Given 9-11 and “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” perhaps it’s safe to say that we live in a time of violence, a fact that disturbs many Americans in new and frightening ways. If this is so, perhaps it is also no coincidence that two recent novels, Leif Enger’s Peace Like a River (2000), and Louise Erdrich’s The Master Butchers Singing Club (2003), address the subject of physical violence in, if not new, certainly enlightening ways. They do it, however, not from a military/political perspective, but from the effect it has on particular families. What is especially curious about both books is that they are set, not in such violent places as New York or the Middle East, but North Dakota, the so-called Peace Garden State. Still, for these two novelists, violence in any sense is no answer. For Leif Enger, physical violence goes nowhere, no matter the deeply religious faith of a father, or the loyalty of the family to one of its own involved in the death of two neighborhood ruffians. Erdrich’s story is a deeper and wider account of the futility and pain that follow the discovery of involvement, willingly or unwillingly, of family members in violent acts. This in spite of the special efforts of one man, and by extension the community, to transcend loss through, of all things, music—in his mind, a way to bridge the gap between death and a life based on love.

Peace Like a River is narrated through the memory of 11-year-old Reuben Land. Though the book opens with a goose hunting trip, which may be symbolic (as we shall see), the focus of the narrative is the killing of two bullies in the 1960s by his 16-year-old brother Davy for abusing his girlfriend and threatening their 9-year-old sister, Swede. The time is the 1960s, though there is no evidence of this time (Liss). When Davy escapes from prison during his trial and flees west in North Dakota, the family, led by
their faith-conscious father, Jeremiah Land, follows the fugitive Davy in an Airstream across the state. North Dakota provides a perfect setting for this journey because of the length of state which, for the most part, is rural, and sparsely populated. One must be careful, however, for the book, says Hooper, is less about an adventure than an examination of character. To the extent it is a journey, it ends in the western part of the state, which is mainly badlands, or steep hills, often beautiful, but, difficult to traverse, except on horseback. One critic notes Enger’s powerful descriptions of the “hellish, fiery-fissured geology” involved (“Big, Bold”). In the badlands Reuben finds Davy hiding out with a wild man, Jape Waltzer, a godless figure and a stark contrast to Jeremiah (Changon). It is winter in Dakota, so the snow and ice, along with the distance and ragged terrain, make the pursuit by the federal agent Andreeson of people like Jape, and now Davy, extremely difficult. The trip gives the book a “breathless energy,” even though Enger’s world is a virtual fantasy that “seems unlikely to have ever existed” (Dieckmann).

Later we discover that Davy met Jape in Amidon in the southern badlands, and moved north to Grassy Butte. Jeremiah marries Roxanna, a kind of “earth woman” who shelters the family near Grassy Butte while they are looking for Davy. If the trip succeeds, it is the “honesty of his quiet, measured, narrative voice that give weight and truth to the fantastic elements that engross the tale” (Zaleski). For some, however, the narrator Reuben, compared to Swede, an inventive and precocious writer, is not a compelling character, and his creator “no Mark Twain” (Liss). After the family returns to Minnesota, Jeremiah is shot and killed by Jape, who earlier had killed Davy’s pursurer Andreeson, whom Reuben labels “the putrid fed” (201, 210). At the end Jape is again on
the loose, and Davy is hiding out somewhere in Canada. In short, the family is scattered, and violence in any sense—personal, psychological, physical—apparently has not succeeded anywhere, except in the case of Reuben, who continues to idolize his father and his father’s faith in miracles, even amid all the family trauma.

