



So Brave, Young and Handsome

Leif Enger

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A stunning successor to his best selling novel "Peace Like a River," Leif Enger's new work is a rugged and nimble story about an aging train robber on a quest to reconcile the claims of love and judgment on his life, and the failed writer who goes with him.

In 1915 Minnesota, novelist Monte Becket has lost his sense of purpose. His only success long behind him, Monte lives simply with his wife and son. But when he befriends outlaw Glendon Hale, a new world of opportunity and experience presents itself. Glendon has spent years in obscurity, but the guilt he harbors for abandoning his wife, Blue, over two decades ago, has lured him from hiding. As the modern age marches swiftly forward, Glendon aims to travel back to his past--heading to California to seek Blue's forgiveness. Beguiled and inspired, Monte soon finds himself leaving behind his own family to embark for the unruly West with his fugitive guide. As they desperately flee from the relentless Charles Siringo, an ex-Pinkerton who's been hunting Glendon for years, Monte falls ever further from his family and the law, to be tempered by a fiery adventure from which he may never get home.

So Brave, Young and Handsome Details

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From Reader Review So Brave, Young and Handsome for online ebook

Cheri says

I knew Enger would have a hard time writing a book as powerful as *Peace Like a River*, and well, he didn't. But, but--his second book is crafted much the same as the first: metaphorical, each word carefully chosen, the characters obviously well-loved and intimately known by their maker, a richly drawn setting. The story, though, isn't appealing to me, I think because it's a romantic western set in 1914 and because the chain of obstacles and resolutions in the plot just aren't plausible.

I know what you just said, outloud: "You think *Peace Like a River* is plausible?" Yes, actually, I do, and the story's events and outcomes and characters are true and organic to the world Enger creates. *So Brave*--I'm sorry to say this because I love his writing--is contrived. I did like it, though not as much as I hoped I would. He's an incredible talent as a fiction writer--I'm waiting anxiously for his next book.

Jolie says

Oh, I wanted so much to like this book...I loved *Peace Like a River*, and would recommend that one wholeheartedly. And I was prepared to love this one, too, but just...couldn't.

I did love Monte Beckett at the beginning--his angst over writing 1,000 words a day in order to turn out a follow-up to his unexpected bestseller. I loved that one of his throw-away stories sounded much like the plot line for *Peace*. I found all his characters at the beginning of the book to be intriguing and likeable.

And then, the rest of the book happened. Or didn't happen. It meandered and wandered and people came and went, and there was very little that made me desire to keep reading. In fact, I slogged along, hoping that there would be grace and purpose at the end. Of course, Leif Enger's prose is still lovely, although somewhat spare and plain, keeping with his setting, I suppose. But sadly, not one I'm aching to read again moments after closing it. No, this one I closed with relief for having finished it. Finally.

Book Concierge says

Audiobook narrated by Dan Woren.

Monte Becket has had one greatly successful novel published, but he cannot seem to write another book. He lives with his wife, Susanna, and son on a farm in Minnesota, and keeps promising his publisher that he's working hard on the next novel. Then one day he notices a man rowing a boat while standing up. Spurred by his son, Monte befriends Glendon, and the older man confesses to regret at abandoning his wife some two decades previously. When Glendon decides that it is time for him to go back to Blue, he asks Monte to come along, and with Susanna's guarded acquiescence, Monte agrees to go along.

I was caught up in the road trip. The story takes place in 1915, when automobiles were scarce, and more people lived in the rural area of America. As Monte and Glendon head West and South, the landscape virtually becomes a character in the novel.

I really like the relationship between these men. Glendon is an admitted outlaw, and even spent some time at Butch Cassidy's Hole in the Wall retreat. But that was decades ago, and he's spent years in relative hiding, building boats and living simply in a converted barn. Monte is drawn to Glendon, but disturbed when he learns the truth of his new friend's background. And yet ... when push comes to shove, his loyalties lie with the Glendon he has come to know on this journey.

