

Peace Like a River Study Guide

Peace Like a River by Leif Enger

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Contents

[Peace Like a River Study Guide.....1](#)

[Contents.....2](#)

[Plot Summary.....3](#)

[Chapters 1 - 2, Clay, His Separate Shadow.....4](#)

[Chapters 3 - 4, Beauteous are My Cakes Indeed, Your Toughened Heart.....6](#)

[Chapters 5 - 6, Peeking at Eternity, When Sorrows Like Sea Billows Roll.....8](#)

[Chapters 7 - 8, Late In the Night When the Fires Are Out, A Boy On A Horse.....11](#)

[Chapters 9 - 10, By the Grace of Lurvy, The Substance of Things Hoped For.....13](#)

[Chapters 11 - 12, The Last Thing He Would Do, At War With This Whole World.....15](#)

[Chapters 13 - 14, Something Warm, The Skin Bag.....17](#)

[Chapters 15 - 16, Under the Gibbon Moon, The Throbbing Heart of News.....19](#)

[Chapters 17 - 18, The Little Man's Country, Winning Her Hand.....21](#)

[Chapters 19 - 20, Boy Ready, The Ledger of Our Decisions.....23](#)

[Chapters 21 - 23, The Red Farm, Be Jubilant, My Feet, The Curious Music That I Hear.....26](#)

[Characters.....30](#)

[Objects/Places.....34](#)

[Themes.....37](#)

[Style.....39](#)

[Quotes.....42](#)

[Topics for Discussion.....44](#)



Plot Summary

Peace Like a River is the story of a man touched by God, Jeremiah Land and the way divine providence plays itself out in the trials of Jeremiah and his family. Jeremiah and Helen Land had three children, Davy, Reuben and Swede. However, when Jeremiah miraculously survived being swept up by a tornado and decided to quit medical school and become a janitor, she left him. Thus, the children grow up with Jeremiah raising them all alone.

Jeremiah is an extremely religious Christian and appears to be in regular contact with God Himself. When Reuben, the narrator and main character, sees his father praying one night, vigorously, he sees Jeremiah walk on air without even realizing it. But this was not Jeremiah's only miracle. He had revived Reuben after his birth twelve minutes after he stopped breathing and he had survived the tornado attack.

The main storyline begins with an altercation between two high school bullies, Israel Finch and Tommy Basca and Davy's girlfriend, Dolly. Jeremiah stops them from assaulting Dolly by beating them up and then they threaten his family. Jeremiah refuses to escalate but Davy cannot stop himself; the conflict ends up with Davy shooting Tommy and Israel when they break into the Land's home. This leads Davy to trial for murder, which never finishes because he escapes from jail.

Jeremiah's faith is shaken and he falls into depression until he decides to take Reuben and Swede and search for Davy being led to him by God alone. However, Davy is not safe. He is being hunted by the feds, particularly by a federal agent named Mr. Andreeson, who Jeremiah refuses to help. When the Land's run out of oil, they stop at a gas station run by a sturdy woman named Roxanna. A snowstorm traps them with her for days, during which time Jeremiah decides to court her and the children develop a close attachment to her.

All the while, Davy has been visiting Reuben. He has been staying with a paranoid and dangerous man, Jape Waltzer, and the girl he is raising to be his wife, Sara. Jeremiah and the local authorities never find Davy. And Waltzer eventually kidnaps and kills Mr. Andreeson.

When there is no more sight of Davy, Jeremiah and Roxanna take the children home to Roofing, Minnesota and they get married. A few months later, Davy shows up with Sara. Jape had decided to make Sara his wife, and Davy escaped with her. After he stayed the night, the Land's find Jape in the front yard. He shoots both Jeremiah and Reuben. They both pass into "the next country" (a euphemism for heaven); Jeremiah goes into the city of God and turns Reuben back. When Reuben awakes, Jeremiah has died but miraculously, Reuben's lungs, which had troubled him his whole life and throughout the book, are healed. Reuben had often wondered why Jeremiah's miracles never applied to him, given his suffering. But only when he gave up trying to control the role of divine providence in his life, does God work a miracle on him through Jeremiah.



Chapters 1 - 2, Clay, His Separate Shadow

Chapters 1 - 2, Clay, His Separate Shadow Summary

The book opens with the birth of Reuben Land, Peace Like a River's narrator and main character. Reuben tells the reader that when he was born he could hardly breathe. At the hospital, where Dr. Nokes and his parents, Jeremiah and Helen, were for the delivery, Reuben's inability to breathe was greeted with shocked by Dr. Nokes and Helen (Jeremiah was outside).

Later, when Reuben was older, Jeremiah told Reuben that God had told him that Reuben was struggling to survive. The doctor had to pound Reuben so much and so hard to get him to breathe that Reuben still had nightmares concerning the birth. Jeremiah entered the room to find Dr. Nokes sitting with his mother, with Reuben laying on top of a tray. His father, invoking the name of God, ordered him to breathe, but Nokes claimed that Reuben was already dead and had not breathed for twelve minutes. Even if he breathed, Reuben's brain would be damaged; but Jeremiah would not be dissuaded. He struck Nokes and continued to demand that Reuben live.

Looking back on the story, Reuben comments that his story is a true miracle, not an ordinary one and that true miracles upset people because it breaks their comfort with the world. And he claims that miracles require witnesses, but with his father, sometimes only Reuben needed to be present for them. Reuben thinks that he was allowed to live without oxygen to see miracles in the world, to be part of God's war of miracles on the world.

In Chapter 2, Reuben claims that the second miracle of his life was that he didn't have brain damage. The third miracle is described in detail in the chapter. Reuben, his sixteen year-old brother Davy and his sister Swede and their father Jeremiah go hunting for goose. At dawn, they hunt in Jeremiah's friend's August Schultz's field. Reuben hits a goose after the third shot and Swede runs off to chase it. Davy kills the goose, and Reuben decides to clean the bird for himself.

Davy is apparently upset; it turns out that the two town bullies, Israel Finch and Tommy Basca, had beaten up Davy's girlfriend Dolly in the girls' locker room after a football game. Jeremiah, who was the school janitor, had caught them, but Jeremiah won't tell Davy the details.

The next morning, Davy brings up the bullies, saying they had threatened to hurt Jeremiah and his family. This issue isn't over for him. That night, Swede and Reuben discuss what they think Davy will do about the bullies. They feel like they're in trouble in their town of Roofing, Minnesota.



After waking up during a dream, Reuben goes to use the bathroom. He sees his father pacing in the back of his grain truck, praying. But as he is pacing, he walks off the edge of the truck and doesn't fall but instead simply walks back into the truck on thin air. Reuben thinks Jeremiah is praying for Davy, but he hears his father speak his name.

Chapters 1 - 2, Clay, His Separate Shadow Analysis

Chapter One introduces four characters, Dr. Nokes, Reuben's doctor, his parents, Jeremiah and Helen and the main character and narrator, Reuben Land. The chapter discusses Reuben's birth and miraculous survival.

Reuben's birth is considered a miracle by Dr. Nokes and his family because he survived for twelve minutes without oxygen. Jeremiah came in and heals Reuben in the name of God. Reuben speculates that miracles upset people because it destroys their comfort with the world and that miracles also need witnesses. Reuben believes that he was placed on the earth to witness miracles to make them possible and that for this reason he brought danger with him and represented a kind of declaration of war by God on the earth. Thus we are introduced to two main themes of *Peace Like a River* - the theme of God's miraculous work in the world and the battle between holiness and the world.

Chapter Two introduces more characters - Davy, Reuben's sixteen-year-old brother, Swede, Reuben's sister and three characters only mentioned, not featured, Dolly, Davy's girlfriend, and the two town bullies that beat her up and were about to rape her, Finch and Basca. Jeremiah had stopped them, and they had threatened him and his family. Davy was furious and wanted to retaliate. The chapter introduces the main characters and outline their personalities; it also begins to detail one of the main conflicts in the book, between Reuben's family and the bullies, Finch and Basca. It also outlines Jeremiah's next miracle, walking on thin air. Clearly God's presence, Jeremiah's faith, and Reuben's witness will be major features of the book.



Chapters 3 - 4, Beateous are My Cakes Indeed, Your Toughened Heart

Chapters 3 - 4, Beateous are My Cakes Indeed, Your Toughened Heart Summary

Chapter 3 has the Land family return to their house to find that the bullies have covered their front door in tar; Reuben's breathing became halted because of the thick, warm air, and Jeremiah helps dissolve the particles in his lungs. During this process, Jeremiah explains to Reuben what happened in the locker room. The boys had followed Dolly in and she tried to defend herself, but when she struck Israel, Tommy grabbed her and they started beating her. Then Jeremiah came in and beat them up. Right after that, Israel threatens Jeremiah, telling him that he and Tommy are watching his entire family.

The family goes back to their routines, and Swede and Reuben relax and become interested in poetry. By Wednesday, Davy and Swede tend to the house and Jeremiah and Reuben get to church; they see a new minister, Reverend Johnny, who is a charismatic. He lays his hands on people and they fall down full of "holy joy." Reuben misses much of the sermon while in the church kitchen with a girl his age, Bethany Orchard. When they hear people hitting the floor they run out and see Jeremiah on the floor.

