**JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST:** Hey friends, Jonathan Rogers here. I know a lot of you love Flannery O’Connor, and I think a lot of you love writing. So you’ll be glad to know that on June 4th I’m starting a six week online course called Writing with Flannery O’Connor. Each week, we’re gonna read one of O’Connor’s short stories and one of her essays on writing. On Thursdays I’ll give a live lecture. There’s gonna be writing exercises, online discussion, and lots of opportunities to connect with other writers. Find out more at thehabit.co/flannery  
  
(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC FADES UP)  
  
**JR:** Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I’m Jonathan Rogers, your host.  
  
(THEME MUSIC CONTINUES)  
  
**JR:** Leif Enger wrote the novels *Peace Like a River*, *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*, and most recently, *Virgil Wander*. He’s a lifelong Minnesotan, and his love of the people and landscapes of the upper Midwest is palpable in his writing. And contagious, if you’ll forgive the untimely metaphor.  
  
(THEME MUSIC FADES OUT)  
  
**JR:** When I called Leif Enger to record this episode, we just started talking, and he had so much great stuff to say that I couldn’t bring myself to interrupt him for my usual introduction. So let me say now what I neglected to say then: Leif Enger, thank you for making time to be on The Habit Podcast!  
  
**LEIF ENGER:** The thing that I love about the books that I love, um… is… that they are generally full of people I like in a place I don’t want to leave. And so whenever I think about, you know— I like a plot! I mean, you’ve gotta have a plot. But the plot is never what keeps me reading. The characters keep me reading, and the place keeps me reading. And there is something about all the places I have written about in books — tend to be here in the Midwest, and they tend to be places where I close my eyes and that’s just where I am.  
  
The north shore of Lake Superior is, one of these just, um… almost embarrassingly lovely places. It’s so pretty that there are places on the shore where it hurts your eyes. It’s too much. It’s just concentrated beauty. It’s like if you drove the A1, if you drove that seaside highway down — the Pacific Coast Highway, it goes hundreds of miles from Northern California to Southern California. And you took all the beauty that’s there and you just condensed that down into a couple hundred miles… boom, that’s the north shore.   
  
And yet you’ve got all of these towns where it’s almost impossible to make a living. It has been for decades. I mean, it’s such a boom and bust mining economy and shipping economy. And you want so badly for the people there to be able to make it, and yet, most of the time it’s really hard to do. So that’s a good inner tension I think. But place, for me, is just a real driver of what makes a good novel.  
  
**JR:** Do you, um… you said you love place, and you write about places in the Midwest. Talk to me about reading places that you, that you… that aren’t the Midwest. I guess…  
  
**LE:** Oh! Oh!  
  
**JR:** I love reading books that introduce me to places that I’ve never thought I’d be interested in. Like your book! I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about the Dakotas, except when I read *Peace Like a River*.  
  
**LE:** (laughs) Right! Yeah.  
  
**JR:** And the North Shore of Lake Superior… I didn’t even know it’s called the North Shore. Cause it’s not actually… it’s the north shore of… when you say the North Shore, it’s really the southern part of…  
  
**LE:** (laughs) The honest to goodness North Shore is in Ontario.  
  
**JR:** Yeah, that’s what I was thinking! (laughs)  
  
**LE:** Right, but here in Minnesota, we’ve got we call the North Shore, as opposed to what they have in Wisconsin, which is the South Shore.  
  
**JR:** Oh!  
  
**LE:** And so that’s sort of the dividing line, is you know, in Duluth, it turns from the North Shore into the South Shore as you drive east into Wisconsin.   
  
**JR:** (laughs) That’s funny.  
  
**LE:** And they have very different characters. The South Shore tends to be sand beaches, and the North Shore is just rocky outcroppings and cliffs and drama, and they both just have their charms.  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**LE:** But yeah, reading is just a wonderful way of travel, and I start to fall in love with different places. When I was on the search for Virgil, um, I just sort of fell in love with something called (inaudible) And I read all kinds of books that were set in the (inaudible) islands.  
  
