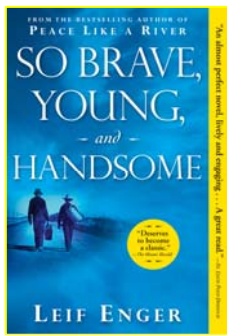


RUSSELL ROWLAND

Enger's Brilliance is Homage to Masters

So Brave, Young and Handsome
Leif Enger
Atlantic Monthly Press, 2008

It takes a special book to draw comparisons to such diverse writers as Mark Twain, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Vladimir Nabokov. Leif Enger has accomplished just that with his new novel



So Brave, Young, and Handsome. From the opening paragraph, Enger pulls the reader in with a voice as confessional and eloquent as that of Humbert Humbert. In this case, the narrator is a writer named Monte Becket, a man who is embarrassed by the success of his first novel, and is now struggling to find that he has nothing else to say. As he himself explains, he is 'an amiable fellow' who would be happy to talk pleasantly with anyone who stops by. In his view, they would soon be bored with his company. And most importantly, his seven attempts to write novel number two have all stalled mid-stream, leaving him with no explanation for his ever-patient wife, Susannah.

When a man named Glendon Hale enters Monte's life, and talks about traveling to California on a mysterious journey, Monte sees this is a chance to escape the pressure of producing, at least for a while. When Monte learns that Glendon is actually a former train robber, on the run from a ex-Pinkerton agent named Siringo, they seem to be an unlikely pair of travel companions. Instead, the two men develop an unexpected friendship that gives Monte a new perspective on his priorities. The story really takes off, and takes on the qualities of a Huckleberry Finn/Jim tale, when the pair takes on another travel companion by the name of Hood Roberts. Roberts is a young man completely in love with the romantic ideals of the criminal lifestyle. Once he learns the truth about Glendon, and the fact that they're being trailed by a bounty hunter, his thirst for adventure kicks in and leads to some unpleasant consequences.

The beauty of this book is Enger's ability to show the different phases of man and his quest for adventure. Hood represents the invincibility of youth, Monte the lost years, when all of the answers you think you knew seem to vanish, and Glendon personifies the quiet wisdom of a man who has lived a rich life and learned from it. Even Siringo steps in and fills his part, as the man who carries his resentments with a devotion most of us would reserve for the things we love. Enger brings all of these elements together with brilliant pacing and fabulous prose. And he moves the story in directions that veer as far from formula as possible.

The last few chapters of the novel take us to Marquez territory, with Monte tracking down Glendon in a California orchard. Glendon has found his former wife and managed to convince her and her husband to take him on as an employee. A lesser writer would have brought these two together and tied the package up with a shiny bow, but Enger has much more ambitious themes in mind, and while Monte tries to convince Blue, Glendon's wife, to forgive him for leaving her, she informs him about how misguided his view of the whole situation is.

Her voice was kind but without concession. “You're his friend, Monte, so listen. His conscience doesn't concern me. His apology does not benefit me. His work for us on the orchard is another matter--that's real enough and it comes at a good time. That's why we allowed him to stay. There is no other reason.”

I nodded. Sometimes it seems every woman I meet is more than a match for me.

In Enger's fictional world, the actions are what matter. People act, and there are consequences, and sometimes they don't seem fair, and sometimes they don't make sense. Kind of like life.