Reuben runs up to Jeremiah and Jeremiah puts his hand on him, filling Reuben with electricity, with a feeling that hurts but is "truth" itself. Jeremiah then suddenly sits up and realizes that they have to quickly rush home.

In Chapter 4, Jeremiah and Reuben reach home. This chapter explains what Jeremiah meant when he said earlier that Israel and Tommy have "already lost." Before they arrive, Davy is working in the garage and Swede hears a knock at the door. When she opens it, Israel and Tommy grab her and harass her in their truck but don't molest her. They return her to the house and tell her they are outside of her window.

Swede goes inside and Davy finds her, smelling like Israel and Tommy's truck. They call the town policeman, Ted Pullet, to no avail. Davy wants to go after them but Jeremiah prevents them. Swede keeps the event to herself, not telling Reuben. The family tries to help Swede get past the incident by giving her a larger birthday party than usual, but it doesn't entirely work.

At breakfast the next day, a traveling salesman named Tin Lurvy shows up and imposes on the family for food. Jeremiah treats him well, but he is unlikeable. When Lurvy leaves, Jeremiah gets a headache, and Reuben has ringing head pain as well. Jeremiah, Swede and Reuben go to sleep and Davy goes outside to smoke.



In the wee hours of the morning, Reuben wakes up, hearing people walking around in the house. The two men stop at Davy and Reuben's door and turn the knob. Davy instructs Reuben to turn on the light; when it comes on, Reuben sees Davy with his Winchester and Israel and Tommy are in the doorway, Israel holding a bat. When Israel tries to hit Reuben, Davy shoots him in the head, killing him; he also hit Tommy, but Tommy is only wounded. Davy stands up and shoots him in the back of the head. Jeremiah gets up, locks Swede in the bathroom so she can't see. Reuben ends the chapter wondering whether Davy knows what he has done.

Chapters 3 - 4, Beauteous are My Cakes Indeed, Your Toughened Heart Analysis

Chapters 3 and 4 build up and resolve the conflict with Israel and Tommy. It begins with Israel and Tommy kidnapping Swede and returning her; there is a brief interlude and then when Israel and Tommy break into the house, Davy shoots and kills them both. This fulfills Jeremiah's prophecy that the boys have "already lost." This further confirms Jeremiah's special relationship with God.

Other examples of Jeremiah's divine powers show themselves in the two chapters. First, he plays Good Samaritan to Tin Lurvy, who is an altogether intolerable man. At church, Jeremiah is overcome with holy joy upon being touched by his charismatic preacher and appears to be the only one in the church who has a genuine experience. When he touches Reuben, Reuben is overcome with the same feeling, which he finds unpleasant but seems to be the feeling of encountering truth itself. Yet again, Reuben witnesses Jeremiah's divinity and appears uniquely aware of it.

Swede and Reuben appear to have a close relationship in the future, as Reuben mentions reading Swede's writings and talking with her about the events described in the early part of the book.



Chapters 5 - 6, Peeking at Eternity, When Sorrows Like Sea Billows Roll

Chapters 5 - 6, Peeking at Eternity, When Sorrows Like Sea Billows Roll Summary

Reuben doesn't glamorize Davy's actions; the family simply waits quietly for Ted Pullet, the police man. Reuben tells Davy that Davy did not mean to kill them, but Davy says that he did. The town's squad cars all come together. They could have easily prevented this.

Reuben recounts one more of Jeremiah's miracles in an interlude. Years ago, before Jeremiah turned thirty, a tornado sucked him into the air. Davy had only just been born at this time; Jeremiah was studying to be a doctor at the time. That night, he was working to pay his way through medical school and the athletic building, where he was cleaning, was not composed of brick.

Helen protected Davy during the tornado incident and watches it travel down their street; she tried to call Jeremiah but the phone burned her in an unworldly way. Later, authorities told Helen that the athletic building had been hit and Jeremiah could not be found, but down the street, Jeremiah shared coffee with a neighbor, Marianne Evans.

Reuben and Swede came to believe that after this incident, God had chosen Jeremiah to go on a special mission on his behalf. Instead of continuing to study to be a doctor, he becomes a janitor. Helen felt she had done something wrong for Jeremiah to change professions, and this guilt led her to leave the family; she later marries a Chicago doctor and does not speak to the children ever again.

When the police arrive, Davy is arrested and placed in the Montrose jail. The family stays in a hotel; when they visit Davy the next day, Davy seems fine. Jeremiah tells Swede and Reuben to do their best to survive the family trauma. In the days to come, friends and even strangers come by the house and try to help them out. Reuben mentions various people.

Everyone has trouble visiting Davy, especially Jeremiah, but Davy's faith is strong that he will be released. The press is behind him as well. He is charged with manslaughter and hires Thomas De Cuellar to be his lawyer.

Jeremiah doesn't want Swede and Reuben to go back to school; in the meantime the superintendent is harassing Jeremiah with extra work; one day he visits the house to ask Jeremiah to work early the next day.

The lawyer tells Jeremiah, Reuben and Swede that he is shocked by Davy's indifference to his case. He says that no one made him shoot them and claims that he



did so intentionally. Davy feels no remorse either, and the courts decide to try him as an adult. Swede handles the situation by writing and typing, working on her poem. One day, she admits to Reuben that she is having trouble killing the main character of her epic poem, Valdez.

Chapter 6 opens ten days prior to the trial; public opinion starts to turn against him when Tommy's aunt publishes a heartfelt story about Tommy in the paper. The story is obviously false; anyone who knew Tommy would recognize this but the public is affected. The lawyer, De Cuellar advises the Land's to keep their spirits up and not publicly discuss Davy.

The superintendent, Mr. Holgren, fires Jeremiah in the elementary school cafeteria in front of the children before Thanksgiving. The event is brought on by Reuben laughing at a student's defacing of Mr. Holgren's hat. When Reuben laughs aloud, Mr. Holgren comes to his table and hits the table, sending milk bottles to the floor.

Jeremiah comes out and Reuben is scared, but Jeremiah winks at Reuben and starts to clean up. Mr. Holgren tells Jeremiah that they should speak and tells Jeremiah that he is a drunk (based on stories from church). Jeremiah refuses to defend himself due to the presence of the children. Mr. Holgren fires him. At that moment, Jeremiah reaches out to Mr. Holgren and touches his face, healing Mr. Holgren's boils. Holgren leaves the room and Reuben is furious with his father for healing the bad Mr. Holgren, giving him an undeserved encounter with God. He was so upset he had an asthma attack. When Jeremiah wants to take him home, Reuben refuses because he is enraged because Jeremiah healed Mr. Holgren but not him.

Chapters 5 - 6, Peeking at Eternity, When Sorrows Like Sea Billows Roll Analysis

In Chapter 5, Davy is arrested. He approaches jail and his trial peacefully. The public is initially behind him but he refuses to defend himself, claiming instead that he had no remorse for killing Tommy and Israel and had a free choice not to shoot them. Davy's faith, Reuben saw, was strong. In Chapter 6, we learn that public support turns against the family when Tommy's aunt, Mrs. Vasca writes an article discussing Tommy's life. The public now wants Davy's head. Jeremiah remains strong for Davy and the other two and encourages Swede and Reuben to persevere.

In Chapter 5, we learn how Jeremiah acquired his miracle-working ability and why their mother Helen isn't around. Jeremiah was caught up in a tornado one day just after Davy had been born and survived unscathed. He then quit studying to be a doctor and became a janitor. Helen thought that the terms of their marriage had been violated, and after Swede and Reuben were born, she left, never to be heard from again. Reuben and Swede decided that the tornado was the moment that God had chosen Jeremiah for a mission.



Chapter 6 brings another of Jeremiah's miracles. He handles Mr. Holgren's increasing workload with love and kindness. When Mr. Holgren fires him, Jeremiah heals the boils on his face. Reuben was furious because the healing was worked on Mr. Holgren, who didn't deserve it, rather than him, a child with asthma problems.

Both chapters continue to demonstrate Jeremiah's perfect character. Up to this point, Jeremiah has done nothing bad and engaged in several supererogatory acts. His miracle-working is partly explained, but it is still surprising. We discover Reuben's reactions to his father are complex, and that the Holgren miracle infuriated him. Jeremiah's Christian behavior is impeccable, but many people do not know how to handle being in the presence of a saint-like character.



Chapters 7 - 8, Late In the Night When the Fires Are Out, A Boy On A Horse

Chapters 7 - 8, Late In the Night When the Fires Are Out, A Boy On A Horse Summary

In Chapter 7, the Land family arrives at the trial and will stay at the De Cuellar's house during the duration. Elvis, the prosecuting attorney, brings in many character witnesses for Tommy and Israel, mostly family. Stanley Basca shocks Reuben and Swede by claiming that Davy came to Tommy and Israel at their place and broke the windows in Finch's car. It looks like Davy had basically invited them to enter the house, making things look bad for him. Reuben testifies and gets overconfident. Elvis is able to make use of this to turn him, unintentionally, against his brother.

Reuben and Swede agree that night to break Davy out of prison and start to plan, but they are prevented from sneaking out by adults in the other room having coffee. They fall asleep waiting to implement their plan; Jeremiah wakes them to tell them Davy had escaped.