**Master Butcher**, after an opening journey to America, is set in Argus, a small eastern North Dakota community during the Depression. Readers also know the town from *The Beet Queen*. Though some view Erdrich’s work as “richly imaginative,” its “pregnant emptiness” is truly real, says Franscell, because “she lived it.” Fidelis Waldvogel, the protagonist, was a feared sniper in the German army during World War I. He had a talent for “killing unsuspecting victims at 250 meters, a far cry from the poet he hoped to be in his youth” (Kline). After the war he marries the pregnant wife of his soldier-friend, Johannes, whom he watched die on the battlefield, and emigrates to Argus where he raises their son, Franz, along with three of their own—Markus and twins Emil and Erich. Here he functions as a master butcher, one who (as Erdrich learned from her youth) could combine “enormous tenderness” with “brutality” (Martin). So slaughter is both a community source of shared sustenance and yet terrifying when seen in the light of the violence—physical and psychological. As a counter measure for past killings for which he feels uncomfortable, Fidelis establishes a singing club in Argus that brings together men from the entire community—including a competing butcher, the sheriff, the town drunk, a vaudeville star, as well as others. Though some think the club is but an “afterthought” in the book (Meadows), it is central to the narrative flow and has a calming effect regarding both past and present deaths that Fidelis witnesses in the community.
There are several homicides in Master Butcher, all surrounded by “extraordinary secrets” that are only revealed slowly, says Smith, and their interlocking stories are but variations on the theme of death in the novel. For Zobenica, just as the violent slaughtering of animals from which he prepares choice sausage raises killing to a higher level, so each of the stories about death provide “new slices,” if you will, of the human spirit. In the process, Weekes notes that Erdrich is able to blend the arts—music, drama, vaudeville—with brutality of all kinds “to show a fullness of life.” At any rate, they all contribute to the overall theme of violence, death, grief, and loss, followed by the challenge of individual and communal love, or the lack of it. Moreover, the individual stories (tunes?) are connected to death in the two world wars which bracket the several deaths in Argus. Of these the first (though we learn of it last) is an attempted murder; another occurs mysteriously from unconscious neglect, and the third is deliberate.

First, the attempted murder. Perhaps the central figure in the novel is Delphine Watska, who (we learn in the end) is retrieved at birth by a scrap collector named Step-and-a-Half from an outhouse, deposited there by a desperately poor mother that Delphine never knows as her own. She sees the loss of that mother from as the source of her own sensitivity (54)—toward her half-breed companion Cyprian, who she discovers is bisexual, and her alcoholic “father” Roy, whose “vomit and piss” (43) she continually cleans up. Her sensitivity also affects Eva (Fidelis’s wife) whom Delphine cares for during her long illness from cancer, and for Fidelis in his bouts of depression, sexual needs, and ultimate deterioration. And finally the four boys.

A key image in the book is that that relates especially to Delphine is that of balancing. Though some see her as merely “an idealized abstraction” (Allen) without “a
heart or mind that motivates the person" (Nahai 2), Wilkinson says she is “endlessly resourceful” and “one of Erdrich’s finest characters.” More than Fidelis, she is central to the book, a reflective decision maker who must weigh all kinds of situations, including her choice of lovers—her initial partner, Cyripan, and later Fidelis. She not only serves as a “human table” in a vaudeville act, but she is a “tough and compassionate” woman who sustains the vulnerable Waldvogel family throughout the novel (PW 44). This woman affirms life precisely because she accepts and lives through many kinds of personal loss. Truly, she is a realist, not one given to religious faith, or miracles, as is Reuben’s perception of Jeremiah in Enger’s novel.

