

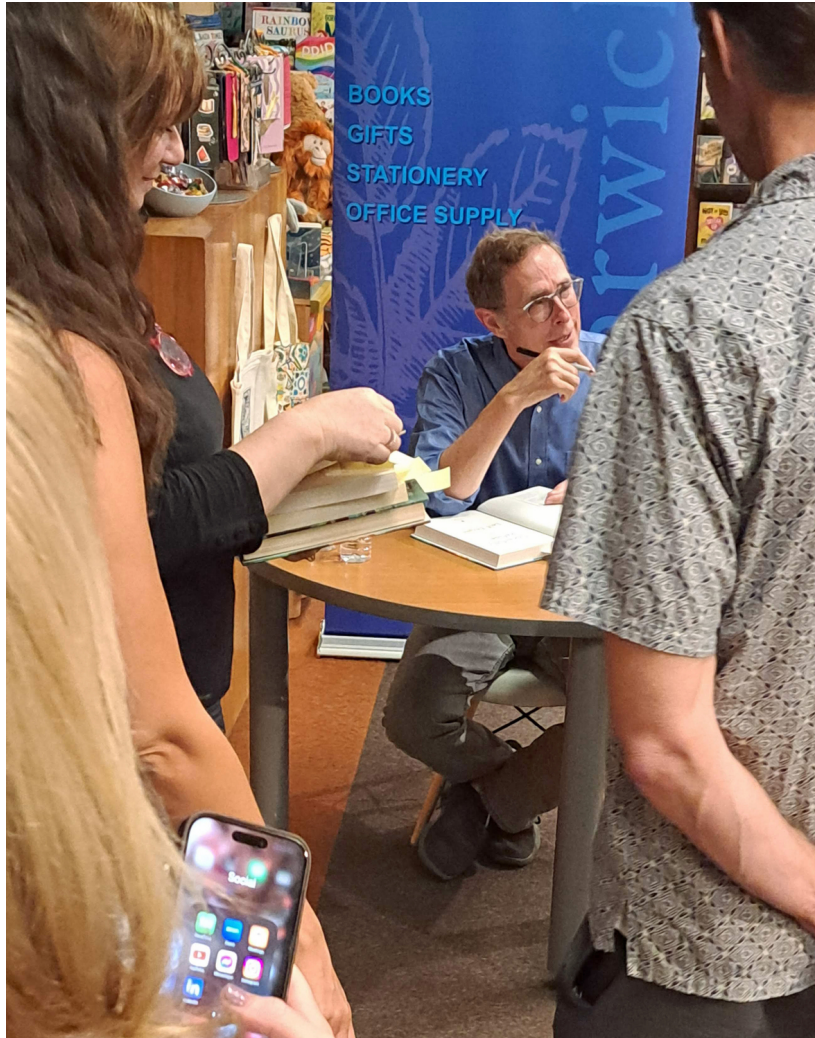
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Because everybody
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter



Cool, calm, and collected



Leif Enger talks to a reader during a signing at Warwick's in La Jolla.

Only the lonely know the way I feel tonight.

Roy Orbison was thinking about writers when he came up with those words. Well, he could have been.

Shut yourself up in a room for months or years, lay your soul bare on the computer screen or in piles of notebooks. Write words that express what moves you and arrange them in a way no one has thought to do. Gather the courage to submit what you have created to people who control the gates of publication, people you can expect to declare your work predictable, thick-witted, irrelevant, and pointless, even if it is none of those things. Assuming, of course, that they bother to reply.

Only the lonely.

Now consider Leif Enger, novelist and bass player, who surely must respect what Roy Orbison did for us, although I have not asked him that. When writing a book, such as the recently published *I Cheerfully Refuse*, he says that he

wakes before sunrise in his long, narrow home in Duluth, Minnesota, just a few blocks from the fearsome batter of Lake Superior. He makes his way along a second-floor hallway to the room where he writes chapter after chapter to describe worlds of his own making. To many people, that's your loneliness right there.

