

Cold Millions by Jess Walter **Discussion and Reflection Questions**

Consider the following questions after you complete Washington's Big Read book, *Cold Millions* by Jess Walter!

1. In the first lines of Part One of *The Cold Millions*, Rye and Gig Dolan are introduced among many seasonal workers camping on an abandoned ballfield near the Spokane River, "...its infield littered with itinerants, vagrants, floaters, Americans" (p. 9). Why do you think Walter chose to include "Americans" in this list? What does being an "American" mean in this novel? To these characters? To you?
2. Discuss the significance of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the novel. What are their goals and how do they try to achieve them?
3. What are the different perspectives on the effectiveness and goals of the IWW presented in the novel?
4. Early Reston makes a case "...for making bombs instead of speeches" (p. 44) as the only feasible path forward in class warfare. Where do other characters fall in this debate? Does this change over the course of the novel?
5. Consider the role of violence in the novel more generally. Is violence ever justified outside of self-defense?
6. As Jules drifts in and out of consciousness in the city jails, he remembers the colonization of Salish lands by industrialists: "On the ground, they drove all the game away with hammering and sawing, they cleared the hillsides of berries to build more houses—they killed the world and called it progress" (p. 72). How might different characters define progress throughout the novel? Can you think of other times—in history, in other stories, in your own life—where different definitions of progress have led to conflict?
7. Throughout *The Cold Millions*, Walter shifts perspectives, giving voice to a variety of characters. What did you make of these choices? How do you think you would have responded to the novel if the story was told from just one character, or by an omniscient narrator? If the story was told in just one character's voice, whose would you want it to be?
8. "Rye wondered if loving another person was a trap—that eventually you had to either lose them or lose yourself" (p. 263). What do you think Rye means? Is Rye right—does love involve the loss of the self? Why or why not?
9. Discuss the ways in which the novel highlights the prejudice and discrimination faced by Black workers in the early 1900s. How do race, labor, and exclusion/inclusion weave together in the narrative?
10. The novel's two main female characters—Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Ursula the Great—each receive a fair amount of time on the page before they get to speak for themselves. When they do tell their stories, do they change the perception you've formed of them from others' narratives?
11. How does the novel explore the connections between the labor movement, socialism, and suffrage?
12. Explore the theme of free speech in the novel. How do the characters' experiences with censorship and suppression highlight the importance of this right? How does free speech relate to unionization and rectifying labor practices?
13. Gemma says of Jules: "I think he came to believe it was better to choose your life, and that even choosing your death was better than letting someone else choose your life" (p. 91). How is this reflected in the choices that Jules has made in his own life? Did the revelation of his true relationship to Gemma come as a surprise to you?
14. Throughout the novel, itinerant workers are a driving force within the labor movement. What stereotypes or narratives are projected onto these workers? Do you think stereotypes or narratives are still projected onto itinerant workers today? If not, why not? If so, in what ways and by whom?
15. Gig describes Spokane as "the Last Rush Town" and to Rye, Spokane feels like "the intersection of Frontier and Civilized, the final gasp of a thing before it turned into something else" (p. 27). In what ways do the novel's characters reflect—or change as a result of—the novel's setting? Could you imagine the characters, or this story, taking place elsewhere in the country? Why or why not?
16. Discuss how the historical setting of *The Cold Millions* resonates with the city today. What aspects of Spokane's modern-day identity—economy, demographics, social issues, cultural environment—can be traced back to the conditions depicted by the novel? In what ways has the city changed since then?

17. When Rye asks Jules for his thoughts on unions, Jules tells a story with a maxim at its center: “One man to a boat...We all go over alone” (p. 27). As Rye gets breakfast later in the IWW Hall, he looks around the room “...at his brother, at Jules, at Walsh and Little, at the porter Everett and the ranch hands, at a half dozen others in threadbare clothes and whiskered faces, this army of the poor and broken, in it together now, but alone, too, each man moving toward the horizon of his own end” (p. 33). Are there other moments in the book where you see this tension between the collective and the individual?
18. The story of First Ursula's creation of her persona echoes Gemma's observation, "What was life if not one invention after another?" (p. 96), as well as Del Dalveaux's statement that when Lee Brand hired him, he "...was hiring a story" (p. 155). How does this relate to the other characters in the novel?
19. Rye has his epiphany about the book's title—the “cold millions” (p. 105)—in Lem Brand's library; a few worn copies of *War and Peace* are Gig's most treasured possessions. Near the end of the book, Rye has begun to read Tolstoy and finds himself wishing he could talk to his brother about it until he remembers “...Gig hadn't read that far into *War and Peace*. Only he had done that” (p. 303). What role do books and literature play in the novel? Who had access to literature then? Who has access to it now?
20. When Brand tells Rye that he wouldn't ask him to “do anything that goes against your ethics” (p. 107), Rye wonders at the question: “Ethics? Did Rye have those?...He wondered just what sort of ethics a person needed to survive so long in cages with cougars” (p. 107-109). How do Rye's ethics change over the course of the book? What about the ethics of other characters? What forces shape those changes?
21. On the train to Missoula, Early tells Rye that “Everyone does everything for a little bit of money...you and your brother got yourselves arrested over what? A dollar!” (p. 176). Rye responds that it was not about the dollar, but about free speech: the difference between “...arguing for basic pay versus a guy taking money to sell out the people he's helping” (p. 178). What role does speech play in the conflicts that take place throughout the book? Are there any moments where speech is particularly powerful? Where the power of speech is weakened?
22. The main action in the book takes place during the free speech riots of 1909 and 1910; of the years that follow, Rye wonders “if the whole world wasn't collapsing. The news was all famine and influenza, murder and war, every day some fresh horror” (p. 325). How do you view Rye's concerns now that we have the benefit of hindsight? Do you see any parallels to current events, and/or current concerns about those events? Do these concerns feel similar or different in certain ways than Rye's concerns?
23. Through what means, besides money, did characters in *The Cold Millions* try to wield power? To what end? Were they successful?
24. How has the power of labor unions waxed and waned over the past century? How have you seen their reputation and economic power shift?
25. Near the end of the book, Walter writes that “...Rye thought that history was like a parade. When you were inside it, nothing else mattered. You could hardly believe the noise—the marching and juggling and playing of horns. But most people were not in the parade. They experienced it from the sidewalk, from the street, watched it pass, and when it was on to the next place, they had nothing to do but go back to their quiet lives” (p. 304). What historical events have you witnessed throughout your own life? Did you feel like you were “in the parade” or “on the sidewalk”? How might your perspective of an event have shifted if you were “inside” it? If you were watching it pass?
26. In the afterword of the book, Walter notes that *The Cold Millions* is “...a fictionalized story [set] among real historical figures and events” (p. 339). How do fiction and history interact within the book? Did it change your reading of the book to know that certain characters were real historical figures? Did you learn something new about these historical figures?

Questions 1, 4, 6-7, 10, 13-15, 17-23, and 25-26 are courtesy of HarperCollins and the National Endowment for the Arts.