Enger gives the reader a relentless pursuer in Charles Siringo – a former Pinkerton detective who is determined to track Glendon down and bring him to justice.

In many respects it reminds me of the old traditional Westerns. And I think it would do well translated to film.

Dan Woren does a marvelous job of performing the audio book. I almost felt as if I were listening to a master storyteller around a campfire. Part of this is Enger's way of writing the tale, but Woren's narration really brought the story to life. I really liked the way he voiced the many characters, but particularly Monte and Glendon.

Richard Derus says

Rating: 3.5* of five

The Book Report: Failing novelist and failure of a farmer Monte Becket, Minnesotan manqué, meets Glendon the gangster via the good offices of his son the pathologically friendly, and to the undisguised disgust and reluctant encouragement of his dreary, negative wife, takes off to Mexico with Glendon to see what he can see.

My Review: I started this book annoyed. I did NOT like the pseudoformal English that the author posits regular people used a century ago, felt it was such a cutesy way of making the story feel "authentic" and so contrived as to make me want to smack the perpetrator.

I got over it. Glendon the train robber completely seduced me, just like he did the narrator, the narrator's wife, the narrator's son, and so many, many others along his twisty path.

This is a tale about Truth, not truth, and the author shows us that from the get-go with the very narrative voice I found so irksome at first. There is Truth in the world, often to be found shoved behind elaborate scrimps of lies, where the facts that tell the truth are woven into the most fantastical beasts of falsehood it's amazing.

Leif Enger knows this, and tells us this amazing and important and underappreciated piece of knowledge in the voice of a man whose grasp of the facts is imperfect but whose knowledge of the Truth guides him and saves him from a wasted, useless life.

Very, very worth reading. I say grit your teeth at the narrative voice and charge into the story full tilt. You will be very glad you got to know these characters. They do remain characters, though; some essential *oomph* is missing that's necessary to launch them into full personhood. Still, they're good readin'. Go to it, unfettered by fear of disappointment.

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Patrick Oden says

"I said, 'Most men never have the chance to be both things at once, the hero and the devil.'

'That is ignorant. Most men are hero and devil. All men. That is what ruins it with wives.'

'She wanted just the hero?'

'Bad men or good she would've had me either way. She couldn't endure both, however. She said to pick one and to be that thing only so that she might trust me until the day of Jesus.'"

There is a perspective in some ancient cultures about in-between places and times. Dawn and dusk, which lie between night and day. The seashore, that lies between water and land. Halloween, that time in which the spirit world and the physical world are perilously close. During these moments, in these places, it is both and neither all at once, indistinct and undefined. So too human life encounters these moments in identity. People are often caught in this nebulous middle, seeming one thing and another all at once. Sometimes this is being caught between their actions and their ideals, or their sin and their virtue. They are half-people of a sort, unrealized and unformed, without an identity of their own.

Some stay in this place their whole lives, never becoming, and never discovering themselves for who they really are. Others cast off from the dock, refusing to settle any longer for what was, and yet not yet knowing who they can or should be. It is a journey of becoming a whole person.

So Brave, Young, and Handsome is this story told of three primary characters, with a few others thrown in along the way. It is a road story telling of a physical journey that brings out the metaphysical of each of the characters, but not in a mushy, spiritualistic, heavy-laden way. And that's what is so brilliant about the book. It's not philosophy. It's a great tale in the tradition of great American writers from decades past.

This is a book about in between times and in between people drawn with immense clarity and insight, while retaining a direct and sparse prose. Enger tells us of an era and certain characters, a story not a message. It is in this story, however, that we see so much of real life as it so often is: in between.

We are between the old and the new, the good and the bad, the honest and the false, the artist and the laborer, the young and the aged, the adventurous and the prosaic. The characters hope, but don't know how to find this hope. What they do is carry on, having tasted something of who they know themselves to be they won't let themselves go back. As Enger says in his acknowledgments, "Sometimes heroism is nothing more than patience, curiosity, and a refusal to panic."

