

*Peace Like a River*  
Teaching Ideas

INITIAL Pre-Reading QUESTIONS

Written and/or oral group discussion:

A. Define "miracle." If you (did) believe in miracles, what purpose do you think they (would) serve? What might be the benefits of a belief in miracles? What might be the dangers? Polls show that more Americans believe in miracles than believe in the theory of evolution. Discuss.

B. Who has the responsibility for keeping you safe from the evil intentions of others? Who has the responsibility for keeping children and the defenseless safe in our society? How? If you are hurt by someone, whose responsibility is it to see that justice is served?

C. Individual philosophical framework, to be filled out for discussion:

Order the following forces in terms of their degree of responsibility for individual human happiness:

- Universal human nature
- Factors in the natural and architectural environment
- Individual character
- Individual Free Will
- Luck
- Fate
- Destiny
- Familial relationships and loyalties
- Friends and Community relationships
- Purposeful work
- Law and legal and governmental institutions
- A higher power: "God" or whatever spiritual powers exist

Order the following forces in terms of their degree of responsibility for individual human misery:

- Universal human nature
- Factors in the natural and architectural environment
- Nature and human nature
- Individual character
- Individual Free Will
- Luck
- Fate
- Destiny
- Familial relationships and loyalty
- Friends and Community relationships and loyalties and betrayals
- Purposeful work and it's failure
- Law and legal and governmental institutions
- A higher power: "God," "The Devil," or whatever spiritual powers exist

Philosophical issues raised:

1. Who or what frames the shape and outcomes of our lives? (See "Individual philosophical framework" ordering question, previous page.) 2. Taking action versus contemplating and seeking guidance. This is shown in Davy versus Jeremiah. (Can be compared to issues in Hamlet).

Literary issues raised:

1. The revival of old-fashioned oral storytelling; as in Garrison Keillor; the pacing and interweaving of narrative themes, with delayed gratification.  
2. Mystery and Suspense Genre Novel techniques in the "literary" novel. Note the many places, starting with page 4, where the author misleads the reader. Note also the use of stories within stories to delay the exposition and add suspense to the narrative on key plot points.  
3. How authors "stack the deck"; under-motivated actions and unanswered questions raised in *Peace Like A River*.  
4. Is there a difference between Enger's use of "miracles" and most "magic realism"?  
5. The adult narrator looking back through the eyes of childhood.; the father hero. (Compare with *To Kill a Mockingbird*)

Social issues raised:

1. Erasing the effects of evil behavior on victims: revenge, forgiveness and other strategies.  
2. The effects of mother abandonment (*Motherless Child*)  
3. Boys and guns; the second amendment, vigilantes, and the code of the American West and our present violent society, gangs and "Posses." Rural versus urban views on guns. Compare this novel with *Shane* on these issues.  
4. The effects on our national character of the stereotypical Western hero and our idealization of the man of action and dislike of hesitancy (For example, compare Ronald Reagan's status with Jimmy Carter's in the national imagination.)

CREATIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Choose a passage in the book that you really enjoy (a paragraph or two) and read it aloud to the rest of the class. Explain, to the best of your ability what makes the writing so compelling.  
2. After (reading or rereading) the following pages, stop and write your version of the unaccounted events: P. 56. Compose a dialogue between Jeremiah Land and Mrs. Land, regarding their differences and difficulties, a little prior to her departure. Remember that Davy is old enough to overhear and at least partially understand this conversation, and it may influence his outlook. P. 204 Compose a story, a version of events told by Mr. Holgren to an acquaintance, that shows or explains why Mr. Holgren had it out for Jeremiah Land in the first place, and how he reacted to his "healing." P. 283. Compose a phone dialogue between Lonnie Ford in the hospital and either Reuben or Jeremiah.

- P. 311. Compose a love poem from Sara that explains why Sara trusts and loves Reuben. Or, compose a love poem from Reuben that explains why Reuben loves and respects Sara. In your poem, try to suggest how Sara recovered from her atrocious childhood.
3. Take each of the allusions to literary characters and explain the source and the appropriateness of the connection to this book. Examples: Jeremiah (the prophet, old testament), Natty Bumppo, Huck Finn, Jesse James, Butch Cassidy, and Don Quixote (p301).
  4. Before reading the ending, write a description of heaven as you picture it.. You may wish to incorporate features of your favorite places on earth. Try to be as vivid in your description of place as Mr. Enger is in his descriptions of the mid-west.
  5. Write the Ballad of Davy Land (or Jeremiah Land or Reuben Land or Roxanna Cawley). (For the highly sophisticated: Write it as written by Swede Land.)