

## The Cold Millions Discussion Questions

1. Throughout *The Cold Millions*, the author Jess Walter shifts perspectives, giving voice to a variety of characters. Why do you think the author chose to structure the novel in this way? If the story had been told in just one character's voice, whose would you want it to be?
2. How would you characterize Rye's personality? Is he a cynic, a realist, or something else? Do you get a sense of his convictions by the end of the book?
3. How do Gig's personality and convictions contrast with Rye's? Which of the young men would you want to have alongside you in a protest movement?
4. 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? What are their similarities and differences?
5. From page 18: "Rye had an insight that felt like a reverie, that, man or woman, Catholic or Prod, Chinese, Irish, or African, Finn or Indian, rich or poor, the world is built to eat you alive, but before you go down the gullet, the bastards can't stop you from looking around." What does Rye's insight mean to you? How are the themes of freedom and self-determination portrayed by various characters in the book?
6. What stereotypes or narratives are projected onto the itinerant workers in the book? Do you think these stereotypes are still projected onto itinerant workers today? If so, in what ways and by whom?
7. The free speech fight of 1909 depicted in the book was instrumental in allowing workers to unionize and protest unfair labor practices. Our right to freedom of expression and association enshrined in the 1st Amendment has been challenged and redefined throughout history. In what ways are those rights being challenged today?
8. Over the course of American history, how have unions and the labor movement helped all workers?
9. Does reading historical fiction provide you with perspective on current events?
10. The IWW was known for accepting people of all races and cultures into their ranks and promoting big societal changes. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn herself spoke passionately about the need to make the world a better place for women, people of color, and the poor. Other union leaders of the time wanted to raise wages but did not condone what

they viewed as her revolutionary fervor. What are the pluses and minuses of each viewpoint?

11. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn says to Rye, "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?" Do you find this to be a hopeful sentiment? Does this notion inspire you in your own activism?

12. 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?