Chapter 8 opens with the sheriff arriving at the De Cuellar residence; when he gets there, Davy had already been gone for seven hours. Jeremiah is shocked and falls into a depression immediately. He is afraid Davy will be hurt when he is captured and maybe killed. The law enforcement officers seem excited about hunting Davy, practically licking their chops. However, public opinion shifts back to Davy and they cheer for him.

As the weeks go by, the police can't find Davy. Reuben and Swede discuss Swede's poetry at some length; she can't finish her epic by killing Valdez, who Reuben now thinks might be a real person threatening them.

When Walt Stockard reports to the Land's that his mare is gone, Reuben and Swede know that Davy escaped on a horse and was far away by then. Yet Jeremiah is not happy; he falls deeper into depression and his faith appears shaken. He can barely read his Bible and when Reuben asks him to read a psalm to him, he refuses.

Reuben and Swede play on their father's depression - he won't force them to go back to school, so they don't. They do chores, however. Swede keeps working on her poems, which are quite good.

Chapters 7 - 8, Late In the Night When the Fires Are Out, A Boy On A Horse Analysis

It becomes clear in Chapter 7 that Davy wasn't merely defending his family. He had broken the windows out of Israel's car, provoking them. Davy had basically set a trap for



Israel and Tommy, aiming to kill them. Reuben even realized that Davy had intentionally gone to bed with his gun. The trial looks bad for Davy, and Reuben and Swede are convinced he will lose.

But in Chapter 8, Davy has escaped, apparently on a stolen horse. The police can't find him for months. Jeremiah sinks deeply into depression over Davy's escape. He fears Davy will be killed when captured, or at least hurt. But now it looks as though Davy is simply gone. Surprisingly, Jeremiah's faith is shaken and he won't even read Reuben a psalm when he asks. This is the first time we see Jeremiah weakened and the weakness is severe. He cannot cope with his depression and the children have to take up the household chores. Jeremiah is out of work as well.

Perhaps the purpose of these chapters is to represent a challenge to Jeremiah's divinity, returning him to humanity. He stops being responsible with respect to his children and is constantly worried. He is no longer invincible.



Chapters 9 - 10, By the Grace of Lurvy, The Substance of Things Hoped For

Chapters 9 - 10, By the Grace of Lurvy, The Substance of Things Hoped For Summary

Christmas '62 rolls around and Jeremiah is still unemployed, save for odd jobs he finds. Christmas is meager, and Swede wants to take a trip to look for Davy. Ten days prior to Christmas, Dr. Nokes pays the Land's a visit and finds that Jeremiah has a terrible cough and lung congestion, like Reuben does. Nokes is also worried about Reuben. Antibiotics would cure Jeremiah, but not Reuben, who couldn't take infection. He has to stay away from Jeremiah and encourages Reuben to take a job working outside on a corncrib.

As Reuben is working, Swede comes to tell him that Jeremiah's condition is worsening and Reuben goes to see Jeremiah in his room. Jeremiah suggests that they move to a dryer climate, New Mexico specifically. Reuben worries Davy won't be able to find them, but otherwise he's game. Reuben and Swede decide to wait for Jeremiah to recover and then consider the move.

Reuben has trouble making progress at the corncrib. A six-year-old boy, Raymond, interrupts him. The corncrib is hard for Reuben to work with, although he knows Swede has a harder job. He realizes one night that the corncrib is strengthening his lungs. On December 20th, Reuben finished cleaning the corncrib. Davy receives no Christmas cards that year, and Swede is upset about it. Mr. Layton pays Reuben \$25 for his work and Swede and Reuben fantasize about what they can do with it.

December 23rd, Jeremiah gets out of bed. He seems better but has lost a lot of weight and muscle. Reuben then decides to buy food with his money. Swede and Reuben cook Jeremiah food to help him recover. Andreeson, an investigator with the feds, shows up to the house inquiring about Davy and telling them to report him. Jeremiah refuses. Swede and Reuben are determined to help Jeremiah protect Davy.

Swede makes dinner for their meager Christmas. Jeremiah is pleased, but then Mr. De Cuellar and his wife comes to the door; they have gifts. They give the Land's a travel trailer that Mr. Lurvy left Jeremiah in his will after he died. Jeremiah starts to laugh, and when De Cuellar asks why, he says that that morning he had asked God to take them to Davy.

In Chapter 10, the Land's get a letter from August Schultz telling them that Davy is with him; Andreeson had inquired there, too, but Davy hid. The Lands get money by selling household items and leave. They have no direction but Jeremiah's faith. On the 22nd they leave and the house is abandoned. As they leave, Reuben makes various observations about the town.



Their first destination is North Dakota, a mere eighty miles ahead. That afternoon they get to August's house. Reuben had been dreaming that Swede's character Valdez had jumped into his bed in the trailer. When he goes in the house, Reuben is afraid of where they are going next.

Chapters 9 - 10, By the Grace of Lurvy, The Substance of Things Hoped For Analysis

Chapters 9 and 10 concern Jeremiah and Reuben's sicknesses and the regaining of Jeremiah's faith through the answering of his prayer to find Davy. Jeremiah comes down with the same lung congestion Reuben has. Jeremiah will recover with antibiotics, however. Reuben gets a job outside on his doctor's recommendation to make his lungs stronger through hard work. They both do well, but when Jeremiah gets up, he's lost much weight.

When he is ill, Jeremiah asks Reuben if he would be interested in moving to New Mexico to be in dryer air where his lungs will do better. Reuben worries Davy won't find them but otherwise he is willing. Christmas morning, the DeCuellars show up and give the Land's Mr. Lurvy's travel trailer that he left to them in his will. That morning Jeremiah had prayed that God would bring them to Davy or bring Davy to him. This was an answer to his prayer.

When they leave in Chapter 10, they go straight for August Shultz's house, where Davy is hiding from the fed agent, Mr. Andreeson. Jeremiah takes no map, but simply claims that he is directed by "the substance of things not seen," a reference to the Apostle Paul's definition of faith. Jeremiah is restored.



Chapters 11 - 12, The Last Thing He Would Do, At War With This Whole World

Chapters 11 - 12, The Last Thing He Would Do, At War With This Whole World Summary

August and Birdie Schultz were wonderful hosts, feeding them like they hadn't been fed for some time. They also tell the Lands about Davy. Davy had come to their house previously; August said he looked more grown-up, thinner but in good shape. Apparently Davy misses his father and siblings terribly. He had hitched a ride to the Shultz's place and slept upstairs before leaving again.

Reuben and Swede listened in on Jeremiah and the Shultz's talking but Jeremiah sends them away. They listen from a hiding place anyway. August tells Jeremiah that Davy is unaware of the gravity of his situation and is unaware of Andreeson. Jeremiah admits that Davy did what the papers said and he says that Swede and Reuben are doing well. Birdie had encouraged Davy to give himself up, and Davy reacted with a look that made it clear it would be the last thing he did in his life.

The next morning, August takes Reuben on a horse ride. August asks if Jeremiah's health is improving and Reuben says that it is. But August is still worried due to Jeremiah's weight. August then takes Reuben to a small house and barn, which was where Jeremiah grew up. August and Jeremiah had grown up together.

Reuben is hopeful that they will find Davy, but August doesn't know. When they return home, Jeremiah was happy that August had taken Reuben on the ride alone, but Reuben does not like the attention since he is worried about his father's low weight. Reuben is worried Jeremiah has lost part of his spirit.

In Chapter 12, Swede continues to write. She is only eight years old, but has deep insight into their situation. August thinks Davy has gone to the Badlands; Swede thinks their trip has a romance to it, in the style of a Western. She's going to write out the story before their return. Swede and Reuben wonder if it is worth being with Davy again if that requires Davy to go to jail.

The Land's stop in Linton, North Dakota and they find that Andreeson is following them. Swede believes Andreeson to be desperate, without a lead, but Reuben thinks he is hunting them. Jeremiah wakes up with a headache, so they stay put for the day. At dinner, Andreeson knocks on their door; Jeremiah had hoped it was Davy. Andreeson wants Jeremiah to tell him where Davy is, and Jeremiah does not lie to him. Andreeson is arrogant and threatens Jeremiah. Jeremiah accuses Andreeson of lying and Andreeson leaves.



Swede wakes them up the next day; it was unusual for her to be awake before Jeremiah. Jeremiah doesn't want to leave, preferring to stay in one place. Swede thinks she knows it is God's will to move forward and Jeremiah agrees. Reuben and Swede discuss Andreeson on the way.

They have to struggle to find gasoline, since their trailer gets poor mileage. When they stop in Mandan, no one is manning one gas station and troopers are waiting for them at the others. Reuben feels defeated.

Chapters 11 - 12, The Last Thing He Would Do, At War With This Whole World Analysis

Davy has left the Shultz's and the Land's have to find him. Reuben begins to worry about Jeremiah's sickness but Jeremiah is still faithful, despite having lost a lot of weight, including muscle and flesh. Their stay at the Shultz's gives the Land's new hope they will find Davy; Swede is particularly hopeful.