Not so. When we read his stories of souls interwoven, we travel with an apostle of amity, we explore the strength of the human web—even in the dismal land he imagined for his latest novel. It's a process that [has generated four books](#) in twenty-four years because, as Leif admits, he is not a fast worker (although during that period he sandwiched in a mystery coauthored with his brother). The wait is worth it because the sentences he eventually crafts are overwhelmingly magnificent. Can I frame them? Is there enough wall space?

I owe this rumination on Leif Enger to my longtime friend Luann. Years ago, she mentioned that she greatly enjoyed his books and that she was sure I would too. Luann is always right. Since then, I have read three of the four books, not a blistering pace, but understandable when you consider the reciprocity factor: Leif has sometimes taken ten years between books. I am also indebted to a listing of authors scheduled for readings that is published each Sunday in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, just below the bestseller lists. Leif Enger? How could I not go?

For the unfortunate people who have never been to [Warwick's](#), it is a fiercely independent, 128-year-old, family-owned bookstore in the Village area of La Jolla. The lusty, intoxicating smell of printed pages fills the space. When a signing is afoot on a weekday evening, the store closes at six p.m. so that wheeled carts of books and doodaddery can be pushed aside to make room for at least fifty or sixty folding chairs and a well-practiced routine of comments from the spotlighted author, questions from the audience, and book signings.

At seven-thirty on a Tuesday in June, Leif arrived at the podium in casual dress. He worked as a National Public Radio reporter for sixteen years in Minnesota before he became the embodiment of every journalist's dream to write books people admire and even purchase. His voice is reassuring, confident, and pleasantly free of insistence. You know, NPR. After he talked for a while, I couldn't picture him ever getting angry. He seems so friendly that I'm calling him Leif throughout this piece.

I Cheerfully Refuse is "fairly dystopian," Leif told those assembled at Warwick's. Midwesterners can be good at understatement.

He said his response to troubling events and societal changes is to write a story

about them, and so we have *I Cheerfully Refuse*, which he began to frame during the ominous early days of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The novel's dystopia is not the sort you can imagine taking hold after nuclear war, an unrestrained pandemic, or generative AI harvesting so many bad human ideas that it decides the world would be better off without humans. The book presents an insidious turn toward legislated ignorance. The world has become a place where libraries close, ideas are dangerous, and all but a tiny cadre of ultrawealthy scrape by on scarce earnings, barter, and pluck. Life is spattered with degradation, and some strangers who roam small-town streets are thieves or scoundrels. Others are murderers of innocents. It is a cautionary tale delivered without harangue, and it's impossible to overlook the idea that when the rule of law becomes the law of rule, democracies collapse.

From *I Cheerfully Refuse*: "The world was confused. It was running out of everything, especially future."

Leif talked of his joy in writing characters into life, especially Rainy, the main character in *I Cheerfully Refuse*.

"It was so cool," he said. He didn't want the writing to end because he felt cheered to be in Rainy's presence.

"I never enjoyed writing a story more."

The early morning start of work was a pleasure, he said, because when he approached his office, "I just felt like Rainy was waiting in there."

Rainy (short for Rainier) falls in love twice in Leif's telling. He falls for reading, a pursuit he avoided as a younger man, and then for a librarian/book collector/truth-to-power woman who becomes his wife.

Leif recalled when he fell in love with reading. Age eight, *The Wind in the Willows*.

"When it happens to you, you never recover," he said.