Then, there are the mysterious, albeit grotesque, deaths of a couple, Doris and Porky Chavers (a member of the singing club), along with their child, Ruthie, found in the basement of the house of Roy Watzka (another member). He later confesses to having left them trapped during one of his drunken binges. The realization of this set of deaths leaves Delphine mentally crushed and the community aghast, but Erdrich, says Prose, is able to make such grotesque events “plausible and convincing.” Another more deliberate murder is instigated by Clarisse Strub, the local undertaker, relative of the Chavers and childhood friend of Delphine, who kills Sheriff Albert Hock after he tries to frame her for the murder of the Chaver family when she refuses his sexual advances. Apt to be prosecuted, she leaves town. So Delphine loses a friend and confidant from girlhood, from which the two often relive the complex emotions involved in a Shakespearean play (74)—emotions not too far removed from the mysterious deaths in Argus. What is most significant is that in all of these deaths human love and companionship are lost, and others left to suffer the grief.
In spite of killings and separations, the violence in *Peace Like a River* does not dampen the tone of the novel where Enger’s prose “sings like a river” (Abrams). But there are other reasons for its popularity, one related to religion, the other to western drama. First, the religious dimension cannot but appeal to people of faith. For Enger, the very texture of the novel is Norwegian Lutheran, that is, based on individual faith rooted in a personal relation to God, and nourished by the Bible—which Jeremiah tirelessly quotes. Reuben says the man was once miraculously, but safely, displaced four blocks away by a tornado, something common in the Red River Valley. At the time of Reuben’s birth Jeremiah’s repeatedly yelling “Breathe” (2), after the doctor had pounded on Reuben’s chest, saves the boy’s life. And when his father is shot at the end after returning from the Dakota badlands, Reuben’s asthma attacks miraculously stop. Still, all these events are seen through the eyes of a young boy, giving the text: a “Midwestern magic realism” (Hubbuch), which can be exciting, albeit evasive. Pearson says it is the boy’s faith that permits the miracles to exist. For Dieckmann, the text is “implausible to all but true believers” and doesn’t fit with an age of “Beatlemania and Civil rights”—or the Viet Nam War. Davis says it is “analogous to church going” and simply contains “too much piety” (163). In Stander’s mind it is a “good yarn,” but lacking in profundity. Important as the miracles are to Reuben they become a kind of cover up for the traumatic effects of violence—the loss of Davy, the death of the father and an FBI agent, and the ultimate dispersal of the family.

The other reason relates to the nature of western drama, about which Swede writes and Davy lives out in Reuben’s writing about the family. As a young writer Swede is steeped in western novelists, like Zane Gray, and her own poetry and fiction
display a love for the oversimplified, as she “scribbles western lyric verse to make sense of events enveloping the family” (Crosby). Virtually, Davy is a cowboy, out to right wrong, that is, the abuse of his girlfriend and sister by two intruders he sees as thugs. Such a scenario is bound to appeal to an American audience, steeped in novels and videos about cowboys chasing robbers or Indians. The result is a few bold characters acting in a western terrain playing out stereotypical plot. Indeed, Davy “may never come alive as a character, or be worthy of pursuit beyond blood ties” (Dieckmann). It is the western element, together with the religious theme and tone, that makes for popular reading, even though the violence is counter productive, justice is left hanging, and families are hardly united in the end, however strong young Reuben’s feeling for his father and sister.

Some of Erdrich’s major characters (viz. Roy, Eva, Delphine) see God quite differently from Jeremiah. For them, religion can be a cover up rather than a relief from the pain of loss. Roy says God has left a huge hole in creation which can be filled only with “spirits” (292). His alcoholism turns this kind of statement into tragic humor, but later he will tell Delphine about his wife Minnie, a survivor of Wounded Knee, giving his philosophy of violence and death a far greater depth. When Fidelis’s wife Eva is dying, and cancer is tearing away at her body, she greets the pious women at her bedside who hardly understand her pain with what amounts to a curse: “Spit in your eye” (122). When Delphine reflects that these women remind her of turkey vultures, one is reminded of Emily Dickinson’s “What Soft—Cherubic Creatures--/These Gentlemens are--.”