**JR:** Did you say surfing culture?  
  
**LE:** Yeah. Um, because there’s a little surf culture that’s grown up here in Lake Superior. You know, these crazy individuals in wetsuits go out in November when the gales are high…  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**LE:** And the waves come in, and they’re 12 foot waves that come in and crash on the beaches. And these — mostly guys, but also a few women — are out there in their wetsuits with their surfboards, and there’s ice hanging off of their beards…  
  
**JR:** (laughs) Even the women!  
  
**LE:** And they’re out of their — yeah! And they’re completely out of their minds, and it’s totally wonderful. So I knew that I needed a surfer in the book, so I was reading about surf culture, and I began to really fall for the South Pacific where it all began. Um, and now, I know I’m gonna have to go and visit. When all this craziness is over and we can travel again, I’m definitely going to the South Pacific. I wanna see some… I wanna see some *real* surf culture that doesn’t involve ice.  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**LE:** And I think that’s what you’re talking about. Is just the ability to open some pages and fall into a different place that then you are loathe to leave. It’s what so much Southern literature has going for it, that sense of slowness and pace.   
  
There’s a great book by Larry McMurtry that he wrote in about 1962 called *All My Friends Are Going to be Strangers*.  
  
**JR:** Uh huh. I don’t know that book.  
  
**LE:** And I— oh, isn’t that a good book?  
  
**JR:** No, I said I don’t know that book. I’ve never read it.  
  
**LE:** Oh, you don’t know that book! I thought you said you loved that book. I think you might love it if you read it. It’s not one of his better known books. It’s pre-*Lonesome Dove*, you know?  
  
**JR:** Uh huh.  
  
**LE:** He wasn’t yet a household name, at least among writers. And this book is set in Houston where this young writer is a student at Rice University, and then he gets fed up with school and he leaves. He goes to California. He has a little adventure where he drives back to Houston. But his love of Houston is so beautifully explained, and you start to understand the sort of, um… the kind of lovely oppressiveness of the air, and how the whole city is low, and if there’s rain every parking lot is a foot underwater.   
  
And um, yet that whole atmosphere of it… he just adores… it’s like Houston is his best friend. And before he leaves, he takes a long walk through Houston, and the street lights are on, and there’s this kind of nice… smell… and he’s like man, Houston is my best friend! What am I gonna do when I’m not in Houston anymore?  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**LE:** And it’s really this — I’ve only passed through Houston! But now I wanna go and spend a little time. Books can do that for us in a way, um… maybe only the really best movies can do? Books are powerful that way.  
  
**JR:** Well, I think… I do think books have a power to make us… you’re talking about Houston is not the kind of place that people, well… usually it gets a bad rap. People don’t talk about how much they love Houston. They talk about how humid it is, and they talk about how bad the traffic is.  
  
**LE:** Right, right.  
  
**JR:** And I love books that make me love places that I wouldn’t know to love.  
  
**LE:** Yeah…  
  
**JR:** I mean, yeah, we talked about Bruce Springsteen a minute ago, and how he makes Jersey seem like… it would be so great to be from New Jersey. I just, you know.  
  
**LE:** Right! (laughs)  
  
**JR:** When I listen to Bruce Springsteen, I think, boy, what a place New Jersey must be!  
  
**LE:** Yeah! Did you ever watch Anthony Bourdain?  
  
**JR:** No, I didn’t.  
  
**LE:** That’s the feeling you get from a lot of his stuff. And speaking of New Jersey, and speaking of Houston and many other places, he had a way of going and getting in, and showing you a gritty side of a place that made you fall in love with it. I think that was his magic as well.   
  
**JR:** Yeah. Well, um… one thing that I’m very aware of in your work is a sense of delight. And again, looking at a place like… what’s the name of the town in *Virgil Wander*? Greenstone?  
  
**LE:** Greenstone, yeah.  
  
**JR:** Um, looking at this place that seems… unlovely or undelightful — at least the town itself, I know the surroundings are beautiful — and finding delight in that. It seems like an important engine for your work, and not just yours, but writing more broadly.  
  
