

“Make of It What You Will”

Discussion Questions/Activities for *Peace like a River* by Leif Enger
Read North Dakota, Nov. 1, 2006, 2-3 p.m., videoconference with Nancy Jones

1. During his visit with you, Leif Enger said, “A story is finished only when people pick it up and read it and make of it what they will.” What, ultimately, do you make of the story? How did you respond to the fates of Davy, Reuben, Swede, and their father? How does each of the children come of age in the novel? (15 minutes)
2. As you read, make note of scenes (and page numbers) that are especially appealing to you. Select your three favorites, and write a short response about what makes these scenes effective. Note especially how setting, action, and dialogue work. (12 minutes)
3. Enger said that when he was young, the North Dakota Badlands were “dangerous, exciting, and romantic.” Do you agree? Did your feelings about North Dakota change after you read the book? How? (6-7 minutes)
4. Re-read the first chapter after you have finished reading the novel. Discuss how the story of Reuben’s difficult birth and miraculous recovery set up the events of the novel and the way in which Reuben responds to them. How does “Clay” prepare readers for the last chapter, “Be Jubilant My Feet”? (6-7 minutes)
5. Enger said Reuben’s asthmatic condition, the remarkable goose hunting scene (pages 5-11), and the “frontier” landscape of North Dakota were all inspired by events in his life (His son is asthmatic, he suffered as Swede did while hunting geese, and he and his family made regular visits to his grandparents in North Dakota.).

Draw on your own family experiences to create a scene using dialogue, action. Set your scene in the North Dakota landscape where these experiences occurred. Instead of remaining true to actual events, give your characters the chance to behave better or worse than they really did; change their names and genders. Experiment with a first-person point of view that is different from what yours was in the actual event. (Write from the POV of your father, mother, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, etc.) Be prepared to read and discuss a scene of no more than 2-3 minutes (practice reading aloud in advance) during the Nov. 1 videoconference. (20 minutes)