What I like so much about Enger's work is that it is so hopeful. Absolutely honest, mind you, there's no false hope to be found here or sentimentalism seeking to manipulate our emotions. These are real people, faults and all. But unlike so much contemporary literature and film Enger doesn't feel a need to obsess with corruption or ruin. His is a book that shows people who are not handsome, or young, and rarely brave. But they want to be, and be such in ways that matter to them, not to others around them. They are seeking wholeness for themselves.

Not all succeed. Some do, but not in the expected ways.

"For at the same time he lost everything--the very direction of his own steps--he won the thing he held most precious he wouldn't approach it in words."

It is a story of real life. Not gritty, corrupted, malformed caricatures. Real people, or at least characters who are desperate to become real people, who learn what it is to be a real person.

With all this depth and insight it might sound ponderous. But it's not. It's very gentle and easy-going. It moves along at a varied pace, with enough movement to never seem tiresome and enough twists to never seem predictable. My only slight irritation is that sometimes Enger jumps ahead a bit and is so eager to bring a slight twist that he breaks the moment with unnecessary foreshadowing, sort of a "you'll love what comes next!" moments. I wish he just let us experience the story as it happened a bit more. But this is a minor qualm and he does even this within the contexts of a fitting narration.

It's a brilliant book, in craft and theme and insight. It's the best work of contemporary fiction I've read in a very long time and guess it will be my favorite book of 2008.

Sandi says

So Brave, Young and Handsome: A Novel is a very interesting read. It's got so many layers and nuances. Set in 1912, the narrator is a Minnesota postal worker who wrote a fabulously successful novel, quit his day job, and hasn't been able to write anything since. He befriends with an old guy who builds boats, and leaves his wife and son to spend six weeks helping his new friend find his long-lost love. It quickly becomes apparent that Monte is either a very poor judge of character or that he is the most unreliable of narrators.

Monte's adventure traveling in the West show us an early 20th century that is changing rapidly. His buddy, Glendon turns out to have been part of Butch Cassidy's Hole in the Wall Gang. He's being pursued by a former Pinkerton detective, Charlie Siringo. Both men are clearly from a bygone era. Horses have pretty much been replaced by cars. Wild West extravaganzas are dying out. Even small Western towns are much more civilized than the Old West frontier outposts.

Reading this book was a pleasure. It was so vivid and poignant. However, it had a lot of complexity that would make it a good subject for serious literary analysis. I highly recommend it.

Stephen Gallup says

Occasionally the narrator of this wonderful tale refers to the misadventures of Butch Cassidy and the

Sundance Kid, which had occurred a few years prior but which of course to a modern audience are understood in terms of the movie. In both stories, the protagonists are pursued by an implacable detective -- somebody almost inhuman in his ability to keep on coming in spite of every effort to shake him off.

There's a crucial difference, however, in that this is a story of redemption. A failed writer who sees himself as a fraud meets a former desperado who still owes a debt to society -- and to the girl he married and deserted long ago. Leaving their comfortable homes, they set out on a cross-country journey to make amends. There is violence and other unpleasantness along the way, to be sure, but the book's conclusion is much sweeter than the movie's.

The characters are exquisitely drawn, and the prose is mostly transparent. The occasional points where it is embellished are like discovered gems along the way. As he begins telling the story, Monte Becket over-uses exclamation points. This I took as the forced writing style that had produced his one commercially successful book and its numerous aborted sequels. But when he gives up trying to be an author and just starts telling what happens, he has the greatest story of his life -- and yet somehow that doesn't seem to occur to him until the very last page. This is a great novel, certainly the best I've read this year.

Larry H says

I absolutely loved Leif Enger's first novel, *Peace Like a River*. He's a terrific writer. So needless to say, I was really looking forward to reading his follow-up novel. And I loved much of it a great deal.

Living in Minnesota in 1915, Monte Becket was a one-time successful novelist hoping inspiration will strike him a second time. Eking out a humdrum existence, one day he befriends Glendon Hale, a vagabond outlaw who wants to head to Mexico to find his one true love, whom he abandoned to flee lawmakers years before. So Monte accompanies Glendon on this journey. And an interesting journey it is.