**LE:** I think it really is. I think you can tell when a writer is working, um… with an accessibility or an openness to delight, and maybe when they aren’t. And I don’t always succeed in it myself, but mostly what I write for is to gain access to that sense. There’s a… just as an example, sort of how it transitions from life into work, Robin and I take long walks, as I was mentioning before, through Duluth. And a few blocks from our house, there’s a beautiful sort of small wilderness park called Tischer, and there’s a creek that runs through it, a beautiful, beautiful swift running creek that runs all year, Tischer Creek. It’s very pretty, and there’s a nice gravel path that runs along the side, and there’s bridges that go over it.   
  
And there’s a fox that must live nearby. I’ve seen this fox a few times. And foxes are clever, but this one does something I’ve never seen before, which is he hangs around this one part of the creek where there’s a backwater and a thirsty creature and go down and drink easily. And if you go down there, there’s a little wet sand and there’s mud, and you can see the tracks of all kinds of animals. There are deer and housecats and dogs and large birds and raccoons. But this fox that I keep seeing leaves no tracks.  
  
**JR:** Really.  
  
**LE:** So, two or three times, I’ve seen him down there, standing by the water, getting a drink, looking around. And I wait until he’s gone, and then I go down to find his tracks, ‘cause I like that language of animal tracks. And there just aren’t any fox tracks down there.  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**LE:** Somehow this fox, who is as real as you and me, has figured out how to not leave tracks. So I had this picture in my head of a fox drifting along the shore with his feet like a couple inches off the ground. And so delight is usually there, if you are willing to see it, and it’s usually free!  
  
**JR:** Oh yeah.  
  
**LE:** So I think this connects to what you kind of mentioned in your email, which is this state of kind of the givenness in the world around us. Which as I understand it just means the world as it is, instead of made in what we wish it was. But I think delight is that door that gives us both at the same time.  
  
**JR:** Gives you both what at the same time?  
  
**LE:** Both the world as it is and a little bit extra. Just a little extra. So the fox is there, but the fox is also drifting off the ground. You see what I’m getting at?  
  
**JR:** (laughs) I think so.  
  
**LE:** It’s like the world is solid and the world is corporeal, but it’s also ethereal and delightful. And I guess maybe there’s an imagination or a childlikeness to seeing the world that way, but that’s really the only reason I write. Is because I desperately need to be able to see both of those things, and writing is the only way I’ve found to do it consistently.  
  
**JR:** Um, sounds like going on walks or picnics is another way you get at delight.  
  
**LE:** Absolutely, yeah.  
  
**JR:** What are some other ways that you find delight?  
  
**LE:** Oh…. well, um… (pause) (sigh) I read a lot of books. Writers do it for me on a consistent basis.  
  
**JR:** Yeah.  
  
**LE:** Um, I… sometimes I read old favorites. Often I look for new favorites. I think that’s easier to do with books than it is with music. With music, I always find myself drifting back to tastes I acquired when I was in my twenties… or teens. I’m sure this is why oldies stations are so popular.  
  
**JR:** (laughs) Yeah…  
  
**LE:** Um, you know? Throw Tom Petty at me, and I’m just a pile of mush.  
  
**JR:** You know, that’s funny. I was just thinking about Tom Petty when you said that. I don’t guess I will ever outgrow Tom Petty.  
  
**LE:** I don’t think I will either. I mean, just… maybe my favorite songwriter. I adore that music. Whereas with books, you know, I can… I step back and read Charles Portis on a regular basis. I step back and read Larry McMurtry and Anne Tyler and so many books that I had when I was younger. But somehow with books, I’m also always looking for the next one I know is gonna be a favorite.  
  
Last year, I read a terrific book by Megan Hunter. This young writer, I’ve never met her, um… she wrote a slim little novel called *The End We Start From*…  
  
**JR:** Uh huh.  
  
**LE:** Which reads like a long poem. It’s a short novel. You can read it in one sitting. And it sounds like such a downer, but I was glued to it. It was mesmerizing. It felt like an epic poem. It felt like I was reading Homer.  
  