Delphine, the “moral center” of the novel (Kirkus Reviews) questions the “false assurance” that “prayers worked” (43) when contemplating the many kinds of violence in a small community like Argus. In her own case, she sees “a woman-shaped hole at
the center of the universe through which her mother, then Eva, and now Clarisse had walked” (267). And when she sees what happens to her alcoholic father (violence against himself), and experiences Markus losing his spirit after being buried in the earth (accidental violence) in which he loves to play, a certain twitch in her brain causes Delphine to reject any religious “hope and light” (54). Kline says the image involving Markus suggests “a malevolence deeply rooted in the land itself.” As a child Delphine thought the goodness of God was simply “A Lie” (54). Now she voices the hypocrisy and “façade of lies” that surround a country’s sending children like Markus to war while the press is printing “the lists of North Dakota fallen” (346). Readers may not react kindly to this kind of perspective when compared to Jeremiah’s faith in Peace, but it is the view of an adult, not a child, regarding those who have suffered much. And in effect Delphine simply asks “why?”

This woman’s more reflective self emerges when she contemplates the beauty of a Dakota snowfall (300), which can be double-edged—uplifting and psychically piercing.

... The snow fell as a bitter powder all December, light dustings that did not soften the earth’s iron ... When the snow was blown aside, the old plow marks and grooves in the earth sprouted a miserable stubble of wheat and corn stocks ... Snow is a blessing when it softens the edges of the world, when it falls like a blanket trapping warm pockets of air. This snow was the opposite—it outlined the edges of things and made the town look meaner, bereft, merely tedious, like a mistake set down upon the earth and only half erased. (234)

It is in passages like this, rooted in ambiguity, that Edrich “makes the language sing” (Kephart). Goldberg, calls her an “incomparable poet of the Great Plains,” whose
command of the language “gives the book its power.” Here the snowfall reflects both the potential for peace of mind juxtaposed with a visualization of depression at the thought of loss after death in Argus. That connection, of course, contrasts with the young Swede’s verse in *Peace Like a River* which is general and sing song:

Now Sundown’s wound seeping and he’s tilting as he rides;

His eyes are red and gritty as he scans the canyon’s sides.

He hadn’t known the nature of the man whose track he sought,

And it sickened him to death to see the things that Valdez wrought.

One day an upturned stagecoach and its driver’s ghastly hue,

The next a blackened farmhouse and its family’s blackened too.

So many graves had Sundown dug, his hands are chapped and sore,

And now he prayed to God for strength to dig one more. (35)

These rhyming lines, of course, fit Enger’s context—the connection between Sundown’s quest and the family’s search for Davy, their hero, while uncovering an evil Valdez-like Jape. Though not great literature, the parallel to Davy is fun to read as Enger explores both “the loss of innocence” and “the goodness of men outside the law” (Pearson).

More important is the contrast between the overall themes. Whereas Swede strives to give a western epic dimension to Davy, her tale comes off as a lengthy “cowboy ballad” (“Big, Bold”). By contrast, Michael Rose sees Delphine’s actions akin to Ulysses. In a realistic way she undergoes all kinds of trials, including her bout with the sorcerer, Fidelis’s sister Tante, when she hides Eva’s morphine as the woman is dying of cancer. In this sense Delphine is an epic character whose strength is far more than a the human table on whose muscles she balances Cyprian, her lover. In a larger sense she
balances life and death. Such balancing, says Martin, is the “human dimension” of the novel, as it is a reflection of the author’s own life. All in all, Master Butcher is not magic realism, as is Peace—though Erdrich is capable of that in other books, like Bingo Palace, which is also a coming-of-age novel, but rooted in the very meaning of the land rather than just taking place on it. In Master Butcher she depicts on a land she knows first-hand the tragic effects of violence on people.

Finally, Erdrich dramatizes the violence that results from war, and what it does to families. And she writes about such heartbreak, says Minzesheimer, “without wallowing in it.” Passaro notes the text is both intimate and expansive, local and global—“like a fine-tuned instrument for the measurement of internal language and historical truth.”