At its core, *I Cheerfully Refuse* is a road story packed with ancillary characters who play briefly on page and long in memory, but this road is the surface of Lake Superior, the inland sea that is beguiling and monstrous, depending on the minute. In this telling, Lake Superior is a character itself. In real life, Leif and his wife have sailed Lake Superior, which he describes in the book as a "three-hundred-mile stretch of malevolent spirit." He has walked the lake edge and encountered wrecked hulls emerging from the shifting shoreline. In the novel,

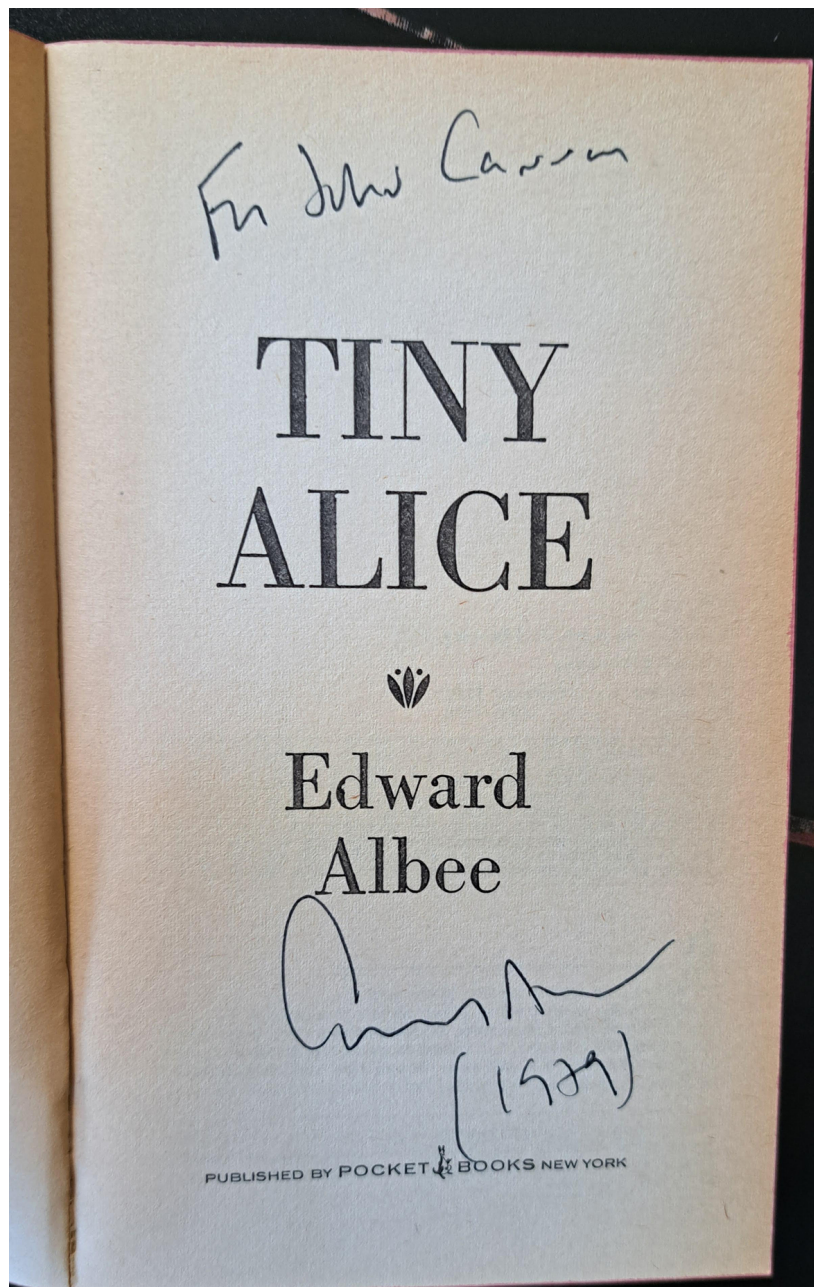
he posits that the lake is starting to yield the remains of mariners and others who disappeared into the lake's frigid depths over the storm-racked centuries and have lain undisturbed until the lake temperature began rising. Superior, it is said, sometimes gives up her dead, when the gales of November turn warmer.

