

★ *I Cheerfully Refuse*

Leif Enger

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Illuminating a dystopian landscape with hope and love, Leif Enger's magnificent novel *I Cheerfully Refuse* follows a grieving bibliophile's sailing quest across the Great Lakes.

Rainy, a bear of a man born in a climate-changed time, faced a future of drudgery and subsistence. He was lifted from his procession of gray days by Lark, a kind, passionate librarian. He read all that he could to impress her. They built a happy life together on the shores of Lake Superior—she selling books, and he playing bass in a local band. Kindness was their credo.

But the arrival of a new boarder, Kellan—a probable escapee from a six-year worker contract; a brother figure carrying a rare manuscript, *I Cheerfully Refuse*—shattered their peace. Lark was murdered by those who pursued Kellan, and Rainy was forced to flee. He took to the lake in an inherited, patchwork vessel, headed for familiar waters: “If I were to see Lark anywhere, it would be in that place where the meteor struck and thinned the world, and islands rose to shelter tattered souls.”

The book's backdrop is a desperate one, marked by anti-intellectual political upheavals, indentured servitude, rashes of suicide marketed as escape, and oligarchical control over vanishing resources. Rainy encounters leaking prison ships led by villains who never sleep, who face no recourse for their misdeeds; he rescues a sharp nine-year-old, Sol, from the clutches of an abusive trader. He encounters grifters and murderous local dictators. But despite such travails, the novel revels in hope: Rainy trades music for assistance; he is sheltered by kind people; he is rewarded for past protections. With the words of Lark's books pulsing through him, he cannot fail.

Comet-bright and eloquent, *I Cheerfully Refuse* is a perfect novel that treats dystopian circumstances as transient so long as literacy remains.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March / April 2024)

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