Once again, Enger's writing is fantastic. For the most part, the characters he created, especially Monte and Glendon (and their brief companion Hood Roberts), have stuck in my mind. The only reason I didn't like this book more (and in fact got fairly frustrated during a middle stretch) was the character of Charlie Siringo, the one-time Pinkerton guard on the hunt for Glendon. I found his character a little too unbelievable, and was tremendously irritated by the hold he seemed to have over every character in the book, minor or major. But once I made it through that span of pages, the book regained its heart, and captured me once again.

Amelia says

It's here! Finally, after almost 6 years, the second book by Leif Enger! He wrote *Peace Like a River* - my all-time #1 favorite!

I liked it in the end. It's no *Peace*, but it was a good story. I couldn't feel the characters as deeply as in *Peace* ... I wish we had more time with *Redstart* and *Hood*, less with *Siringo*. But, the overall themes were ones I

could get behind: true love endures, forgiveness is sweet on both the giving and receiving end, there is a fine nobleness in voluntary justice, and relationships, art, work, and the beauties of the earth are the things that can give you the most lasting happiness.

I would recommend this to Celeste (before you read Peace ... and give yourself some time in between the two), and anyone else who likes a good, relaxing story with a pace like a lazy part of the Mississippi River. It kind of has that feel to it.

Jesse says

This was good stuff. I like the ending on this one better than Enger's first. The solid, true-crime-feel held through to the end. Enger has a way of using bright thick words that surprise. For those who are interested here is what Idaho feels like. The characters were fascinating and engaging. I think Charles Siringo was the best. As far as bad guys go, he is at the top: complex, subtle, creepy. Glendon is a close second as far as best character and he has lots of interesting surprises as well. Highly recommend this one.

Jessica says

The term "Heartbreaking work of staggering genius" gets bandied about a lot these days, but in this case it's very well earned. As I knew it would be. The man who wrote the sublime PEACE LIKE A RIVER could not possibly write a bad grocery list, let alone a bad book.

Though I do wonder if there is anything autobiographical here. The narrator, Monte Becket, is a writer. A former postal worker, actually, who wrote a novel on a whim and had it become a runaway bestseller. And now he sits, day after day, writing words and discarding them. His publisher is anxiously waiting for his next book, and he's ashamed to admit that he's written the beginnings of nearly a dozen, and discarded them all. And so, plagued by writer's block, he heads out to Mexico with his odd duck of a neighbor . . . and ends up aiding and abetting a number of people and a number of crimes, and living life as he hadn't before. This book is a gorgeous anomaly: a western written by a post-modern writer. Spare sentences, short chapters, odd turns of fate, and yet it unspools like a yarn worthy of Zane Grey. It reminded me of combination of ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE and TRUE GRIT, with a healthy dose of ALL THE PRETTY HORSES.

So, in short: It's fabulous, you should read it. Then, if you haven't, read PEACE LIKE A RIVER. Two, that's right, TWO Heartbreaking Works of Staggering Genius.

(A HEARTBREAKING WORK OF STAGGERING GENIUS is also very good.)

Ann says

This book is about a Minnesota man, the narrator, Monte Becket, in 1910 who had written a 'western' that made his name familiar to many but now feels that he somehow did not deserve the accolades of family, friends, and the world. One day he looks through the mist at the Cannon River running by his home where he

lives with beautiful wife Susannah and 8 year old son, Redstart to see salvation in the form of failed man, Glendon Hale, rowing into view. They meet Hood Roberts, a young mechanic who wants to be a cowboy on their road trip through a land that is changing forever but will always be the west.

For all of us who want to meet our quota of a thousand words a day as did Monte Becket but are composing letters by the hour, only to make them into kites and fly them up to God, this story gives us hope.

