

The Cold Millions by Jess Walter:

*Discussion Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. How are Del Dalveaux and Early Reston similar, and how are they different? Did you find that you had sympathy for either character?
6. 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?
7. 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?