**JR:** Really.  
  
**LE:** And so, um, I can’t wait for her to write more books. Cause I wanna read ‘em, I wanna fall into that spell. And falling under a spell is… you know, that’s a pool of light, wherever you find it.  
  
**JR:** Yeah. I’ve heard you say something along the lines of the way you know what to write is what it is that you would like to read.  
  
**LE:** Yeah.  
  
**JR:** Which is another reason for a writer to read… um… seems to me the only reliable way of — that is the only reliable way of knowing what to write next. The only way to know what kind of— if you’re trying to write funny, all you’ve got is what’s funny to you.  
  
**LE:** (laughs) Yeah, that’s right! It’s incredibly subjective! And it’s uhhh… yeah, I don’t know… I don’t know how well… I don’t think I could ever probably just take the assignment of okay, write a book that will be comforting to people right now.  
  
**JR:** (laughs) Yeah.  
  
**LE:** Um, well, I have no idea! All I know is what I desperately want to read right now, and I’ve just gotta be willing to roll with where the story wants to go. Another thing I sort of admire is when a writer can map something out and say, here’s where this — man, I wish I could do that! Maybe it wouldn’t take me so long to write books!  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**LE:** If I could write an outline and stick to the outline, instead of abandoning it after 8 pages.  
  
**JR:** So, do you write outlines that you then abandon, or do you just not write outlines?  
  
**LE:** No, I write them. I just never stick to them. (laughs) Uhhh, I always have an outline, because a story appears with a certain kind of wholeness to it. At least, so far that’s the way it’s happened. Maybe one I day I will be able to do it differently? But right now, it’s… I’m just doing what I have.  
  
Here’s an example. Okay, book I’m working on right now. I’m about halfway done, and my narrator’s name is Ranier. He’s docked his old boat in a little town up the Canadian shore of Lake Superior. And… what can I say about Ranier? I don’t want to over explain it, so I’m not gonna tell you about the mission he is on. But he docks in this town to repair his little sailboat after a storm.  
  
He’s looking around for parks, and he meets this old guy who happens to be a doctor. Now, when I started writing about the doctor, I thought he was just there to take care of a cut that Ranier got on his eye during a storm on Lake Superior. Um, because he needs to see a doctor, and I thought well, here’s a role for this guy to play. But when I started to write about this doctor, it turned out that he’s kind of an interesting character. He’s got some trouble with addiction, and he’s got terrible eyes. And he’s kind of troubled and heartbroken about a situation in his life. So I kind of invested and I wrote about him.  
  
So now, it’s days later, it’s pages later, and Ranier by now has fixed his boat and he’s left the doctor behind in this little town. But I kind of think — now, I’m not sure — but I think that somehow that heartbroken Canadian practitioner is gonna show up again. Um… I think he’s got unfinished business. So we’ll see! Or maybe now that I’ve talked about it, he’ll just vanish forever. (laughs)  
  
**JR:** Yeah.  
  
**LE:** It’s unpredictable. But just the fact that I don’t know… um…  
  
**JR:** Yeah…  
  
**LE:** Allows for a certain delight in the work.  
  
**JR:** I like that.  
  
**LE:** I’m having enormous fun, partly because I don’t know how it’s all gonna turn out.  
  
**JR:** I love the idea that it is not knowing that keeps you going. And um… you know, that uncertainty, and leaving open the possibility that you’re gonna be as surprised as anybody else by this process.  
  
**LE:** Yeah. Exactly. That really makes it fun. That’s why a person does it I think. Just to see what happens! We’re hardwired for that. We wanna see what happens.   
  
**JR:** Yeah. Um, yeah, I won’t start writing a story without an outline, and the outline almost never turns out to be right.  
  