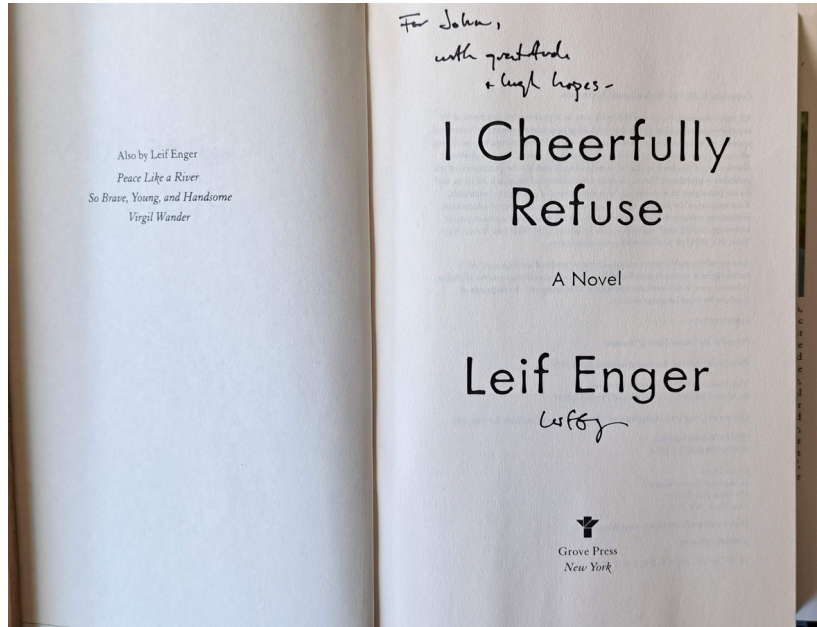
The book is sprinkled with unobtrusive references, and curiosities sidle onto the pages. Milton is not named, but that's him doing a guest spot. Leif told the Warwick's crowd that Huck Finn was an influence. Schrödinger's exasperating cat appears. Or disappears. Or both simultaneously, who can know? Orpheus has his mitts all over this book.

And *Don Quixote*. Many of the listeners at the Warwick's event appeared to have already read *I Cheerfully Refuse*. An attendee jokingly (half-jokingly?) chastised Leif for his book's blithe summary of *Don Quixote's* ending because she had long intended to read the classic. Four hundred years after Cervantes wrote one of the first modern novels, replete with phrases to tilt at, musicals to spawn, and the sidekick literary device that detective novelists still should be thankful for, Leif gets blamed for giving away the ending? Surely there is a statute of limitations on spoilers. Here's my crude summary of Leif's well-crafted reveal: Don Quixote gets sick, decides knighthood and related chivalry are dumb ideas, and dies. There. You don't have to read 1,000 pages unless you want to appreciate the artistry. Or you can leave *Don Quixote* shelved next to *The Iliad*, *Ulysses*, *Tristram Shandy*, and other books you tell people you will read someday.

I Cheerfully Refuse now appears prominently on my home bookshelves for a reason beyond its literary force. My book collection is not inspiring. It may not even be a collection. It includes a paperback *Heart of Darkness* with its original price printed on the cover: sixty cents—evidence that I never knowingly discard a book. But for decades I have harbored a treasure on those shelves. It is but a yellowed copy of *Tiny Alice* that dates to a college drama course, but unlike any other *Tiny Alice*, it bears the author's signature and personal salutation to me. That's right, [Edward Albee](#) wrote words to me personally. For forty-five years, it had been my only book signed by an author of national prominence. I acquired the signature in 1979 when the playwright came to downtown Aurora, Illinois, to help celebrate the transformation of the [Paramount Theatre](#) from a worn-out movie and vaudeville venue into a handsome performing arts center. I was working in the city then as a newspaper reporter, signed up for a workshop Albee was conducting, and acquired an indelible memory. In gestational, biblical terms, the Pulitzer and Tony winner explained the mystery of how his dramatic ideas arrived. At the right time, he said, he simply knew he was "with play." At the end of the event, I shoved that old *Tiny Alice* his way and he signed it with grace.

Now I have finally added a second book addressed specifically to me. Maybe I do have a collection.





Kind regards
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