However, in Chapter 12, these hopes do not come to fruition. Andreeson is following them, hoping that they will lead him to Davy. He tries to threaten Jeremiah, but Jeremiah will have none of it, accusing Andreeson of lying, exposing his sin. Jeremiah wants to stay in one place for awhile, but Swede encourages him to move forward, saying she knew it was God's will. When they need to gas up, the town they stop in is swarming with troopers. Reuben despairs.

Chapters 11 and 12 are a brief rise and fall. Chapter 11 shows the Land's are eager to find Davy and hopeful. Their stay at the Shultz's has reenergized them, although, there are more cracks in Jeremiah's invincibility. His sickness has reduced him to a dangerously low weight and his muscles have atrophied somewhat. In Chapter 12, Jeremiah defeats Andreeson, their enemy, in their second direct encounter in a particularly Christian way - exposing Andreeson's sins to the light. Andreeson flees but tracks them anyway; when they need to gas up, a swarm of troopers are waiting for them. These two chapters show a brief rise and fall; it looks like there is no way out.



Chapters 13 - 14, Something Warm, The Skin Bag

Chapters 13 - 14, Something Warm, The Skin Bag Summary

Andreeseon had manipulated the North Dakota State Patrol to dispatch troopers to track the Land's. But the Land's avoided them. Swede and Reuben discuss which Biblical figure Jeremiah is most like for avoiding the troopers. Swede tells Reuben that she put maple syrup in Andreeseon's gas tank when he was talking to Jeremiah.

They still need gas and poured in ten gallons they had stored. Jeremiah is getting tired, so they pull over near a barn; he wants to stay in one place on Saturday because the gas stations will be closed. Swede points out to Reuben how unlikely it is that none of the troopers saw them. Jeremiah had God behind him; maybe they could get along without gas.

Reuben tells Swede about seeing Jeremiah walk on air. The next morning it is quite cold and they have run out of propane. Jeremiah still has a headache but he could take care of the children. They drove in the cold all morning for hours and never ran out of gas. Eventually, however, the car pulling the trailer, the Plymouth, starts having trouble. In Grassy Butte, they find oil from a station run by a woman named Roxanna. They got oil, gas and propane, and she even offers them a place to stay for the night.

Chapter 14 finds Roxanna feeding the Land's well. She tells them about her past, which is rather impressive. She grew up motherless like Reuben and Swede. They had so much fun that Reuben wished Roxanna was attractive so Jeremiah would marry her.

Jeremiah dreamed that a little devil man stole his breath with a skin bag that he filled by punching Reuben in the stomach. Reuben woke to his father pounding Reuben's back to make him breathe. His lungs had been congested. Roxanna was hitting him, too, and eventually Reuben feels better. They decided to stay with Roxanna another night because of the snow in the road and Roxanna is delighted. Reuben is upset and he and Swede end up wrestling about whether they should leave or not. On reflection, Reuben realized that running into Roxanna was providential. The state police would never find them, particularly after the snow fall. Reuben and Swede realize they are outlaws and take an oath to trust Roxanna.

The snow does not melt or let up and they end up staying for five days, with Reuben and Swede doing chores. It turns out that Roxanna's great uncle had known Butch Cassidy; Reuben recounts one of the stories Roxanna told. Jeremiah enters the room and tells Roxanna that they will leave the next morning. No one really wanted to leave; Jeremiah's reason was that God had yet to instruct him.



The plow arrived; the drifts were moved, and Swede and Reuben get in the trailer. Swede was furious that neither God nor Jeremiah had told her what the plan was. They say their goodbyes to Roxanna, and Swede will later describe that goodbye as a "moment of transfiguration."

Chapters 13 - 14, Something Warm, The Skin Bag Analysis

Chapters 13 and 14 begin with a fall and ends with a providential rise. At the beginning of the chapter, it looks like the Land's will be arrested, but somehow - perhaps miraculously - they had remained undetected. But eventually they have to stop, because they have no more engine oil. They providentially meet Roxanna at a gas station which was closed.

Roxanna is a kind of savior figure; she is kind, sturdy, generous and full of wonderful stories. Swede and Reuben love her. They end up having to stay with her for days due to snow drifts and a slow town plow. Everyone is happy to stay; Roxanna is happy to have them, but Jeremiah seems distracted, waiting on a message from God about how to proceed. Reuben and Swede, however, want to stay. Roxanna gives them gas, oil, propane, food and a place to stay. She rescued them.

Again, the appearance of Jeremiah carrying on an as-of-yet-unknown divine plan seems to be a genuine one. Numerous providential events have occurred, and Reuben and Swede are witnessing it unfold. Roxanna rebuilds their spirits and their supplies. They are ready to find Davy again; and they have eluded detection.



Chapters 15 - 16, Under the Gibbon Moon, The Throbbing Heart of News

Chapters 15 - 16, Under the Gibbon Moon, The Throbbing Heart of News Summary

Swede will later write a book, *The Dakota Territory as I Recall It*, where she recalls having a picnic in the Badlands in January. This is the current time in the book. Before they left, Roxanna took the Land's on a picnic. She is graceful but in a manner very different from Jeremiah. Reuben describes the scene where they stop as beautiful and miraculous; Jeremiah is overwhelmed. They explore the area and then see Andreeson in the distance. When he approaches, Swede has disappeared. He tells Jeremiah that they are close to finding Davy and wants them to help him so Davy won't get hurt. He wants Jeremiah to help them search for him and tries to convince him to no avail. Andreeson leaves. Why didn't Andreeson arrest them? Reuben and Swede don't know.

Later Davy appears on the hillside on a horse. Reuben waved but Davy rode off. They then go on a hike; Reuben seems to be the only one that recognized Davy. During the events of the day, Reuben sees Davy on a horse again; it was clearly him this time. He looked darker, smaller, and different. Reuben could barely talk and Davy helps him on his saddle. Davy had been observing them.

Davy wanted to hear about Andreeson, but Reuben couldn't describe him in a way that he would convey how bad he was. Apparently Davy is staying nearby. He asks about Roxanna and Jeremiah, wondering if they were an item, but they weren't. Reuben tells Davy about Jeremiah's illness. Davy tells him not to tell the others.

Davy had the help of a friend, Jape Waltzer. Reuben has the dark feeling that he will never see Davy again and prayed that his father would miraculously appear. He wants to know where Davy is staying so he threatens to tell if Davy doesn't show him.

When Reuben returns, Jeremiah has gone with Mr. Andreeson to search for Davy. Reuben can't make sense of it. He asks Roxanna why Jeremiah went with Andreeson, and Roxanna said he felt he had to, that he was led to by God. Roxanna had heard him praying like no one had prayed before. Apparently he was wrestling with God in a literal way.

The chapter transitions to a discussion about how Butch Cassidy died and then about Reuben and Swede reading over a letter to Uncle Howard.



Chapters 15 - 16, Under the Gibbon Moon, The Throbbing Heart of News Analysis

Three important events transpire in Chapters 15 and 16: (i) Davy appears to Reuben, (ii) Jeremiah wrestles with God, and (iii) Jeremiah and the family encounter Andreeson. Davy's appearance to Reuben is odd. Davy has been watching them in the distance and speaks only to Reuben, forcing him not to tell anyone. Reuben uses his leverage to get Davy to show him where he is, although this event will come later.

Jeremiah seems disconnected from the group; he is preoccupied with divine matters, apparently. Roxanna claims to have heard him wrestling with God about matters she couldn't understand. Jeremiah is clearly preparing for something and struggling with an important question.

Andreeson approaches Jeremiah, Swede, Reuben and Roxanna on their picnic and tries to convince Jeremiah to accompany him to find Davy. Andreeson's behavior is odd; he doesn't arrest them and seems to understand that Jeremiah is a holy man. This is probably because of his interaction with Mr. Holgren. For whatever reason, when Reuben returns from seeing Davy, Jeremiah has left with Mr. Andreeson and it is not clear to Reuben why he did so. Roxanna says that Jeremiah believed that he was called to do so by God.



Chapters 17 - 18, The Little Man's Country, Winning Her Hand

Chapters 17 - 18, The Little Man's Country, Winning Her Hand Summary

Reuben waits for Davy to find him just after midnight. Reuben is scared and sorry he asked to see where they were. Davy picked him up silently with Fry, his horse; he tells Reuben that they're going to see a man named Mr. Waltzer and a girl named Sara. Eventually they reached a cabin and Reuben meets Mr. Waltzer.

Mr. Waltzer makes them some food in a cabin Reuben sees as dilapidated. A few minutes after they start talking, Mr. Waltzer invites Sara, his fourteen-year-old daughter, in to meet Reuben. He lives in the cabin because it "is a safe place to wait for change" and met Davy at a hitching post. He asks Reuben to keep his eccentricities a secret.

Before their meal, Reuben nods his head to pray but Waltzer insists that he gave Reuben the food, not God, and so he should be thanked. He grills Reuben about how they came to the area. When he asks Reuben what he wants to do with his life, Reuben's lungs are so shallow and he is so tired that he simply says, "I guess breathe." Waltzer tries to convince him that if he just breathed correctly it'd be fine, but Reuben is so upset and scared that he tells Mr. Waltzer to shut up and he was out of air. He passed out.

