

Words and miracles: Realities outside the text

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [October 20, 2009](#) issue

I have a friend who was a college professor before she made the brave decision to leave the security of academia and strike out on her own as a writer. Once or twice a year she sends me two books and a nice note expressing her reluctance to add to the number of books I need to read—and her conviction that I will love these two. She is always right.

One she sent recently is *The Law of Dreams*, by Peter Behrens. It is about a boy orphaned during the Irish potato famine of 1847. He lands in a gang of similarly orphaned children who are left to provide for themselves by foraging and stealing—a reminder of similar children who are trying to survive in Darfur or in the street gangs of Chicago. Somehow Fergus makes it through his time in an orphanage in Dublin and through a harrowing sea voyage to this country, where he finds a new life of hope and possibility.

My friend also sent *Peace Like a River*, a first novel by Leif Enger. It has been around since 2001, but somehow I missed it. One reviewer said the book is “a reminder of why we read fiction to begin with.” The characters are quirky, human and winsome. Chief among them are Jeremiah Land, a high school janitor whose wife left years ago, and his children—Rueben, the story’s narrator, who is a wise, self-deprecating, hopelessly loving, vulnerable 11-year-old boy who has asthma; Swede, a brilliant nine-year-old girl who is the interpreter of the swirling events of the family’s life and who is writing an epic poem whose characters reflect the lives she and her family are living; and Davy, the older brother, who precipitates the action by killing two boys who have threatened his family. Jeremiah reads the King James Bible at the breakfast table, prays, talks to God out loud, argues, laughs, pleads and yells. Miracles happen—from Rueben’s survival of a traumatic event when his lungs won’t work, to the father’s healing of the school superintendent who just fired him, to the replenishment of fuel for the Plymouth station wagon Jeremiah is driving in pursuit of Davy, who has broken out of jail and is on the run. The final miracle occurs when

father and son say goodbye in a scene that not only reveals the source of the book's title but brought a tear to my eye.

In his book *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, Thomas Long cites Paul Ricoeur's claim that biblical texts "reliably refer to realities outside themselves" and "that there is really something 'outside the text.'" *Peace Like a River* is not a conventionally religious book, but it conveys a belief that, outside the text, there really are miracles to be seen.