Franz, Fidelis’s oldest boy, loves to fly and he loves Mazarine, who happens to be Delphine’s sister, though never knows it—which is a way Erdrich has of showing people’s unconscious interconnections. She later expands such interconnections grobally. In World War II Franz becomes an American fighter pilot, where he is shot down and watches his co-pilot disintegrate in the air (a curious parallel to Fidelis’s loss of Johannes in World War I). Later, Franz is accidentally hit by a cable which deranges him mentally, a striking blow to Mazarine, to Delphine (who has raised him and promoted his marriage) and, of course, to Fidelis. When times become difficult economically, Tante takes the twins to Germany where, when they grow up, both fight in the German army. Emil is blown up by a mine, and Erich is taken prisoner, after which he elects to remain loyal to Germany, a factor that practically kills Fidelis, as it undercuts his original dream of family, German and American. A unique aspect of the novel is the cruel effect of war on families that Erdrich details when their offspring fight for different sides. In an
interview Edrich claims “because war is an assault on humanity, it is an assault on children” (Ouellette 28), and the novel is a glowing example of that.

Here something must be said for Jeremiah in Peace Like a River in the context of the two violent deaths at the end—Jeremiah’s and that of the FBI Agent, Andreeson. In the Old Testament Jeremiah is called to preach to the Israelites, though they do not listen, and he wonders why God has abandoned his people, letting the wicked prosper (Jer. 12). In her mediation on this prophet, theologian Kathleen Norris says that she learned from reading Jeremiah that when we feel helpless about a situation, it is well just to “wait it out” rather than figure it out (38). In Peace, Jeremiah doesn’t try to figure out God’s ways. He is an exciting character whose faith is real, in spite of the disaster around him. He remains positive, indeed Christ-like, as when he miraculously heals the school superintendent who fires him from his job as a janitor. He also evolves, as when Andreeson takes him aside and shows him that Davy has broken the law and must be apprehended (cf. 245-46). Surprisingly, he marries Roxanna, thus giving the children a mother, who will carry on after he is gone. In short, he is an admirable character, able to change, and a sort of visionary. What is more, he warns his children in the beginning that we will “always be at war;” hence, he says, “arm yourselves” (4). Later, he postulates the “principle of escalation,” meaning that one violent act of retaliation results in a more violent response. He even adds a motivation for violence, namely, that one nation wants what another nation has, like “property” (22). These are insightful comments that might apply to anyone’s life, to war in general, to present day Iraq. But they are general statements, which only parallel Swede’s writing. Under the “Spell of the West, cast already by Mr. Grey” (37), she cannot kill Valdez (68). In short, according to
Jeremiah, evil is part of the human condition, so all one can do is face it, maintain family loyalty, have faith, and “wait it out.”

Jeremiah, however, does not change Davy’s determination for revenge, including (in Reuben’s mind) his brother’s contempt for the police who would excuse the boys Davy has killed (37). And though he remains faithful to his son, Jeremiah cannot change his son’s attitude, or stop the killing. His faith in miracles is admirable, and may help him cope with evil acts, though in the context of the novel, they lead nowhere. Truly, Jeremiah lives on an intangible level where he is primarily a motivator. In contrast to those who think he is “lost in the clouds, Wilkinson claims he has a “profound sense of human nature.” Crosby says the novel simply “transcends the world, a kind of inexplicable incandescence.” It is that element that gives the novel its appeal, however otherworldly. The result, of course—however one might admire the courage and determination of Davy— is that killing leads—indeed esculates—to more killing, and very little is resolved in the end. To the extent to which Jeremiah is a heroic figure, the book may be an evasion of any negative effects.

The most tragic result of the four boys’ war stories in Master Butcher is the toll it takes on Fidelis. He carries the burden born of the violence he experiences in many ways: from Johannes, to the death of Eva, to the change in Markus following his “live burial,” to the effect of war on the other three boys. It may be, as Allen says, that Fidelis emerges as a nonentity—“beefy, competent, inarticulate, emotionally limited,” where his masculinity is undermined by “a hidden vulnerability” that surfaces when “the family is severed at its roots.” Fidelis does deteriorate, though Delphine helps alleviate his burdens as their union deepens after Eva’s death. But his pain is deeper than their
relationship, and has to be evaluated in the context of the songs which predate their meeting. It is no secret that throughout life music brings tremendous emotional relief to one’s troubled psyche (Ode E2). If the music does this, in addition to bringing the community together, it might serve to cover Fidelis’s pain, even as one by one the members of the club disappear—Porky Chavers, Sheriff Hock, Cyprian Lazarre, among others. But the songs in themselves become a source of pain.