**LE:** (laughs) Yeah. I think… yes. Yeah. I know the feeling.  
  
**JR:** Yeah.  
  
**LE:** What are you working on now, Jonathan?  
  
**JR:** Well… um, the… I am working very slowly on a sequel to my last novel, *The Charlatan’s Boy*. And I’m slogging — slogging may be overstating the case a little bit — I’m just going very slowly on a sequel to that book. Um, yeah.  
  
**LE:** Is it difficult to go back to characters you have written about before?  
  
**JR:** (pause) As it turns out, yes. In this case. There’s been enough of a — I guess I keep considering the possibility that *The Charlatan’s Boy* was the whole story, and maybe it doesn’t, you know, require a sequel. Um…  
  
**LE:** Yeah. Did you write the novel thinking there would be a sequel?   
  
**JR:** Um… yes and no. I wrote the novel with a contract, with a two book contract, right? And so the considerations were more contractural than narrative in terms of… I mean… I was working from the assumption there was gonna be a sequel. Then I got to the end and thought huh, this is interesting. This kind of feels like… (pause) This may be the end of this story. And the truth is, I’m thinking of the sequel in many ways. It’s just another story about the same people. It’s just not exactly the same thing as a sequel.  
  
**LE:** That is the same thing as as sequel. There’s so much comfort about welcoming an old character, or sliding back into a world that you knew from your earlier work. That is a very attractive thing for me. I’m writing another Lake Superior novel, and I find the same thing. It’s like oh, man. I feel at home in this setting. And it’s very freeing. I mean, there’s a lot of scene setting that you don’t necessarily have to do. And you can close your eyes and smell that air and know where you are. It’s wonderful.  
  
**JR:** Yeah.  
  
**LE:** Do you come up with a lot of ideas and are faced with choosing the best one? Or do you come up with ideas quite rarely, and so you have to seize onto them and do the best you can?  
  
**JR:** I feel like, in terms of stories, I come up with ideas pretty rarely.  
  
**LE:** Yeah.  
  
**JR:** How about you?  
  
**LE:** Well yeah, that’s how it is for me too. It’s like a story appears when it has to. If I’ve been unproductive for too long, it’s like you open a drawer and there’s one story in there. And what are you gonna do with that one story? You do the best you can. People say, why did you write that story now? Because it was the only one there!  
  
**JR:** (laughs) Yeah, right.  
  
**LE:** I would love to be one of these writers who are, uh… I remember years ago reading an interview with John Grisham. And it was after *The Firm* came out, his first gigantic best seller. And he said, well, you know, I had six or eight other really terrific ideas after that, and I sat down with my agent, and we figured out which one was gonna be the best and the most commercial.  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**LE:** And I thought WOW! (laughs)   
  
**JR:** Yeah, I can’t imagine.  
  
**LE:** Amazing! I was deeply impressed. (laughs) It’s not that way for me!  
  
**JR:** Yeah, I read an interview in the New York Times about John Grisham, and this little anecdote just made me love him. He’d gone to New York for some reason, I guess to meet with his agent or whatever. And so he sat down for the interview with this reporter, and they went to some sort of fancy restaurant in New York City. And he ordered, he said, I’ll have, you know, gnocchi and… some other kind of pasta. And the guy says, you know, kinda in a… highhanded way, said, “You realize that’s two different kinds of pasta, don’t you?” And he said, “Yep! I want two different kinds of pasta!” (laughs)  
  
**LE:** (laughs)  
  
**JR:** And for some reason I love… these like… I want what I want. And… (laughs)  
  
**LE:** That’s wonderful.  
  
**JR:** I’m not nuts about his books. I mean, they’re just kind of not my thing. But this is a guy who knows what to do with his success, you know?  
  
