swing of a sword.” How does this comment set up the events of the novel? How is it reflected in Reuben’s final inability to relate to his former “crush,” Bethany?

Peace Like a River has inevitable references to morality plays, where Good must battle Evil. How and when does this specifically occur? How does the ending fit into this eternal conflict?

There are elements of magic realism scattered throughout the book. How do these compare with what Reuben sees as miracles?

Author & His Craft

The novel begins with one of several “miracles” performed by the narrator’s father. What was this miracle, and how does it set the tone for the rest of the story?

What are the complex circumstances that precede the deaths of Tommy and Israel? Does the author provide all of the information up front? Why not?

“Misdirection” is a literary technique whereby an author keeps the reader’s attention away from important facts and details until later in the narrative. What other examples of “misdirection” are provided in the narrative of the novel?

Why did the author set the novel in the early 1960s? Does that create a different tone for the reader?

How does the author inform the reader about the landscape his characters are exploring?

What are some of the signs and symbols used by the author throughout the book?

Early in the novel, Swede tells Reuben, in regard to her Sunny Sundown epic poem, “Just because I write it doesn’t mean it really happened.” How does that reflect on Reuben’s telling of the family’s story?

Reuben often has to make an effort to breathe. How does this serve as a metaphor in the novel?

What foreshadowing occurs in the first chapters of the book, especially during the hunting scenes and in Swede’s poem about Sunny Sundown?

How does the novel’s title relate to the story?

What portions or aspects of the writing were most artful and enjoyable to read?

Speculative Questions

Consider how the different characters see fate and their own part in their own futures. What is the author telling us about free will?

What if Reuben had told on Davy? Are the large consequences of his secret necessary to the story?

Would the story be possible and convincing without the “miracles”?

Davy seems unchanged by Jeremiah’s sacrifice. What would be needed to get a man like Davy to reject his code of self-sufficiency?

We are asked to believe that Sara is healed of the traumas in her life without any support of such a change evident in the narrative. How would you show this happening?

Would the story be possible and convincing without the “miracles”?

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