

The Cold Millions

Harper Perennial

By Jess Walter

ISBN: 9780062868091

Introduction

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

A Best Book of the Year: *Bloomberg* | *Boston Globe* | *Chicago Public Library* | *Chicago Tribune* | *Esquire* | *Kirkus* | *New York Public Library* | *New York Times Book Review* (Historical Fiction) | *NPR's Fresh Air* | *O Magazine* | *Washington Post* | *Publishers Weekly* | *Seattle Times* | *USA Today*

A Library Reads Pick | An Indie Next Pick

From the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Beautiful Ruins* comes another “literary miracle” (NPR)—a propulsive, richly entertaining novel about two brothers swept up in the turbulent class warfare of the early twentieth century.

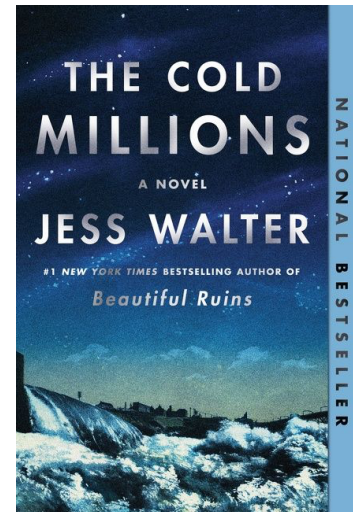
An intimate story of brotherhood, love, sacrifice, and betrayal set against the panoramic backdrop of an early twentieth-century America that eerily echoes our own time, *The Cold Millions* offers a kaleidoscopic portrait of a nation grappling with the chasm between rich and poor, between harsh realities and simple dreams.

The Dolans live by their wits, jumping freight trains and lining up for day work at crooked job agencies. While sixteen-year-old Rye yearns for a steady job and a home, his older brother, Gig, dreams of a better world, fighting alongside other union men for fair pay and decent treatment. Enter Ursula the Great, a vaudeville singer who performs with a live cougar and introduces the brothers to a far more dangerous creature: a mining magnate determined to keep his wealth and his hold on Ursula.

Dubious of Gig’s idealism, Rye finds himself drawn to a fearless nineteen-year-old activist and feminist named Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. But a storm is coming, threatening to overwhelm them all, and Rye will be forced to decide where he stands. Is it enough to win the occasional battle, even if you cannot win the war?

Questions for Discussion

1. The book opens with a first-person narrator—Officer Waterbury—who is killed at the end of his brief section. Why do you think the author chose to start the book this way? Did you find it effective?



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2. The character Jules says, "People expect a story to always mean the same thing, but I have found that stories change like people do." While the story of the novel's hero, Rye Dolan, is told primarily in the third person, his narration is interwoven with chapters from the first-person perspective of supporting characters. Why do you think the author chose to structure the novel in this way? How does this choice relate to Jules' observation?
 3. Debating with Gig, Early Reston says, "I just don't see how you fight a class war without the war." This is a persistent theme throughout the novel—bombs versus speeches. Where do you think the author falls in this debate? What are your own thoughts?
 4. At one point in the novel, we read 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." Discuss.
 5. The main action in the book takes place during the Free Speech riots of 1909 and 1910; of the years that follow, Rye observes, "I wondered if the whole world wasn't collapsing. The news was all famine and influenza, murder and war, every day some fresh horror." What parallels do you see to current events? Does the novel's historical lens provide you with any insight into what is happening today?
 6. Rye has his epiphany about the "cold millions" of the title in Lem Brand's library; *War and Peace* plays a supporting role in the novel. Discuss the role of books and literature in the novel. What is the symbolism of the fact that Gig's "prized possession" consists of volumes 1 and 3 of *War and Peace*, "two fifths of the finest novel ever written"?
 7. At one point, Early Reston asks Rye, *Who are you?* and Rye concedes that it was a fair question; at another point, when asked to identify himself, he claims that he's 'not anything.' At the end of the novel, Fred Moore tells Rye that "She [Gurley Flynn] always believed, as I did, that you were a pawn in the other side's treachery." Rye himself wonders about Ursula—and by extension himself—"just what sort of ethics a person needed to survive so long in cages with cougars." How does Rye's identity evolve over the course of the novel? Do his 'ethics' change?
 8. Early in the narrative, Rye notes that "when Gig was smitten, by cause or by woman, there was no sense in him"; he also notes that he "didn't like it when Gig ran with these union types; he thought their revolutionary banter half foolish and half dangerous and was never quite sure which was which." And yet Rye is drawn into the cause alongside his brother. Discuss.
 9. Water is at the center of the narrative, both literally and figuratively. In telling his story about running the ferry, Jules observes, "One man to a boat.... We all go over alone." Rye notes of Jules's stories that the "meaning was like an undercurrent beneath the surface." Discuss.

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. The story of First Ursula's creation of her persona echoes Gemma's observation, "What was life if not one invention after another?" How does this relate to the other main characters in the novel?
12. Ursula the Great observes that "a woman owns nothing in this life except her memories" several times, and yet when Rye goes to offer her money after Gig's death, she is the only one to refuse him, telling him that she "owned the hotel free and clear now." What changes for Ursula, and how does she help effect that change?
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." How is this reflected in the choices the reader realizes Jules has made in his own life? Did the revelation of his true relationship to Gemma come as a surprise to you?
14. Lem Brand describes Early Reston as a "detective posing as an anarchist or an anarchist posing as a detective. The stories you hear: that he's an agent who got in so deep he forgot which side he was on. Or that he was never on a side." Early Reston says of himself: "I'm on *my* side, Rye. Always have been. Like any man, if he's being honest." Discuss.
15. How are Del Dalveaux and Early Reston similar, and how are they different? Did you find that you had sympathy for either character?
16. Thinking back about Gurley Flynn, Rye says, "I knew cops and killers, detectives and anarchists, and not one of them had her strength, could have done what she did." And yet he also notes that "It didn't matter what he did, what Gurley did, what Fred Moore did, what any of them did. Somewhere there was a roomful of wealthy old men where everything was decided." Do you agree with him?
17. The epigraph to the epilogue comes from Tolstoy: "Life did not stop, and one had to live." How does this fit with what follows, in which Rye finally speaks in the first person? Did you like knowing what happened in the aftermath of the novel's main events?
18. Remembering Gurley, Rye writes: "'Men sometimes say to me: *You might win the battle, Gurley, but you'll never win the war.* But no one wins the war, Ryan. Not really. I mean, we're all going to die, right? But to win a battle now and then? What more could you want?'" Discuss.