**LE:** Yeah…  
  
**JR:** He’s also coaching little league and just being a member of his community…  
  
**LE:** Oh yeah.  
  
**JR:** And eating whatever he wants at the fancy restaurant in New York City.  
  
**LE:** Yeah, that’s very lovable. I’m just in favor of successful writers. I want them to keep doing what they’re doing. Any time I get a chance to listen to an interview with Stephen King, I want to take that chance, because I want to know what he’s thinking! (laughs)  
  
**JR:** You were asking the question of, you know, story ideas. Um… do you… I find it’s easy to come up with situations. Like, I can always think of an interesting situation that might be a story, but very few of those situations turn into actual stories with a plot and that kind of thing.  
  
**LE:** Yeah, yeah.  
  
**JR:** I don’t know if you experience that in a similar way.  
  
**LE:** You know… situations are the hard part for me.  
  
**JR:** Yeah?  
  
**LE:** Um… for me, the thing that comes first is usually a character who is in some sort of a jam. And once I have — usually a dude in a jam — I figure the rest will show up. And once a dude in a jam has a particular place, then I’m almost…  
  
**JR:** Almost there!  
  
**LE:** Um, but situations are, you know… the jam is part of it, but there’s always more. And then it’s just sort of letting them put your shoulder down and just barrel down through whatever they have to, and who they meet on the way, and how that person affects them, and who they fall in love with…  
  
You know, one thing I love to do — I bet you do this too — if I don’t know a character real well, I’ll just sit down and write longhand for you know 7 or 8 pages of just dialogue in which they’re talking with different people, so you start to understand their voice. Just let ‘em talk for a while, and then they sort of tell you what they’re interested in, and what they’re afraid of, what their high hopes are. How they’ve been disappointed. What’s the difference between what they wanted out of life and what they got.  
  
**JR:** That’s a great question to ask, by the way, for building a character.  
  
**LE:** It really is!  
  
**JR:** What they wanted out of life and what they got.  
  
**LE:** Yeah! I mean, what are the disappointments.  
  
**JR:** That would be a great question to ask people in general.  
  
**LE:** (laughs)  
  
**JR:** You mentioned you’ve been having kind of shallow conversations with your neighbors? Why don’t you just start asking, hey, what’s the difference between what you expected and what you got?  
  
**LE:** Well, mostly because I just don’t want to be a jerk… (laughs) But I always think, hm… because people are *so* interesting, and once in a while, you find somebody who’s totally open to that kind of question, and then you can jump in and go for it.  
  
**JR:** Yeah.  
  
**LE:** But you don’t want to just jump in and ambush people like that. (laughs) I remember one time as a kid, maybe high school, I went to this Bible study. There were a lot of people there. I didn’t know any of them really, except for a few friends. But there were a bunch of older people. I was 15 or so, and you know, most of the people there were adults. And somebody brought me in to meet this young guy who was like a divinity student. And they said, you’ve gotta listen to this guy, he’s something special.   
  
Um, and they sort of brought me into this circle. And I said, um… Hi! I’m Leif, you know. And he’s like, hey, I’m… Dan. I don’t remember his name. And his first question to me was… (pause) Is there a way you could serve God better than the way you’re serving him right now?   
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**LE:** (laughs) Then I thought… you jerk! You can't ask that question. You don’t even know me! (laughs) Now I think it’s hilarious! He was clearly there kind of upholding his reputation as a provocateur.  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**LE:** And he was a good one! I’d love to talk to him now and see what in the world he’s done with his life.  
  
**JR:** Yeah.  
  
**LE:** (laughs) But you don’t wanna be that guy.  
  
**JR:** Okay, alright. You talked me out of it.  
  
**LE:** (laughs) Well, of course he’s got a podcast. And on a podcast, you can ask whatever you want, because people are expecting your questions.  
  
**JR:** That’s true.  
  
**LE:** Do you like podcasting? I’ve been thinking about it.  
  
**JR:** So tell me about — yeah, yeah — tell me about the gap between what you expected out of life and what you got out of life. Can you tell me about that right now?  
  
**LE:** (laughs) Of course, I’ve never thought of that for myself, Jonathan!  
  
**JR:** Yeah, right.  
  
**LE:** Uh, no I… you know, I don’t think the gap is that great. Because I was taught from a very young age— look I was raised in the strictures of *Janteloven*!  
  
