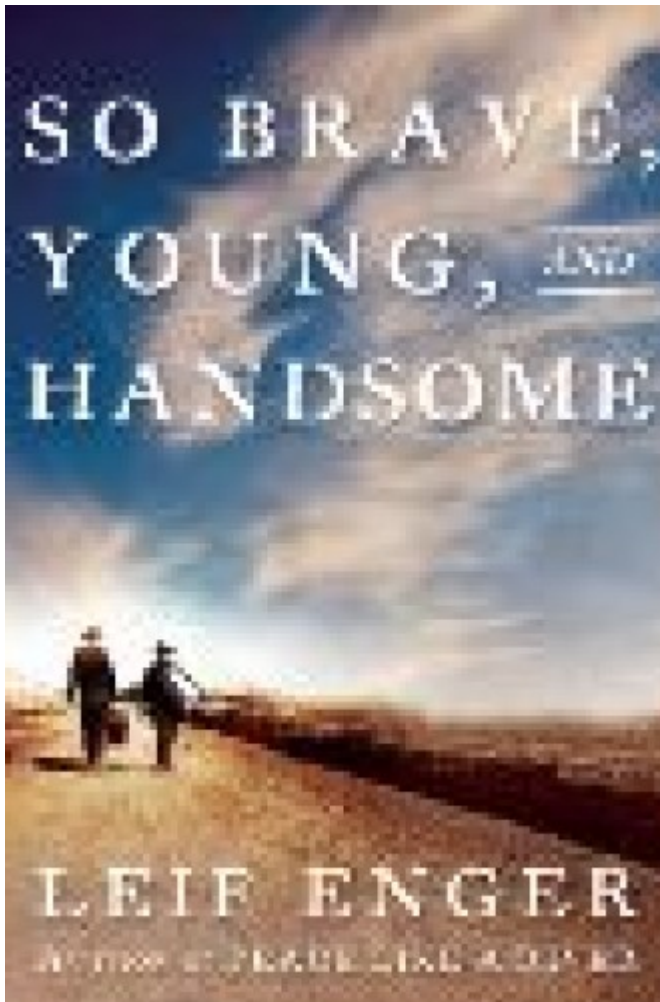


So Brave, Young and Handsome

reviewed by [Brian Doyle](#) in the [October 21, 2008](#) issue

In Review



So Brave, Young, and Handsome

Leif Enger

Atlantic Monthly Press

Why do we expect more than one terrific book from a writer? Isn't one superb book enough? Razzing Frank McCourt for making cheerful, thin books that aren't *Angela's*

Ashes and ragging Ken Kesey for all the later muck that wasn't *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*—isn't that unfair? Very fine books are rare birds; why expect them to come in flocks?

Leif Enger published his first novel seven years ago. *Peace Like a River* was haunting, resonant and remarkable in many ways—as road tale, chase story, contemplation of violence and forgiveness, character study, sales phenomenon, star-studded honoree on every list of books of the year. I'll never forget the calm, gentle, scrawny, spiritually electric father in that book, sometimes so absorbed in prayer and conversation with the Lord that he walked on air, sometimes so embroiled in arguments with the Lord that he incurred mysterious bruises. Despite its plodding pace and slight loss of verve in the last hundred pages, the book is memorable for its sweet, quiet tone; the whole book seems to happen in the quivering silence just after daybreak, in the shiver of winter, on the ancient ocean of the American plains. A very good book.

Which Enger's second novel, *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*, isn't. It's a good book. It's a western, with horses and rivers and orchards, all virtues. It's picaresque. It rollicks along, two men on a journey, pursued by a law officer, and there's a gunfight and sudden murders and well-built boats and a gentle, complex fabric of reconciliation. Moral debts are paid, and there's an elephant and an energetic, lovable kid named Redstart—a name you hardly ever encounter in fiction—and it's set in the 1910s, which hardly any books are these days. Those are all good things. But the book is a little too self-conscious, a little too mindful of its own colorful shambling along. And the beautifully maintained boy's-adventure-novel tone wears thin. Characters come and go, the plot is essentially aimless, and the hero seems like the sort of faintheart who would quail if there was too much mustard on his sandwich.

Plot: A happily married Minnesota novelist, author of a best-seller some years ago but nothing since, sets off on an adventure with an elderly former train robber who wishes to apologize to the wife he abandoned many years ago. They are sought by a grim, elderly lawman. The robber vanishes, the novelist is thrown together with the lawman, and all the characters end up having a showdown in a California orchard. The end of the book, circling around to the beginning, has the novelist beginning to write a novel featuring a happily married Minnesota novelist. . . .

I have the overwhelming urge to understand Enger, to empathize, to cut the man a break. Where *do* you go as a novelist after the roaring success of your first novel? Clearly, unless you are an idiot or a mystery writer, you don't stick to the recipe. And in *So Brave*, Enger does sprint off in a different direction: *Peace* is a quiet, evocative tale told by a boy, and this is a kind of horse opera, a Zane Grey homage, a self-conscious, old-style adventure epic. That Enger pulls it off is a testament to his capacious skills as a storyteller.

And Enger does have an easy mastery of sinewy sentences. "If anything is harder to watch than the face of a person you have deceived, please tell me what it is." "A jail ain't nothing but a collection of corners." "Tired people assess their chances unwisely." "In times of dread it's good to have an old man along; an old man has seen worse." And how refreshing to read a writer who's interested in grace and prayer, gentle miracle and powerful and confusing love, resurrection and moral fiber as normal, casual, nutritious, ordinary aspects of life—a writer who knows that people grapple with the moral wrangle all the time, that they turn to prayer in moments of duress, that they witness the ocean of miracle no matter what religious jacket they wear.

Final grade for Enger's second work: B, a cut below his previous work. Too mannered. Too self-consciously Cowboy Epic. Too much Saturday-matinee adventure. The sudden reversals of fortune, the backlit dramatic moments, the swirls of dust behind trusty ponies—why, it's a B movie! Which makes it a good read, just not a book to reread.