Amy says

Crud, crud, crud. I meant to write my review of this when I finished it, but now it's been several weeks and a bunch of books in between. Still the story has stayed with me. While I can no longer recall a specific eloquence of phrase, the overall flavor of the story, with the wonders of the early 20th century: train travel, Wild West shows, outlaws, Pinkertons, sharpshooters and cheap penny novels. The basic story is one of an aging train robber, Glendon Hale, seeking redemption from the love of his life. His traveling companion is the willing, but somewhat stagnant writer, Monte Becket, author of a one hit wonder, a swashbuckling western novel called *Martin Bligh*.

Their travels, adventures are a marvelous tale of the time, itself. Add to it the characters they meet, interact with and seek, and the story achieves a wonderful richness -- a journey on which it was quite pleasing accompany these two.

William says

Peace Like a River, Enger's first novel, had simple, elegant writing and a believable, suspenseful plot that set the author loping comfortably between the literary buttes of Larry McMurtry and John Steinbeck. River felt like a classic before you were halfway through the book. So Brave, Young, and Handsome is set at the same pace, and holds to the same style of writing, and if that process seems now too easily reproduced, or too wash worn to stun us at second sight, the casualness of this appearance holds only until you strike upon a sentence remarkable for its strong characterization, and gracefully evocative of its captured time and place.

If River was a book about faith, So Brave is a novel of family. But themes center also on that great western trope of identity, as defined by family, by action, by location, happenstance, and also by lie. Characters are carefully cast and perfectly named: Hood Roberts, Jack Waits, and Glendon Hale are born in the mind the moment you hear their names. The heart of the novel lay, as with all great stories, with its women, and though held to the perimeter for much of the story, is the their presence - Blue's, Susannah Becket's - that casts a horizon toward which all the men march.

The only regret you'll have is that there are too few pages for characters so rich. But thankfully books like this are not chocolate; they are not a taste from which a person really ever grows sick.

Snotchocheez says

4 stars

I can't be a Leif Enger completist after two novels. No! Arrrgh! Alas, this terrific writer only has two novels under his belt in his (fifteen year) career, but I can assure you, when he gets the gumption to write again, I will be there waiting.

Yeah, and no, 2008's *So Brave, Young, and Handsome* is not as good as his debut, 2001's *Peace Like a River*, but it's pretty darn good enough, despite a few minor tics (like that seemingly-Wiley Cash-inspired title for starters). It's probably not a coincidence that Monte Becket, our hero, is a one-hit-wonder writer (in the mid 1910s) of (in today's parlance) a well-received YA novel, desperately mired in a bad bout of writers' block (echoing, it seems, Enger's own career arc.) Monte's solution to break the funk (which was, really, my only problem with this book, this setup:) Abandon his loving wife and son, his state of Minnesota Cannon River-adjacent homestead, and go on a trip with a dicey boat-building alcoholic neighbor, Glendon Hale, to Baja California so that Glendon might apologize to his wife for his misdeeds of the past. Somehow, Monte's wife Susannah agrees to let Monte accompany this strange neighbor to a trip west, if it will jumpstart his foundering writing career with ideas for a new book.

As it turns out, this strange neighbor Glendon has a *very* checkered past that is slowly revealed as the duo trek to Mexico. (Turns out, he's a train robber and consorter with the legendary Hole in the Wall Gang of outlaws like Butch Cassidy, "Flat Nose" Curry and "Black Jack" Ketchum).. Not long after leaving Minnesota, the road trip becomes a pursuit when Charles Siringo, a veteran, celebrated Pinkerton detective, picks up Glendon Hale's scent in Kansas. Monte gets *much* more than book ideas on this trip, as he's now on the run with someone presumed armed and dangerous.

Except for the meh set-up, this was a joy to read. Enger, much like he evinced with *Peace Like a River*, has a seemingly innate gift of storytelling, making his characters zing, the old west locales vivid and richly-detailed, the tension palpable. I must say, Zane Grey-ish old timey westerns are so not my thing, but I can trust Enger to take me anywhere I wouldn't ordinarily go unbidden.

Talent this rich must not languish. Leif, a plaintive plea: Come back, please!!