Reuben dreamed about the devilish man with the skin bag again. When he awoke, he guessed that the devilish man who stole his breath in the skin bag was Waltzer. Davy is about to take Reuben home when Waltzer tells him not to tell anyone and that he can teach him to breathe correctly. Davy and Reuben ride off.

When they reach Roxanna's, Reuben has gotten his breath back and asks Davy when he will see him next but Davy won't say. Reuben woke with a headache and spent most of the day in a warm pool relaxing. Swede starts telling him a story. Reuben fades in and out of sleep until the night when he feels better. At dinner, they wonder when Jeremiah will get home; Roxanna encourages them to have faith, sounding like Jeremiah. If Jeremiah wants to go home, Roxanna says she won't let him.

When Jeremiah got back, he seemed different—buoyant and alien. Swede acquired Jeremiah's mood as well and told Reuben to let Roxanna open the door. Roxanna had dressed nicely for the occasion. That night Jeremiah moved to the trailer but only he did to honor Roxanna. Swede tells Reuben that he loves her.

Reuben and Swede go to the trailer to talk to Jeremiah about why Mr. Andreeson is no longer their enemy. Jeremiah insists that just because he might be bad or in the wrong



does not mean he has to be an enemy. He reminds Reuben that Jesus said to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

That afternoon, Davy returned; Reuben didn't wave that time. Davy tells him that Jape is gone that night, which made Reuben happy. In the next few weeks, Davy and Reuben would ride together three more times. Swede never suspected; Reuben never appeared to be in danger.

Sara is not Waltzer's daughter; he purchased her from a Utah man. When Sara is old enough, she is supposed to marry Jape. Davy is a bit afraid of Jape, as is Sara. When Sara had caused Jape to have an accident which mangled some of his fingers, he cut them off in front of her and made her dispose of them as punishment.

The next day, Reuben slept until noon when Jeremiah woke him to clear his lungs. Jeremiah was dressed up and tells him that he is going to court Roxanna. Reuben was overjoyed. Jeremiah aims to "win her hand."

Chapters 17 - 18, The Little Man's Country, Winning Her Hand Analysis

Chapter 17 introduces Waltzer, a paranoid and dark character, while Chapter 18 brings the discovery that Jeremiah will court Roxanna.

Jade Waltzer is what today one might call a militia man. He lives in the plains by himself in a cabin with a girl, Sara, who he is raising to be his wife. He is a paranoid, conspiracy theorist and very controlling of what people say and do in his house. He is so difficult with Reuben that Reuben has an asthma attack in his house and when Reuben wakes up, Jade continues to insist that he can teach Reuben how to breathe despite the obvious fact that someone must have tried that with him before.

It is clear that Davy shouldn't be associated with Jade and that this association was one of the consequences of his life on the run. In Chapter 18, when Jeremiah returns from searching with Mr. Andreeson, he tells Reuben and Swede that Davy really did do a bad thing and that he will suffer whether he is captured or not. This tie to Waltzer is apparently the suffering.

When Jeremiah gets back in Chapter 18, it becomes clear that he is falling in love with Roxanna and she with him. He tells Reuben he wants to court Roxanna and Reuben is excited. Jeremiah seems to have regained some strength and has clearly received the Lord's approval.



Chapters 19 - 20, Boy Ready, The Ledger of Our Decisions

Chapters 19 - 20, Boy Ready, The Ledger of Our Decisions Summary

Reuben's lungs are getting worse; his energy is down and the others have to keep taking care of him. Swede brought him steam and read psalms to him. Jeremiah was busy courting Roxanna and Reuben realized there had been no miracles while they were with her, although he acknowledged that many wonders had occurred, but Reuben thought he needed a miracle.

Swede is reading to Reuben and Reuben decides he is going to tell her about Davy but then Jeremiah gets home. Jeremiah brought Dr. Nickles, who told him that the stream/vinegar treatment they used didn't work. He advises them to take Reuben to the hospital until his lungs clear up; he is a full-blown asthmatic. But, he remembers the hospital has lots of influenza patients, which made it dangerous for Reuben, so he decides to give Reuben some adrenaline which made it impossible for him to sleep.

That morning, Reuben found Jeremiah having coffee with Andreeson. Andreeson promises Jeremiah they won't hurt Davy when they find him. In the afternoon, Reuben did what he could to go outside. He prayed but the prayers were a jumble. He waited for Davy, for what would be his last night in the hills.

When Reuben and Davy reached Waltzer, he was tending to Fry. Reuben gave Davy valuable information and told him Andreeson was closing in. Davy and Waltzer seemed unconcerned. At dinner, they continued to be unconcerned, talking about other things, such as a constellation Waltzer called "Boy Ready." One of the constellation stories had the moral: "So you can win the battle but the war is lost long ago." The lesson upset Reuben.

Andreeson called the next day. The man Davy hitchhiked with said he'd show Andreeson where he dropped Davy off, but Robinson never showed up at their arranged meeting time. Jeremiah asks Reuben if he needs to tell him anything; Reuben said no but Jeremiah knew he was lying.

Andreeson didn't call for the next two days, but a strong wind created a ground blizzard. Reuben worried about how Waltzer, Sara and Davy would survive it. Jeremiah was learning to play the guitar and sing and Roxanna was cooking. Eventually the wind died down and everyone but Reuben went to shovel snow. Reuben had to man the phone until the country plows reached them in the afternoon. When Jeremiah called Andreeson's motel, the attendant told him that he had already left. Reuben seemed to know what had happened to Andreeson, telling Jeremiah. Mr. Robinson, Reuben realized, was really Jape Waltzer, and Jape intended to kill Mr. Andreeson to save Davy.



The next day, Reuben realizes he had betrayed Davy. Jeremiah rounded up a posse of seven people. A rancher had found Mr. Andreeson's car a few hours earlier. Reuben has to go with them to show them where the cabin is. He notes that Swede took the secret badly; she was furious for Reuben's lying and betraying. Mr. Juval, a federal investigator and colleague of Mr. Andreeson, starts talking to Reuben about how he feels about Andreeson, Davy and the rest.

When they find the cabin, the man who leases the ranch, Mr. Ford, said he'd never seen it before. It didn't seem right to him. Reuben realized that he didn't know where he was and so he lies and steers them away from Davy. The climb Reuben led them on was difficult but he had apparently fooled them. They were further away from the cabin than they were before.

On the way down, Lonnie Ford fell off his horse, which in turn fell on him. Somehow he survived, but not without significant damage. The sheriff patched him up. Juval then asks Reuben whether he misled them; Reuben fesses up. They dress Ford in some blankets and leave him and Reuben with him. When they were alone, Reuben decided to build a fire for him. He started to imagine Davy being captured and decided to pray; he repented of his hatred, particularly of Andreeson. And he started to cry, praying for everyone who was in trouble.

At that moment, Ford yelled "Otter" and then Reuben explained to him what happened. He then poured Ford some whiskey. Reuben started to read Ford a story when Juval and the posse came back. No one had been in the cabin, not even Andreeson. But his fedora was there.

Chapters 19 - 20, Boy Ready, The Ledger of Our Decisions Analysis

Chapters 19 and 20 build up to the climax of the book. Chapter 19 finds Jeremiah and Andreeson forming a friendship. He wants to tell Swede about seeing Davy, about Sara and about Jape Waltzer but he can't. He visits Davy with Waltzer for the very last time; he tells them about Andreeson, that he is closing in on them, but Davy and Waltzer seem unconcerned. When Reuben reaches home and a few days pass, Jeremiah still hasn't heard from Andreeson and finds that he had left his hotel without checking out. Reuben knows that Waltzer has killed him or has at least kidnapped him and the guilt he feels causes him to tell his father.

In the next chapter, local officials round up a posse and go hunting for Jape and Davy. Reuben feels guilty for betraying his brother and leads the men off the path, causing Mr. Ford to fall off his horse and get hurt. When the men find the cabin, Jape, Sara and Davy are nowhere to be found, and Mr. Andreeson's fedora is in the cabin, but he is gone as well.

The book has three chapters left and Davy has yet to be caught. Now Mr. Andreeson is gone as well and Jape is on the run. Mr. Andreeson has become a good guy, one of the

only men who can stop Jape, and he is either dead or captured. And Jape has moved from ambiguously bad to unambiguously bad. Davy must be caught; Jape dealt with and the story of Mr. Andreeson resolved.



Chapters 21 - 23, The Red Farm, Be Jubilant, My Feet, The Curious Music That I Hear

Chapters 21 - 23, The Red Farm, Be Jubilant, My Feet, The Curious Music That I Hear Summary

In March, back in Roofing, Roxanna and Jeremiah got married. At the end of February, they had come home, although by the time of writing, Reuben had forgotten most of it. Dr. Nickles had returned, and insisted Jeremiah take Reuben home. It was clear that Roxanna would be coming along, so she closed her shop. Midafternoon they arrived in Roofing as school got out.

Their home was both clean and heated, thanks to Dr. Nokes and his wife. The next few days, they cleaned up, and Reuben was assigned the trailer, which Jeremiah had sold to Dr. Nokes for rent money. They had to move outside town to live on a farm where Jeremiah found work, The Red Farm. Reuben thought it was a nice place.

