

## BOOK REVIEW

# Working on union blues in 'The Cold Millions'

By **Dan Cryer** Globe correspondent, Updated October 22, 2020, 5:49 p.m.

Each Jess Walter novel emerges from a strikingly different region of his imagination. His best, by far, is the National Book Award finalist "[The Zero](#)," which portrayed a New York City police detective caught up in a nightmarish web of conspiracies jump-started by the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Working on the pile at Ground Zero punched "gaps" in Brian Remy's consciousness. He can't remember why he's doing something or how he got somewhere. Assigned to a bizarre spy mission by either the FBI or CIA, or both, he figures "maybe we are all like people in dreams now ... aware that something isn't right." The book brilliantly evokes the nation's post-9/11 confusion and anxiety.

In Walter's latest novel, "[The Cold Millions](#)," Steinbeck has replaced Kafka as his muse. Following two working-stiff brothers in Spokane, Wash., during the labor-union battles of the early 20th century, it cheers unabashedly for the down-and-outers — the "cold millions" — driven to desperation by terrible working conditions. Like Steinbeck's Okies pushed out of Oklahoma for California, Walter's protagonists are hard-working miners and loggers who drift wherever they can find a job, only to end up scorned by the well-off as tramps. What "isn't right" in this story is the tyranny of inequality and injustice.

Gregory (Gig) Dolan functions as 23-year-old surrogate father for Ryan (Rye) after the death of their parents in Montana. Rye is a naive 17-year-old. Gig is drawn to the one-big-union appeal of the International Workers of the

World (IWW), nicknamed the Wobblies. An idealistic advocate of nonviolence, he believes that “whoever fights monsters should see to it that ... he does not become a monster.” Teenaged Rye doesn’t know what to believe.

The union busting deployed in this era, vividly depicted by Walter, is blatantly physical. Cops and private security goons bash heads, arrest peaceful demonstrators, and sometimes kill those who dare to try to organize. “Free speech” can cost life and limb.

Into this volatile environment, Walter inserts several real historical figures, notably, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. A New York City native and fiery orator on behalf of the Wobblies — by the 1930s, she would gravitate to the Communist Party — she’s only 19 when she arrives in Spokane in 1909. And she’s pregnant, having left her husband behind in another state. On several counts, she’s persona non grata to the city’s movers and shakers.

Tycoon Lemuel Brand, aided by his mistress, who performs as Ursula the Great in a vaudeville show, hires spies and thugs to keep his companies union-free. On the other side, aligned with Gig and the IWW, are Jules, a Yakima miner, and Early Reston, a roughneck skeptical of Gig’s commitment to nonviolence.

Rye, very much a work in progress, is the novelist’s linchpin tying the story’s elements together. To his surprise, he finds himself recruited to accompany Flynn, raising money across the West to hire the famous Clarence Darrow as the IWW’s defense lawyer. Rye has never been so close to a woman, let alone to such a charismatic personality. Awed by her oratory, energy, and beauty, he feels like he’s been “swept up in a typhoon.” Yet desperate to get his brother out of jail, he falls prey to choices that will haunt him forever.

Walter’s empathy for these characters is palpable. In one nose-pressed-to-the-glass scene, Rye peers into a clothing store at fine leather gloves he cannot afford. He’s shivering in the cold, dressed in tatty Salvation Army clothes. With twenty dollars from a benefactor, the equivalent of two months' pay, he resolves to buy two pairs, one for himself and one for his jailed brother.

Gig, a self-taught intellectual, has been reading "[War and Peace](#)." Once he's in custody, Rye picks up the volume and begins to understand that he, too, however small and insignificant, is part of an epic story.

"History was like a parade," Rye muses. "When you were inside nothing else mattered. You could hardly believe the noise. ... But most people were not in the parade. They experienced it from the sidewalk ... and when it was on to the next place, they had nothing to do but go back again to their quiet lives."

In subplots, the author alludes to other blemishes on America's national narrative. Spokane itself is built on the former hunting grounds of slaughtered Native Americans. And his female characters endure all the restrictions common to the era.

Jess Walter is a superb storyteller. His plot rolls on at a steady pace. His ear for dialogue, whatever the character, is acute. He knows when to amp up the prose with a telling metaphor.

All of Walter's virtues have been on display in his previous novels. In the meantime, his gift for satire, previously put to good use in "Zero" and in "[Beautiful Ruins](#)," partially a spoof of Hollywood inanities, has been set aside.

As polished and hard as a diamond, "The Cold Millions" reminds us of America's tempestuous past and suggests that all this is anything but past.

## **THE COLD MILLIONS**

By Jess Walter

Harper, 339 pp., \$28.99

Dan Cryer is the author of a biography, "[Being Alive and Having to Die: The Spiritual Odyssey of Forrest Church](#)," and a memoir, "[Forgetting My Mother: A Blues From the Heartland](#)."

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