

CULTURE

Labor novel of the year

The Cold Millions, by bestselling author Jess Walter, chronicles the Wobbly free speech fights of 1909 Spokane, with a cast of historical IWW leaders, frontier brothel madams, silver mine millionaires and labor goons.

By Marcus Widenor

Today, Seattle is a hub for the high-tech global economy. But at the turn of the 20th century, Spokane occupied a similar place in American capitalism. With seven freight and passenger lines converging there, it was the the busiest terminal west of Chicago. Spokane connected the fields of California, the forests of Oregon and Washington, and the mines of Idaho and Montana to the rest of the country. Workers mustered out for jobs and wintered there, creating a culture steeped in the radicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which organized them without regard for their skin color or national origins, unlike the conser-

vative American Federation of Labor.

Enter Irish-American brothers Gig and Ryan, living in a boarding house and waiting to land the next job. To get it, they'll have to pay off a "job shark"—a labor contractor who manages the workforce for Spokane's industrialists, taking a cut while blacklisting those suspected of union sympathies.

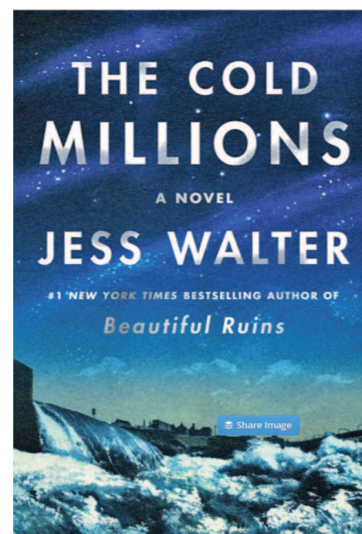
Gig is a Wobbly (a nickname given to IWW members) and when he is arrested for speaking against the labor contractors from a soapbox in downtown Spokane, his 16-year-old younger brother Ryan gets up right behind him and is hauled off to jail too. They join hundreds of IWW members who have filled Spokane's jails, using their First Amendment rights as a way to fight oppression.

Ryan is released, and promptly enlists in Spokane's class war as the Wobblies battle labor spies and goons hired by employers. While Gig sits in

jail, Ryan is befriended by 19-year-old Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "The Rebel Girl" in Joe Hill's famous song. Newly arrived from New York via Missoula, Flynn is six months pregnant, which disconcerts some senior male IWW officials. A charismatic feminist, Flynn is determined to raise money to fund the free speech battle in Spokane, and takes Ryan along on a Pacific Northwest speaking tour. Ryan gets a quick education in organizing tactics and the ethical calculus of "which side are you on?"

There's a rich cast of characters here, including a Salish Indian named Jules, the mysterious militant Early Reston, devious industrialist Lemuel Brand, and Ursula the Great, a music hall artist whose risqué act involves a caged cougar. And there's mystery as well. Ryan, and the reader, must figure out who the employer informants are. Is Early Reston an anarchist, a police provocateur, or both?

One of my favorite characters is the cynical alcoholic Al Devaux, a former Pinkerton, now freelance gun thug. Walters



channels Dashiell Hammett's life and first novel (Red Harvest, 1929), giving us a riveting portrait of a ruthless enforcer, for hire by any employer at the right price. In the hands of a lesser writer this character might be a noir cliché, but he's so well realized here that he is completely believable.

Ryan hasn't thought much about history, social movements, or his place in the world. He must decide if he believes the cynical militant Early Reston, who says that everyone's in it for themselves, or Gurley, the utopian who seeks to remake

the world. And what compromises will he need to make to get his brother out of jail? Gurley is the historical figure at the center of the novel, but it's the teenager Ryan who carries the story's dramatic tension.

The Cold Millions is an exciting, balanced novel based on solid historical scholarship. I particularly enjoyed the attention Walter pays to the details of 1909 Spokane, its neighborhoods, ethnic groups and class character, and to the Wobbly vernacular—the peculiarly Western American rhetoric of popular resistance to oppression. For an inspiring story of labor struggles here in the Northwest, you can't go wrong with this novel.

Marcus Widenor is a former labor organizer and associate professor emeritus at the University of Oregon's Labor Education and Research Center.

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