They waited for Davy and since Mr. Andreeson had disappeared, the feds were pursuing him with energy. Andreeson stayed missing; Reuben believed Waltzer had killed him, but the feds wouldn't take the story seriously. He complained to Swede about this and she responded in a way that conveyed to him that she had forgiven him for lying and betraying her and Davy.

Another miracle was coming. But no miracle had come from Jeremiah since they met with Roxanna. Perhaps Roxanna had been a parting gift from God to signal the end of the miracles. The days passed happily on Red Farm; Reuben even had a few visitors but his lungs worsen again, and for months he can't do much. He hopes for a miracle and eventually realizes that whether he receives a miracle or not, God is still just.

In June, Davy comes to the house and Swede is overwhelmed. Sara was with him. Waltzer - or whatever his name was - had finally decided he wanted Sara to be his wife, but Davy wouldn't let that happen, so Sara and Davy ran off in a car stolen from Jape. Davy has no intention of staying, but he leaves Sara with them. He does stay for a day, telling them about his jailbreak and the following events.

Apparently Jape had anticipated the posse and they hid far away from the cabin for a few days. Andreeson was not discussed, and Davy approved of Roxanna. They talked about Sara's background. At dawn, Davy had to leave, but when Davy was about to leave, Jape was sitting beside their granary, rifle in hand. Jape shot Jeremiah; when Reuben ran to Jeremiah, Jape apparently shot him, too, and he faded out of consciousness.



In the next chapter, Reuben is awake, wading to a shore with "measureless relief." He had no conception of his identity at that time, nor of any burden and he laughed instead of spoke. He began to walk through a meadow, perhaps for weeks, but Reuben did not know how long. When he came upon an orchard, he saw a man, apparently an old Spanish knight, "going to his king." Reuben's soul leaps and his feet speeds him forward.

The scenery changes as he flew forward; he caught up with a man he knew was his father, Jeremiah Land. He was laughing, too, and noticed that Reuben was as big as he was. Reuben felt as if they were two friends, running together. Jeremiah pulled him forward, apparently running even faster towards their destination than Reuben. They ran towards the sun, but it became clear that the sun was a city. People all aglow were running towards the city as well. Jeremiah told him to take care of Swede, to work for Roxanna, and to tell Davy.

As Reuben returned to earth, Jape had shot three more times at Davy, but missed him. Roxanna called the sheriff, Dr. Nokes, and the Lord. He told the girls to lie down. Swede was looking for Jeremiah's shotgun, but by the time they opened the front door, Davy, Jape and the Ford were gone.

In the next minutes, Reuben was told, Roxanna cared for Jeremiah and Swede helped Reuben. Dr. Nokes pulled up but could do no better for Jeremiah than Roxanna could. They were certain Reuben was dead because he had no heartbeat. And then all of a sudden, Reuben came back to life. The deputy, Galen Max, exclaimed, "'Look there! ... He's done it again!'"

A few weeks later, Dr. Nokes told him that he somehow was breathing without his lungs. But Reuben was surprised because his lungs felt like they did "in the next country." Dr. Nokes visited every day. He told Reuben that Jeremiah should not have died because none of his organs were damaged. Reuben, however, should not have lived. Reuben's lungs were torn up, Dr. Nokes observed, but they survived a shot to the chest. Jeremiah had healed them.

As time moved forward, Roxanna became Reuben and Swede's "orck." She was a wonderful mother. Sara stayed with them, though she kept her emotional distance. Roxanna tried to bridge it and did so carefully. Swede, at seventeen, stopped going to school to write a novel she couldn't publish but she won a fan at the New York publishing house. At the present day, she has written four novels and a poetry collection. She has many fans.

Jape couldn't be caught, just like Swede's Valdez. Andreeson did die in the Badlands at Waltzer's hands. Davy had told him this. One day, years later, at Thanksgiving, Roxanna, Swede, Reuben and Sara were all holding hands to pray. When the prayer was over, neither Reuben nor Sara let go.

Davy ended up in a small Canadian prairie town; Reuben ran into him years later on a hunt. Davy would visit him from time to time, quietly, still in exile. He reads Swede's



writings and sends her things but she goes crazy because he doesn't visit her like he does Reuben. Reuben told Davy about seeing Jeremiah in the next country and about how he could now breathe. Reuben sometimes doubted the story, but now that he and Sara live in a house across the meadow from the Red Farm they built together, perhaps seeing their daughter or one of their sons, he'll know it was true.

Chapters 21 - 23, The Red Farm, Be Jubilant, My Feet, The Curious Music That I Hear Analysis

Chapters 21 through 23 bring the climax and denouement of the book. Things soften for a time. Reuben's health gets worse and Dr. Nickles tells the Land's to take him home to Roofing so he can get regular care. There is no question of Roxanna leaving them and in March, Roxanna and Jeremiah are married. For three months, Reuben's condition worsens but life is good and happy with Jeremiah and Roxanna together.

When Davy shows up, however, the plot follows in the wings. He and Sara escaped once Jape decided that it was time for Sara to be his wife. Davy says he can't stay but drops off Sara. He stays the night and talks to Reuben, Swede and the others. But at dawn, when he is about to leave, Jape is there, with his gun. He shoots Jeremiah and Reuben. Roxanna calls the police, Swede looks for Jeremiah's shotgun and Davy runs off. When the police and Dr. Nokes get there, Jape and Davy are nowhere to be found. This is the climax of the book, Jeremiah and Reuben's deaths.

In the next chapter, Jeremiah and Reuben are in "the next country," a less trite-sounding name for heaven, and they are running toward the heavenly city together. Everything there is happiness, beauty and joy, partly beyond Reuben's description. But Jeremiah sends Reuben back, telling him to take care of Swede, help Roxanna and tell Davy the story. When Reuben wakes up, Jeremiah has died only from minor injuries, and Reuben, whose lungs were already weak, had endured a shot to the chest and survived. Not only that, but his lungs were healed. Jeremiah had healed him.

The final chapter is an epilogue. Roxanna raises Sara, Swede and Reuben wonderfully. Jape is never seen again and Davy later confirms that Jape indeed killed Mr. Andreeson. Swede grows up to be a novelist and poet, as expected. Reuben marries Sara and becomes a strong man and carpenter. They build a house near the Red Farm and have children, a daughter and at least two sons. From time to time, Davy visits Reuben. He is now living in a small prairie town in Canada, at least maybe he is. He reads all of Swede's work and stays in touch with her but for the most part stays quiet. Reuben tells him the story of the next country and Davy believes him. Reuben says he sometimes doubts the story, but when he sees his wife, his children or the beautiful countryside, he knows it was real and that he is going back there.

The climax of the book is Jeremiah's final miracle - healing Reuben, bringing him the miracle he always wanted, from the very beginning of the book. But Reuben let go of feeling entitled to the miracle earlier in Chapter 21, coming to believe that whatever God did was by its nature fair. It was only then that Reuben could be healed. Jeremiah, true

to perfect Christian form, gave his life for Reuben and went to be with God ahead of his time. Reuben was again witness to his miracle and the only witness to his message.



Characters

Reuben

Reuben Land is the main character of *Peace Like a River*; he is also its narrator. In the book, Reuben is only eleven years old but he narrates it as an adult. He is the son of Helen and Jeremiah Land and he has an older brother Davy, who is sixteen and a younger sister, Swede, who is only nine. Reuben had a miraculous birth, with his father reviving him twelve minutes after he stopped breathing. But Reuben has lung trouble for the first eleven years of his life.

Reuben is a loving child, interested in the sorts of things in which most eleven-year-old boys are interested. He loves stories, playing in the yard and spending time with his family. He is also religious and admires his father deeply.

The main storyline is really about Reuben's developing spiritual consciousness and learning to trust God as his father did. Reuben comes to expect that his father will miraculously heal his lungs and when he doesn't, Reuben becomes resentful. But when he learns to trust in God's will, Reuben's faith is made strong, not only because he came to understand that he is not entitled to God's healing, but that God actually gave him a glimpse of the afterlife with his father, who ultimately was able to bring him back to life once more. Reuben reports that from the moment he came back to life to the present, he trusts that he will return to the next country one day.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah Land is the second main character of *Peace Like a River*. He is Reuben's father, and also the father of Davy and Swede. The book begins with Jeremiah performing one of his first miracles - bringing his son to life after his birth through invoking God's aid to cause Reuben to breathe. Before Reuben was born, Jeremiah had survived being swept high into the sky by a tornado, which changed his life, career and led to the dissolution of his marriage. Jeremiah is a man of incredible faith, the Christian faith specifically.

Jeremiah reads his Bible regularly and attends a charismatic church, where Reuben reports that he seems to be the only congregant who is genuinely experiencing spiritual gifts. Reuben sees Jeremiah walk on air without realizing it while praying and Roxanna hears him wrestling with God, just like Jacob in the Bible.

Jeremiah's faith is shaken (but not defeated) when Davy escapes from jail and runs off. But he recovers from his illness and depression when God answers his prayer to find the Land family a way to track down Davy. He then takes the kids with him on a road trip with no plan except to rely on God to direct them.