**JR:** What is that? I don’t even know what that is! What is *Janteloven*?  
  
**LE:** Oh, okay! Alright. *Janteloven* is a term that was coined by a Danish-Norweigian novelist during the 1930s. I think he published a novel in ‘36 called *A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks*.  
  
**JR:** Okay.  
  
**LE:** Great title.  
  
**JR:** Yeah.  
  
**LE:** And the premise is — the author’s name is Aksel Sandemose — and there’s a young man, the hero of the book, who lives in a town called Jante. J-A-N-T-E. And Jante is run by ten laws. Now I’m gonna totally screw this up because I haven’t read the ten laws in a while, but the first law is something like this… (long pause) “Don’t think you can tell us what to do.”  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**LE:** The second law is, “Don’t think you are smarter than us.”  
  
**JR:** Okay.  
  
**LE:** The third law is, uh, something like… “Don’t laugh at me.”  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**LE:** So basically, they’re all versions of the very same thing, right?   
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**LE:** And then there’s an unspoken but everyone knows it eleventh law. Which is… “Don’t think there aren’t a few things we know about you!”  
  
**JR:** Is this Jante or is it Lake Woebegon? It sounds like…  
  
**LE:** Well know, this is definitely where Woebegon comes from.   
  
**JR:** Yeah.  
  
**LE:** I did not know the term *Janteloven* until *Peace Like a River* was published in Oslo, in a Norwegian edition, and I went over for that. And I had dinner with my publisher one night, and he said, uh, tell me what your parents think of your books and your sort of success as a writer. And I said, oh, they’re very uneasy about it. It makes them real nervous.  
  
I told him about the fact that when *Peace Like a River* sold, my mom pulled me aside and said, “Hoping it will sell for just enough money to pay off your mortgage and not a penny more.”  
  
**JR:** Wow.  
  
**LE:** She said, “That’s what we’re praying for.” And I said, don’t pray for that Mom! Pray it sells for a million dollars!  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**LE:** What are you doing?! Don’t sabotage me! God answers your prayers. Don’t do that to me.  
  
I realized — I told my Norwegian publisher about this, and he burst into laughter and he said, “*Janteloven*. You know about *Janteloven*.” And I said, “I don’t know the term.” So he told me about it. And we uh… we laughed hard. Cause I realized absolutely as a person of Scandinavian success in the Midwest, I was raised under exactly those laws.  
  
**JR:** Oh wow. (laughs)  
  
**LE:** That… and it’s just fascinating. There are good things about it. Humility is just instilled in you. The first thing I remember hearing as a kid was the phrase, “Don’t be a big wheel.” (laughs)  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**LE:** I think, always believing I didn’t have it in me to be a big wheel, I haven’t had many disappointments. Everything has been extra. You know, the world is gravy to me. So no, I guess I don’t have many disappointments. But I think a lot of people do, because they are raised to expect bigger things than they get. Ummm…. yeah. That’s life.  
  
**JR:** Well, um… sounds like *Janteloven* would maybe equip a person to be receptive to the givenness of the world.  
  
**LE:** (laughs) I think so.  
  
**JR:** And be grateful. And to… yeah. Alright, I always end — and it’s time to bring this thing in for a landing — I always end with the question who are the writers who make you want to write?  
  
**LE:** Oh man, there are so many of them. There are so many of them, Jonathan. They’re all over the place. The world is littered with writers who make me happy and giddy and envious.  
  
**JR:** Yeah. Yeah.  
  
**LE:** Some of these are gonna be usual suspects. I made a little list so I wouldn’t forget about it. Um, you know, Charles Portis, who we mentioned before. Absolutely one of them. Um, every so often I pull down *The Dog of the South* just to read that dialogue between Ray Midge and Reo Symes.  
  
