



# AMERICAN GOSPEL

A NOVEL

LIN ENGER

AUTHOR OF *THE HIGH DIVIDE*

# A BOOK DISCUSSION GUIDE

for *AMERICAN GOSPEL: A Novel*

by Lin Enger

## PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“No one illuminates father–son relationships better than Lin Enger. He masterfully weaves a deeply moving and unforgettable story about faith, ambition, and the tangled threads that bind family and community. Wise and lyrical, *American Gospel* kept me spellbound from the first word to the last.”

—ANN WEISGARBER, author of *The Personal History of Rachel DuPree* and *The Glovemaker*

“A tightly constructed novel in which unexpected second chances lead to forgiveness, lost and found families, and enlightenment. *American Gospel* is tenderly written, expertly plotted, and culminates in an ending for the ages. A wonderful book.”

—NICKOLAS BUTLER, author of *Shotgun Lovesongs* and *Little Faith*

“Lin Enger’s *American Gospel* is a marvel, a novel of suspense featuring an unlikely cast of characters: a backwoods preacher in northern Minnesota whose near-death experience propels the plot; his son, a struggling journalist; and a glamorous movie star addicted to pain pills. A prediction that the Rapture is imminent brings them together, and each must confront personal beliefs as well as unresolved issues of their shared history. Long after its exciting climax, the captivating characters, vivid images, and provocative themes of *American Gospel* are sure to linger with readers.”

—LARRY WATSON, author of *Montana 1948*

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

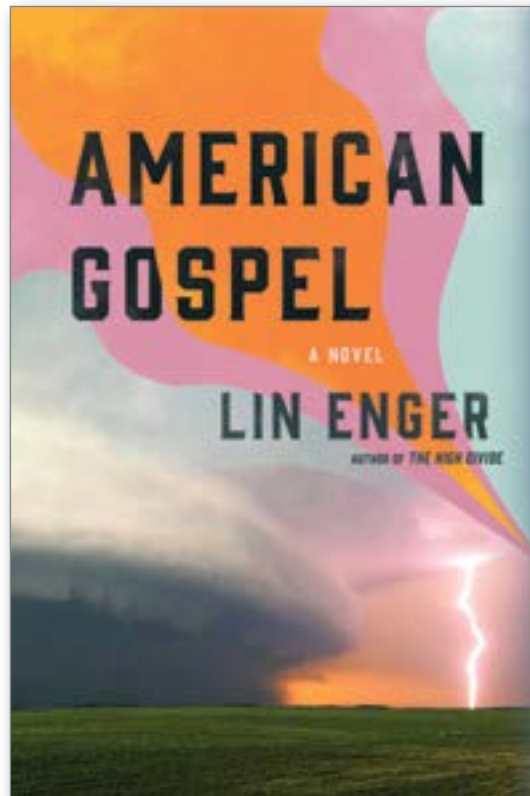
On a small farm beside a lake in Minnesota's north woods an old man is waiting for the Rapture, which God has told him will happen in two weeks, on August 19, 1974. When word gets out, Last Days Ranch becomes ground zero for The End, drawing zealots, curiosity seekers, and reporters—among them the prophet's son, a skeptical New York writer suddenly caught between his overbearing father and the news story of a lifetime. Into the mix comes Melanie Magnus, a glamorous actress who has old allegiances to both father and son. Meanwhile, Nixon's resignation has transfixed the nation.

Writing with clear compassion and gentle wit, Lin Enger draws us into these disparate yet inextricably linked lives, each enacting a part in a drama forever being replayed and together moving toward a conclusion that will take all of them—and us—by surprise. Set during a time that resonates with our own tension-filled moment, *American Gospel* cuts close to the battles occurring within ourselves and for the soul of the nation, and in doing so radiates light on a dark strain in America's psyche, when the false security of dogma competes with the risky tumult of freedom.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who is the main character in this novel? Which one has the most to gain or lose? For whom do you feel the most sympathy?
2. In what ways—culturally and politically—is 1974 a mirror of the present moment?
3. Predictions of a Biblical apocalypse (the Rapture; the Second Coming; Armageddon) are uniquely American and have been part of the national psyche since the early 1800s. Why do people in this country have such a fascination with the end of the world?
4. Why is Enoch upset about the Nixon resignation? How are his political instincts related to his religious convictions?

5. What does Enoch's prophecy mean to Melanie Magnus? What makes theirs such a complicated connection? Do you think Melanie will go back to her life in Hollywood?
6. Considering the way he was raised and his conflicts with Enoch, what are Peter's strengths and weaknesses? What factors seem to motivate the decisions he makes?
7. The killing of the lion is an important incident in both Enoch's life and Peter's. How do the two men see it differently? How does the lion's significance evolve?
8. Compare Melanie's relationships with Morris and with Peter. Compare Peter's relationships with Joanie and with Melanie. Do you think Melanie and Peter have a future together?
9. In terms of place, people, and culture, does the novel resonate with what you know about rural Minnesota, or rural mid-America?
10. How convinced (or not) are you by Melanie's claim of being healed by Enoch's prayers?
11. Discuss the roles of Victor Stubblefield and Skinny Magnussen, both of whom are outcasts in their own ways. How are these two characters alike and different?
12. Why do Enoch and Sylvie, apparently so dissimilar in their beliefs, seem to have such a strong bond?
13. How does the episode of the hog stampede anticipate the novel's climactic events?
14. Why is fifteen-year-old Willie the one who must finally take the lead in trying to save Enoch from the potentially damaging consequences of his prophecy? Why did no one else think of taking control of the situation?
15. What are your thoughts on the state of Enoch's mental health? In the final analysis, is he a character who does more harm than good, or vice versa?
16. How does *American Gospel* fit into the genre of apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic literature? Does it remind you of other novels in this genre?



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Lin Enger** has published two previous novels, *Undiscovered Country* and *The High Divide*, a finalist for awards from the Midwest Booksellers Association, the Society of Midland Authors, and Reading the West. His stories have been published in literary journals such as *Glimmer Train*, *Ascent*, and *American Fiction*. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, he has received a James Michener Award, a Minnesota State Arts Board Fellowship, and a Jerome travel grant. He teaches English at Minnesota State University Moorhead.

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## MORE INFO:

[z.umn.edu/americangospel](http://z.umn.edu/americangospel)