As the story progresses, Jeremiah becomes somewhat distant from Reuben and Swede, concerning himself with finding Davy, dealing with Mr. Andreeson and winning the hand of Roxanna. At the end of the book, when Jade Waltzer shoots both Reuben and Jeremiah, they run together in "the next country" towards the City of God, but Jeremiah sends Reuben back to earth, healing him once again.

God

The deity of the major monotheistic religion in this story, Christianity, God's hand is always present in *Peace Like a River*. Jeremiah Land seems to constantly be in direct contact with God.

Swede

Swede is Reuben's little sister and a precocious literary talent.

Davy

Davy is Reuben's older brother, who kills Tommy Basca and Israel Finch and then goes on the run, precipitating the entire main plot of the book.

Dolly

Davy's girlfriend. When she is attacked by Finch and Basca, Jeremiah stops them with force. This leads to an escalating conflict which leads to the bullies' deaths.

Israel Finch and Tommy Basca

The two high school bullies in Roofing who harassed the Land Family until Davy killed them.

Mrs. Basca

Tommy Basca's aunt, whose newspaper article turned public opinion against Davy.

Mr. Holgren

The school superintendent who hated Jeremiah and fired him. Immediately after the firing, Jeremiah miraculously healed the boils on Mr. Holgren's face.



The Roofing Public

The public in the small town of Roofing, Minnesota initially supported Davy against Tommy and Israel but then turned against him. When he broke out of jail, they turned to support him again.

Roxanna

The sturdy, North Dakotan gas station operator who Jeremiah eventually marries.

Mr. Andreeson

The lead federal agent tracking down Davy and attempting to get Jeremiah to help him. He is eventually killed by Jape Waltzer.

Jape Waltzer

A weird, paranoid conspiracy theorist who Davy is living with while on the run. Jape has procured a young girl, Sara, who he is "raising" to be his wife. Jape kills Mr. Andreeson and when Davy steals Sara away to protect her from Jape, Jape follows Davy home and shoots Jeremiah and Reuben.

Sara

The girl Jade was raising to be his wife and who eventually comes to live with Swede, Reuben and Roxanna, and one day marries Reuben, bearing him children.

Mr. DeCuellar

Davy's lawyer and a benefactor to the Land family.

Dr. Nokes

The Roofing doctor who attends to Reuben's health.

Dr. Nichols

The doctor who sees Reuben at Roxanna's and who encourages Jeremiah to take him back to Roofing.

The Posse

The local and federal authorities trying to track down Davy and Jade.

Tin Lurvey

A traveling salesman who most of the Roofing citizens dislike, but whom Jeremiah treats with great kindness. When Tin dies, he leaves Jeremiah his trailer, answering Jeremiah's prayers that they might find a way to track down Davy.



Objects/Places

Reuben's Lungs

Reuben is born with bad lungs which give him trouble until Jeremiah heals them at the end of the book.

Jeremiah's Miracles

Jeremiah Land works many important miracles in the book.

The Bible

The Christian Holy Scriptures which Jeremiah studies and lives by.

Davy's Winchester

The rifle Davy used to kill Israel Finch and Tommy Basca.

Cooked Food

Due to their poverty, the Land's often didn't have good food to eat. Cooking food was a real treat for them.

Fry

The horse Davy uses to flee jail and travel the Badlands.

Valdez

The main character of Swede's epic poem that she cannot figure out how to kill off.

The Skin Bag

A bag used by a devilish man to steal Reuben's breath in his dreams.



Faith

What Jeremiah has lots of and what causes him to be able to work miracles. Faith is "The Substance of Things Not Seen" according to the Apostle Paul. Faith plays a central role in Peace Like a River.

Jeremiah's Prayers

Jeremiah prays unusually fervently. Many of his prayers come true.

Sara and Reuben's Home

The home near the Red Farm, where Sara and Reuben raise their children.

Swede's Epic Poem

Swede wrote an epic poem whose main character, Valdez, she couldn't figure out how to kill off.

Swede's Novels

When Swede grew up, she wrote four wonderful novels and a book of poems.

The Roofing House

The house where Jeremiah, Davy, Reuben and Swede lived before they left to find Davy.

The Airstream Trailer

The trailer the Land's traveled in to find Davy; the trailer was left to them by Tin Lurvey.

The School

The town school was where Tommy and Israel tried to hurt Dolly, starting the conflict that ended with Tommy and Israel's deaths.

Church

Jeremiah and the Lands are a church-going family; they switch to a charismatic church where Jeremiah experiences spiritual gifts.



North Dakota

The state where the Land's travel to find Davy and where they meet Roxanna.

Roxanna's Shop and Home

The place where the Land's get oil, gas, shelter and food. They also meet Roxanna and spend many days with her.

The Red Farm

The farm where the Land's move when they return to Roofing. Roxanna lives out her days there and it is where Reuben, Swede and Sara finish growing up.

Jape's Cabin

The small cabin in the badlands where Jape, Sara and Davy lived.

The Next Country

The heavenly realm in the afterlife that contains the City of God. Jeremiah and Reuben go there; Reuben doesn't stay but believes he will return there.

Roofing, Minnesota

The Land family's home town.



Themes

Miracles

Peace Like a River is a novel built on miracles; the book even begins and ends with miracles. First, it must be emphasized that the miracles in Peace Like a River are thought to be worked by God solely through the hand of Reuben's father, Jeremiah Land. Second, they have a deeper significance than the event in which the miracle takes place.

The first miracle in the book occurs when Reuben is born. He cannot breathe and his doctor cannot get him to do so. Twelve minutes after he stops breathing, Jeremiah comes into the delivery room and commands Reuben to live in the name of God. And lo and behold, he does. Reuben witnesses a miracle that his father performs while praying, although Jeremiah was apparently not aware of it. One night, Jeremiah was praying in the back of his truck and walked on air without realizing it.

Miracles have an important role in the story in Reuben's spiritual development because he sees his father working miracles and fully expects from his lungs to be healed miraculously as well. But Jeremiah continues to perform miracles and Reuben resents him for some of them, particularly when he healed the mean superintendent of schools, Mr. Holgren, after the man fires Jeremiah.

While sick, Reuben finally comes to believe that he is not entitled to have his lungs healed and that "whatever God does is fair." Once this occurs, Jeremiah is able to save Reuben's life once more after they are both shot by Jape Waltzer. When they travel to "the next country," Jeremiah goes on to be with God and sends Reuben back to live his life on earth.

God's Will

God does not speak in Peace Like a River, but He is ever present, particularly to Jeremiah Land. The story begins with God working a miracle through Jeremiah, bringing Reuben back to life twelve minutes after he stopped breathing. God also gave Reuben his first jolt of an experience of truth through Jeremiah's energy during a church service.

Jeremiah constantly attempts to discern God's will, praying fervently, always reading his Bible, and letting God lead him wherever he goes. He relies entirely on God's will for food, work, help and taking him to Davy when it is time. Save when Davy escapes from jail, Jeremiah's faith in God is unshakable and his adherence to God's will is total. It is clear to Reuben and Swede that God has selected Jeremiah for a divine mission.

Reuben's trust in God's will is not total. He believes strongly in God and that God is present in the life of his father, but Reuben's childhood prayers are disorganized and his



conception of God is vague. He resents his father for using the power God gave him to heal Mr. Holgren rather than healing Reuben who does not always trust that God will get them through their struggles. However, when Reuben is sick he comes to trust that whatever God does is fair to him, and when Reuben visits "the next country" and experiences the heavenly realm for himself, his faith is made strong.

Trusting God

The most important theme of *Peace Like a River* is trusting God to provide and care for His creatures. Jeremiah Land trusts God completely in the beginning of the book. When God saved Jeremiah from the tornado that swept him up, he decided to quit medical school and become a trusts God and makes his choices for God even at the cost of his wife leaving him and their children.

When Jeremiah prays for God to take them to Davy, he trusts that God will provide for them, and later in that same day, he is informed that a family friend, Tin Lurvy, had left the Land's his trailer, enabling them to pursue Davy themselves. His faith is shaken before this, however, when Davy escapes from jail. Jeremiah is full of grief, becoming depressed and sick and giving his Bible only a perfunctory read. But once they set off to find Davy, Jeremiah's faith is restored to such a degree that he leaves Roofing with no plan at all for how to find Davy, believing that God would take him wherever he needed to go.

It is Reuben's struggle to trust God that is the real focus of the story. Reuben has a father that can perform miracles. His father brought him to life long after he should have been dead and he has, at several points in his young life, seen his father perform miracles beyond explanation. But because of this, he comes to feel entitled to having Jeremiah work a miracle on him and heal his lungs. When the miracle is not forthcoming, Reuben becomes angry with his father and resents him.

However, Reuben develops as the story progresses. When he is sick for several weeks, he comes to accept that God owes him nothing and that whatever God does is fair. Reuben trusts that God is a just God even when he cannot understand why something is the way it is. Soon after this when Reuben recovers, he is led to trust God on an even deeper level when he catches a glimpse of the heavenly realm and is revived by his father after their apparent deaths. In the epilogue, Reuben describes his lifelong confidence that one day he will return there.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of *Peace Like a River* is that of Reuben Land, the main character and narrator. He is telling a story about his experiences as an adolescent pre-teen, with his family and deeply religious father. But the story is told from the perspective of Reuben as an adult, long after the events of the book occur. This produces two points of view in the book, one with Reuben as an adolescent and the other with Reuben as an adult, reflecting on his adolescent thoughts and experiences and commenting occasionally on related events occurring at the present time.