**JR:** It’s just incredible. I just read it about two weeks ago and just was blown away again.  
  
**LE:** Oh, it’s just hilarious. You laugh so loud you startle the neighbors.  
  
**JR:** Yep.  
  
**LE:** Or that part in *True Grit* where they’re tracking down Tom Chaney, and they lose half a day throwing corn dodgers in the air and shooting them with pistols.   
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**LE:** It’s just fantastic! Another guy is Walker Percy. I *love* Walker Percy, who wrote *The Moviegoer* and a handful of other luminous books. And I think he demonstrated better than almost anybody, this sort of absurdity and innate humor that goes along with being a person of faith, you know? You subscribe to this divine idea, but you’re also a corporeal being that gets hungry and horny and drunk, you know?  
  
**JR:** You’re a dog in a tuxedo.  
  
**LE:** Yeah, exactly! I mean, he’s funny and honest with himself and generous.  
  
**JR:** I love him.  
  
**LE:** Or Jim Harrison, you know. He’s another one. Uh, guy who writes with all this kind of specificity and, you know fearlessness…  
  
**JR:** I don’t know Jim Harrison.  
  
**LE:** Oh, goodness, Jim Harrison. He’s famous for *Legends of the Fall*.  
  
**JR:** Oh, got it. Okay.  
  
**LE:** It’s maybe one of the best 90 page stories ever written. Um… every time I read one of his Brown Dog stories — he wrote a bunch of novellas about a guy named Brown Dog in Michigan — uh, I think about that character for days afterward.  
  
**JR:** Huh.  
  
**LE:** He’s got this appreciation for beauty and good food and grasslands and rivers and open water. He’s got this wonderful skepticism toward… um, I don’t know, the authoritarian impulse in government and religion. And all of that is just… it’s air in your lungs.  
  
**JR:** Alright.  
  
**LE:** So it’s a long list. Nick Hornby makes me wanna write. Mary Oliver makes me wanna write. Who’s that woman who wrote *News of the World*? Um…  
  
**JR:** Proulx? Oh no.  
  
**LE:** No, that’s *Shipping News*. Her too! Paulette Giles wrote — Giles, that’s it — *News of the World*. Mark (?) makes me wanna write. George Saunders, who’s this incredibly generous writer. I love the way he thinks about people. Louis L’Amour and Michael Chabon and Mario Puzo and Ann Patchett. We’re just drowning in good stuff, Jonathan.  
  
**JR:** Oh, it’s an embarrassment of riches.  
  
**LE:** It is! Sometimes. I pick up my brother Lin’s novel *The High Divide* — I don’t know if you’ve read it or not.  
  
**JR:** I haven’t.  
  
**LE:** But it’s this epic, uh… family and ambition and violence and the last buffalo on the Great Plains in the 19th century. It’s the whole package. And sometimes it just makes me laugh to think that Lin and I have both gotten to be part of this tradition of writing and reading and publishing stretching back to… antiquity. I mean, how lucky are we?  
  
**JR:** Well, Leif Enger, I’m gonna tell you, you make me wanna write. I just love what you do…  
  
**LE:** Oh, that’s very generous.  
  
(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)  
  
**JR:** And I’m so thrilled to hear you’re in the middle of another novel. I hope you knock that thing out and I can read it soon.  
  
**LE:** Alright. I’m gonna do my best. Thank you so much! This has really been fun!  
  
**JR:** Yeah, thanks so much for being on The Habit Podcast, Leif.  
  
(THEME MUSIC)  
  
**DREW MILLER:** The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University to make this podcast possible. Lipscomb has graciously given us access to their recording studio in the Center for Entertainment and Arts Building. We’re so grateful for their sponsorship, their encouragement, and the good work they do in Nashville.   
  
Special shout-out as well to Jess Ray for letting us use her song “Too Good” as part of this podcast. Visit jessraymusic.com to hear more of her beautiful songs.  
  
**JR:** The Habit Membership is a library of resources for writers by me, Jonathan Rogers. More importantly, The Habit is a hub of community where like-minded writers gather to discuss their work and give each other a little more courage. Find out more at TheHabit.co.  
  
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(THEME MUSIC OUT)