Before visiting Germany in the end, when Fidelis—meaning “forest bird”—hears the remaining club members singing, it might be an occasion for celebrating his love of people in general and the desire for peace—at home and abroad. Here, as in other Erdrich novels, music is crucial. But the songs, like the sentimental Lili Marlene, “the reproachful song of the enemy” fill him “with shame and anger” (338). These songs, and those as far back as the Lorelei, which he use to sing to the boys (290), only accentuate his grief, as though he, too, were lured into the mythological killing reefs. So this music is double-edged, for Master Butcher is a love story, or full of love stories, but each story includes heartbreaking pain. If there is a positive elements in them it is that, as in butchering itself, Erdrich affirms a higher form of reality, in this case, the survival of the human spirit following death (Zobenica). Still, the singing does not change what has happened—Erich’s continued loyalty to Germany and Franz’s fading from life in bewildered anger, where “part of Fidelis had gone out ranging with him” (377). Later, Fidelis dies not a heroic death, but a broken man, the father of a family he could not keep together.

Peace Like a River is an exciting story of a single family and their journey—across North Dakota, but also to paradise. Unlike Master Butcher, with its
plethora of characters and intertwining plots, Enger’s novel is easier to read—a single story of one family’s journey across the state. And it has its telling humor. The book starts out with a hunting trip. Here Davy, who always seems to know who he is and what to do, bags a bird on his first shot. Reuben misses several times when the birds are immediately overhead, and then, after firing from afar, wounds a gocse, that returns to “goose” young Swede, “its black beak pointed at her rump” (8). In a humorous way this event telegraphs the message of the book, namely that violence may come back to haunt the perpetrator. Indeed, nothing positive comes from the family’s trip out west to find Davy, except to affirm what Ogle calls “an unblinking allegiance to one another.” For Enger evil is a mystery, not something one can solve, and all one can do is pray. Master Butcher, though more complex, is more “this worldly,” more realistic, and more specific about the presence of violence. Though more taxing for the reader, it is also more historical, and therefore more penetrating than the more generalized “material for ballads” (Zaleski) as in Peace Like a River.

Erdrich is well aware of the effects of violence personally and in a historical sense. At one time Roy tells Delphine about her mother whom he calls Minnie (who is really not her mother). Minnie is an American Indian and a survivor of Wounded Knee in 1890. Here the ghost dance Roy describes, says Curwen, was “the last effort a destroyed and despairing people had to live with hope.” Still, it is a dance. What Delphine doesn’t know is that Minnie is really Step-and-a-Half, the dumpster diver who lives in the community on scraps. It is she who rescued Delphine from the out house and had her husband Roy raise her as his daughter. The effect of this story gives Master Butcher another kind of historical relevance. Kukatani says it unites past and present,
private and public worlds. In that sense it “transcends romantic love.” It is an answer to all who would promote war while calling it “a preventative war,” as with Iraq. It is still war, and it is the families who suffer, whatever their faith or their nationality. Erdrich in Master Butcher lays that suffering bare as she connects violence in a small community to violence world-wide. Curwen says Erdrich’s theme is “how can we live with the prospect of such dying, how can we love with the prospect of such death?”

