



## One Great Book: Volume 4, Episode 1 *Peace Like a River* by Leif Enger

[Show Notes](#)

[00:00]

One Great Book Volume IV, Book 1: *Peace Like a River*

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to *One Great Book*, the short-form podcast from the team behind *What Should I Read Next?*, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it in ten minutes or less.

[MUSIC]

I've heard many writers say that some of their best ideas come to them in church, the inspiration coming not necessarily from the divine but from the simple fact that it's the one time in their week where they're forced to sit down empty-handed and BE QUIET for once. Today's great book begins in a Minnesota church. Well, the novel itself does not, but the inspiration does: right at the moment when Leif Enger was just beginning to conceive the book that was to become his debut novel, he was in church on a Sunday morning singing an old hymn called "It Is Well with My Soul," and the first stanza lodged itself in Enger's brain. It goes like this:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll,  
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

*Peace like a river*. That phrase struck Enger as a "marvelous" book title. The melody it's set to, while peaceful, is not *happy*, as you might expect; there's real sadness there, and the



combination of the two, the peace and the sorrow, it captured Enger—and he felt it captured something about the book he wanted to write as well—the peace, the sadness. He knew he'd found the title for his book, and he says he wrote *toward* that title.

[01:49]

In this season of One Great Book, we're focusing on books that would make excellent gifts for the book lovers in your life, as well as cozy reads that are perfect for cuddling up with for a few hours, and feel pleasantly contemplative. Our first book for this volume, set in the snowdrifts of rural Minnesota and the frozen Badlands of North Dakota, is perfect for blanket reading season. Part tragedy, part romance, part coming of age story, *Peace Like a River* is beautiful and puzzling, it invites reflection and discussion; it's peaceful yet full of sorrow. It is One. Great. Book.

\*\*\*

One Great Book is brought to you by [Page 1 Books](#), the book subscription company that brings hand-selected books straight to your mailbox. We all know book mail is the best mail, and as we turn our attention to gift giving now is the perfect time to delight everyone on your list by giving THEM the gift of book mail. But that doesn't mean you have to know which books they would enjoy because Page 1 has you covered. You can give your reader the gift of choice—and delight them for months to come—with a Page 1 Books gift subscription.

*It's simple and easy for you, and guaranteed to delight them because not only are you giving them great books, you're giving them the gift of literary matchmaking. All you do is go to [page1books.com](#), choose the length of the subscription—3, 6, or 12 months—and check out. Print out or email the gift card to give them whenever YOU are ready. And then they get to tell Page 1 all about their taste in books, so Page 1 can hand-pick books just for them and deliver them straight to their door, beautifully packaged, ready to enjoy, and sure to delight.*

*And if you think your recipient has read everything, no worries—Page 1's replacement policy can't be beat. If you or they receive a book you're already read, you are not stuck, and there's*



*no need to send it back. Just pass it along or put it in a Little Free Library with the bookmark and Page 1 will happily send another.*

[03:45]

*If you prefer the idea of presenting the readers in your life with a big box of bookish goodness, make sure to check out the ready-to-go gift bundles on Page 1's website: this year they're bringing back the perennially popular cozy bundle, plus putting together new bundles with themes like Jane Austen, Shakespeare, and more.*

*To get started, visit [page1books.com](http://page1books.com) and select "give the gift of page 1." That's page the number 1 books dot com. [page1books.com](http://page1books.com)*

\*\*\*

*Peace Like a River* is the kind of book that readers love; I finally read it for myself years after my fellow readers began recommending it to me; when dozens of readers tell me a particular book is their favorite of course I want to read it for myself, and that was certainly the case here. And it's the kind of book that *booksellers* love; I know this intuitively, yet let me try to capture WHY in words for you: it's a labor of love by a Minnesota journalist who clearly loves books and bookstores, it's a story of fathers and sons and tight-knit communities; it tells a cracking story—if you like outlaws and cowboys and secret caves and hidden treasure—and yet it has depths that are ripe for hours of discussion, all packaged in gorgeous prose.