Reuben's perspective is that of a man who has struggled with his Christian faith even early in life. He often reports that he was in awe of his father's faith but was often frustrated by his father trying to live in line with the Christian moral code, forgiving Mr. Holgren for being cruel to him, and even healing him, making friends with Mr. Andreeson, and so on. The novel is a deeply Christian novel, and while Jesus Christ is not mentioned directly, the book is full of quoted hymns, Jeremiah's Bible reading, his fervent prayers, and his miracles. Eventually Reuben is even taken to heaven with the sure knowledge that he would one day return there. Thus the point of view of *Peace Like a River* is deeply informed by Christian theology, particularly of a rural Mid-Western Protestant variety.

Setting

The setting of *Peace Like a River* begins as the little town of Roofing, Minnesota in the early 1950s. Jeremiah Land is a janitor raising three children—Davy, who is sixteen and Reuben and Swede, who are not yet teenagers. They live in a small house together, and Jeremiah is doing his best to raise them alone.

The next setting of the book is the town courtroom and jail where Davy is held and put on trial for the killing of Tommy Basca and Israel Finch. Davy refuses to aid in his own defense and so spends longer time there than need be, that is, until he escapes. Eventually, Jeremiah, Reuben and Swede decide to find him. A friend of the family who died leaves them a trailer that they can take to live in while hunting for Davy.

This leads to the third setting, the trailer, that houses Jeremiah, Reuben and Swede during their journey until they come to stay with Roxanna at her home and gas station. Much of the book occurs here, with Jeremiah and the children helping Roxanna with chores, cooking meals, trying to find Davy and dealing with Mr. Andreeson. At this time, Davy is living with Jape Waltzer and the girl he is raising to be his wife, Sara, in a cabin far out in the middle of a vast ranch in the Badlands. It is not far from Roxanna's home, so Davy visits Reuben from time to time.



When the Land's return home, they can no longer afford to live in their house, so they take up residence in a place outside of Roofing called the Red Farm, where Reuben and Swede finish growing up and Roxanna lives out her days. When Jeremiah and Reuben are shot by Jape Waltzer, they travel to yet another setting, which Reuben calls "the next country," another name for heaven.

Language and Meaning

The language of *Peace Like a River* is unusually conversational and full of folk wisdom. Reuben is the main character and narrator, so the story is told from his point of view, but he is telling the story in adulthood, years after it occurred. He will often pause with brief asides about the future, and use passing turns of phrase, such as "but I'm getting to that," which give the reader the sense that Reuben is talking to him rather than merely narrating a story.

Further, Reuben does not merely tell his story. He draws lessons from the story as well, often making profound spiritual observations such as "Real miracles bother people, like strange sudden pains unknown in medical literature." Or "Pride is the rope God allows us all." Reuben as narrator is not "in" the story but instead is using it to communicate the power of God in his life and to paint a portrait of the moral and spiritual strength of his father.

The meaning of the text is amplified when Reuben intersperses the story with Swede's developing poetry, particularly her epic poem about Valdez. These interludes into poetic writing may seem like distractions but are meant to add a level of profundity to the book, as poetry often adds an element of power to a story that mere narrative cannot. The story also contains discussions of other stories Swede and Reuben learn, one in particular about Butch Cassidy from Roxanna. These stories have a similar effect as the poetry, conveying part of the meaning of the book through another medium within the broader novel medium the author primarily employs.

Structure

Peace Like a River has twenty-three chapters and three-hundred pages of text. The main character, Reuben Land, is the narrator and the story is told entirely from his perspective. The story begins with the introduction of the Land family and Jeremiah's unusual ability to perform miracles. As the chapters progress, Jeremiah unintentionally starts a conflict with two school bullies that eventually escalates into Davy killing both bullies. This leads Davy to be arrested and being put on trial. The events leading up to the trial, and the escape that follows before the trial ends are a "mini-plot" in the book which sets up the overarching plot.

The overarching plot of *Peace Like A River* is ostensibly the attempt to find Davy and save him from those that are pursuing him. But it is also a story about faith, healing and divine providence. As a result, as the chapters unfold, many more events of import transpire than are connected directly to Davy. The reader encounters Jeremiah's faith



shaken and regained, his ability to perform miracles halting when he meets and falls in love with Roxanna, Reuben's close relationship with Swede, his sister, and her budding writing talent, along with the health struggles of Jeremiah and Reuben.

The plot builds as the Land's come closer to contacting Davy and the feds come closer to capturing him. It climaxes in two places - first, when the local authorities fail to catch Davy and the Land's move back to Minnesota with Roxanna. The second climax comes when Davy finds them three months later, with Jape following closely behind. Jape shoots Reuben and Jeremiah, leading both to experience "the next country" directly, Jeremiah dying, and Reuben miraculously surviving.



Quotes

"From my first breath in this world, all I wanted was a good set of lungs and the air to fill them with—given circumstances, you might presume, for an American baby of the twentieth century. ... When I was born to Helen and Jeremiah Land, in 1951, my lungs refused to kick in." (1)

"Real miracles bother people, like strange sudden pains unknown in medical literature." (3)

"I now think of my survival as my father's first miracle." (5)

"He went on pacing—God my witness—walking on air, praying relentlessly ..." (17)

"For the first time the thought ingressed that if the man, my father, beloved by God, could work miracles—if he could walk on air—then fixing my defective lungs ought to be a picnic." (20)

"Once torched by truth, Swede wrote years later, a little thing like faith is easy." (33)

"Be careful whom you choose to hate. The small and the vulnerable own a protection great enough, if you could but see it, to melt you into jelly. Beware those who reside beneath the shadow of Wings." (36)

"And when did he know just what he'd done? We've wondered that, Swede and I. When did it come to Davy Land that exile is a country of shifting borders, hard to quit yet hard to endure, no matter your wide shoulders, no matter your toughened heart?" (50)

"Is it hubris to believe we all live in epics?" (55)

"Do you think poor Mrs. Basca could've guessed at the power of tragedy?" (71)

"... for as I approached Dad lifted his hand, sudden as a windshift, touched Holgren's face and pulled away ... Then I saw that his bedeviled complexion—that face set always at a rolling boil—had changed. I saw instead skin of a healthy tan, a hale blush spread over cheekbones that suddenly held high definition ..." (80)

"Pride is the rope God allows us all." (89)

"You could read me a psalm if you want to, Dad." (103)

"Mr. Andreeson, you and I will not speak again." (125)

"Because I was praying this morning; and I prayed 'Lord, send Davy home to us; or if not, Lord, do this: Send us to Davy.'" (128)



"I have the substance of things hoped for. I have the anticipation of things unseen."
(130)

"And this, Swede said, brought a great smile to Davy's face, and in that smile the Shultzes saw the truth, that turning himself in would be the very last thing Davy would do in his life, however long it lasted." (140)

"And so we take our leave. So we forsake the encouraging company of the last friendly outpost, riding alone into a wide cold land in pursuit of our brother. What a speck we are on this vast prospect! How small appear our chances of success!" (150)

"It sure is one thing to say you're at war with this whole world and stick your chest out believing it, but when the world shows up with its crushing numbers and its predatory knowledge, it is another thing completely." (166)

"Maple syrup down his gas tank." (169)

"I can't do what you're asking, Mr. Andreeson." (203)

"Reuben, I've decided to court Roxanna. What do you think of that?" (253)

"Since arriving at this house, we'd had no miracles whatever." (257)

"So you can win the battle, Reuben, but the war is lost long ago." (268)

"His name isn't Robinson, its Jape Waltzer—and he's with Davy—and he's going to kill Mr. Andreeson." (274)

"Someday, you know, we're going to be shown the great ledger of our recorded decisions—a dread concept you nonetheless know in your deepest soul is true." (280)

"Fair is whatever God wants to do." (294)

"Here my terrestrial witness fails. I shut my eyes, the old morte settled its grip, and the next country gathered itself under my feet." (299)

"Take care of Swede ... Work for Roxanna ... Tell Davy ... Please." (304)

"I've been there and am going back. Make of it what you will." (311)



Topics for Discussion

What are Jeremiah's main miracles? What role do they play in the story?

What kind of character is Jeremiah? What kind of character does Jeremiah have?

What role does Reuben have in the story vis-à-vis Jeremiah? Is he merely a witness or something more?

To what extent is the story really about finding Davy? For what else might the Land's be looking?

What is the relationship between Jeremiah and God? Between Reuben and God?

To what extent is Mr. Andreeson a villain? To what extent is Jape Waltzer a villain?

How does Jeremiah represent the ideal Christian person in *Peace Like A River*?

What is significant about Swede's poetry, her stories and the tale of Butch Cassidy?

Explain how the storyline relates to Reuben's desire to have his lungs healed, his initial anger that they aren't and his later accepting that they may not be.

To what extent is *Peace Like a River* a Christian novel? What are its Christian themes? Symbols? References?