It is interesting that the titles of the two books are tell tale. The title of Peace Like a River is taken from a poem by Horatio Gates Spafford (1873). It is about keeping faith, in spite of Satan’s buff, so that all is “well with my soul.” Spafford wrote the poem in response to a tragic fire in Chicago and a later shipwreck as a way of dealing with the grief that comes from loss of life. The quote is also found in Isaiah (66:12) and the text of the poem often appears in Protestant hymnals. If one reflects on the metaphor of the river, of course, the result might be that there is also a turbulence beneath the peaceful surface, which cannot be ignored amid the religious optimism. The book is not about grief after loss, but about miracles, as perceived by Reuben, so that there is a kind of “resurrection” in the end, suggesting that one must have faith, no matter what, even and especially following the loss of family members, like Davy and Jeremiah. What is not primary in this scenario is that violence in the first place was unnecessary, and it is unnecessary in the end. Here faith can become a boy’s dream (as it does a man’s memory, for Reuben is now older), much like the stuff of westerns, however unreal.

The title Master Butchers Singing Club has a different twist. It is significant that Erdrich leaves the apostrophe out of the title, so that “master butchers” becomes an adjective, not a possessive noun. What this means is that “butchers” takes on a much
larger meaning, however ambiguous. Fidelis was a butcher in Germany, both as a sniper and as a sausage maker. The novel as a whole is filled with “butchers,” from Wounded Knee to World War I and II, and maybe by implication the war in Iraq. Of the latter Don Wycliff of the Chicago Tribune writes that in spite of victory, there is “no hiding the deadly face of war.” He includes a few graphic photos of suffering civilians noticeably absent in American papers during the war. For Erdrich, slaughter in war is no different from violence wherever it occurs—from Delphine’s intended death, to the death of the Chavers, to Clarisse’s killing Hock, to Emil’s death from a mine. Whatever the motivation, such violence has terrible effects on families. One may sing to cover up the pain because there is a healing effect to music. Curwen notes in the novel “the dead are only one song away” and “in these songs is a deep spiritual hunger to bridge the gap between death and life.” Still, as Fidelis learns in the end, war is an assault on humanity, an assault on children,” and literature can only point out, says Franscell, where “death and survival dance.”

Both Master Butcher and Peace Like a River are set in North Dakota, one in the 60s, another in the Depression of the 30s. Both are about killing and the effects on family, though the violence in both cases leads nowhere. Peace, a shorter and more compact story, embodies in a philosophy of war, its motivation in greed, the escalation inherent in any attack on another. Most obvious, however, is the faith of Jeremiah, the story teller’s father, and the family loyalty that the killing engenders. If at a particular time there are no answers to cruelty, Jeremiah, like his namesake, would seem to answer “wait it out.” Master Butcher is more complex with many stories about violence and death. Erdrich is far more detailed in relating these stories, as though they were different
tunes, melodious variations on the dark theme of death. Enger’s answer to the reality of the evil of killing is faith and prayer. Erdrich’s is more rooted in the redemptive power of the arts, that is, vaudeville (Delphine’s balancing so many realities), drama (Clarisse and Delphine’s dialogue on McBeth), and especially music—the songs of Fidelis Waldvogel’s singing club.

If Jeremiah would have us survive through the miracles of faith, Fidelis’s answer to the horror of deliberate killing is rooted in liturgy, that is, songs, which temporarily bring together a community, no matter how alien its different members. While Reuben is the narrator in Peace, and Enger’s vision is filtered through an adolescent’s perception of his brother’s killing and its effects, Delphine Watzaka bears the most significant burden of grief and loss in Erdrich’s plethora of stories. She is the one who must balance, not only her vaudeville partner, and her alcoholic father, whose wife is a descendant of Wounded Knee, but Fidelis’s four sons, who fight in both America and Germany during World War II. In the process the family is severed at its roots, in effect, killing the master butcher. For Delphine, endurance is the only answer to brutality, not faith in God, a “creative genius,” but a “careless artist” who “lets the Devil shit on his most exquisite live works” (346). By contrast, it is the stories themselves that become the “songs” by which the human spirit survives the horror of death, whether in war or the small, rural, mythic community of Argus, North Dakota.
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