I heard a story—fittingly, on my own book tour for *I'd Rather Be Reading*—that helped me understand just how much this book—and this author—mean to independent bookstores.

*Peace Like a River* was first published on September 11, 2001. That date means much to us in hindsight, but before release, all it meant was that this much-anticipated debut had been given a plum September release date. It was true then, it's true now: many big books come out in September, and great things were expected of Enger's debut. It was a Book of the Month Club



selection, the first printing was an impressive 100,000 copies, independent bookstores couldn't wait to sell it as a featured holiday selection.

[05:35]

And now, with the benefit of hindsight, we know that *publishing* was not the news that day. And not only were people not focused on books and authors and their promotional tours, but those long-scheduled book tours couldn't even take place, not as planned, because people wanted to stay home and for a brief window of time, *there was no air travel*.

But two things happen. One, Enger, who loves books and the bookstores that sell them, went to great lengths to make his scheduled tour a reality, even if some of the details had to change. Instead of flying from state to state, he drove 10,000 miles to visit each and every originally scheduled city, and that act of good faith endeared him to booksellers forever.

Two, Enger was peddling a book titled *Peace Like a River* at a time when people were desperate for *peace*. According to Enger's agent, "The book was a balm. The title was a balm. It was what America needed." And it sold.

## Music

The book is indeed about themes that resonated in 2001, but they would have resonated at any time, I think: it's a story of love and sacrifice, faith and disbelief, loyalty and trust, of doing the right thing and forgiving people who do terrible things. And it's a story of miracles, of an extraordinary man whose life is changed by what happens to him when he's swept up in a tornado.

*Peace Like a River* is narrated by a young boy, telling us about—and wrestling with—events he does not comprehend. A suitable framing, because this book explores happenings grown men don't understand any more than our young narrator does: the FBI agent blind to the evidence before him, the boy drawing breath when his asthma-clogged lungs made it impossible just a moment before, the torn birthday gift that is repaired at a touch, the soup pot that seems to be un-empty-able. And by telling his story straight, the best he can, he invites the reader to



evaluate the evidence he presents: the miracles that happen in the novel, and those that happen (or don't) in our everyday lives.

[07:36]

I've told you very little of what happens in this novel, but I hope I've captured the mood: picture a family story, set in the dead of a frozen northern winter. A good man driven to desperate deeds who's forced out on the run, and the family that sets out after him, supporting him in the only way they can think of. A young boy forced to reckon with forces beyond his ken, but that form who he is. A community that means well, yet whose incomprehension brings only harm and—sometimes—humor.

In short, if you want a gorgeous novel, in the vein of Wendell Berry and Marilynne Robinson, that wrestles with the magical and the miraculous, whose beautiful storytelling and memorable characters have compelled many readers to call this THE best book they've ever read, *Peace Like a River* may be the next great book you're looking for.

music

Readers, visit [modernmrsdarcy.com/onegreatbook](https://modernmrsdarcy.com/onegreatbook) to learn more about *Peace Like a River* and all of the great books in this volume. While you're there, sign up for our newsletter, so you stay up to date on all the podcast news and happenings, and are the first to know about upcoming events. That's modern mrs darcy dot com slash one O-N-E one great book.

Thanks again to our sponsor Page 1 Books, the book subscription company that will keep you and your gift recipients in books this season, and in the months to come. Order your gift subscription or check out their ready-to-go book bundles at [page the number 1 books dot com](https://page1books.com).

If you're enjoying this podcast I hope you've given *What Should I Read Next?* a try. That's my long form podcast where each week a reader tells me three books they love, one book they don't, and what they're reading now, and I recommend three titles they should read next. It's guaranteed to put more than one great book on your to be read list.



[09:17]

I'd love to hear what you think about *Peace Like a River* on Twitter or Instagram @AnneBogel that's Anne with an E, B as in books, O-G-E-L. You can also find me on Instagram @WhatShouldIReadNext.

Thanks to Kellen Pechacek for his sound design on today's episode.

Readers, that's it for today, thanks so much for listening.

And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading."

Happy reading, everyone.