

# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *The Cold Millions* by Jess Walter

### About the Author

#### Jess Walter (b. 1965)



A former National Book Award finalist and winner of the Edgar Allan Poe Award, Jess Walter is the best-selling author of seven novels, two book of short stories and one nonfiction book. His work has been translated into 34 languages, and his fiction has been selected three times for *Best American Short Stories*, as well as the Pushcart Prize and *Best American Nonrequired Reading*. His stories, essays and journalism have appeared in, *Harper's*, *Esquire*, *Playboy*, *McSweeney's*, *Tin House*, *Ploughshares*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and many others.

Walter began his writing career in 1987 as a reporter for his hometown newspaper, *The Spokesman-Review*. He was a finalist for the 1992 Pulitzer Prize as part of a team covering the shootout and standoff at Ruby Ridge, in Northern Idaho. This became the subject of Walter's first book, *Every Knee Shall Bow*, in 1995. He has also worked as a screenwriter and has taught graduate creative writing at the University of Iowa, Pacific University, Eastern Washington and Pacific Lutheran.

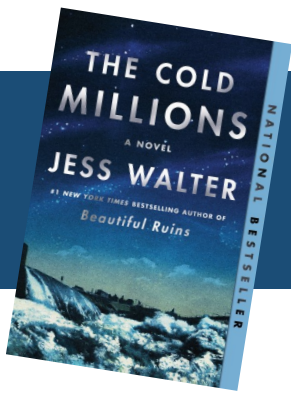
Walter has twice won the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award (for *The Zero* and *We Live in Water*), the Washington State Book Award (*The Cold Millions*) and was a finalist for the L.A. Times Book Prize (*The Zero*) and the PEN/USA Award in both fiction (*The Zero*) and nonfiction (*Every Knee Shall Bow*). His novel *Beautiful Ruins* was a #1 *New York Times* bestseller and spent more than a year on the bestseller list. It was also *Esquire's* Book of the Year and NPR *Fresh Air's* Novel of the Year. *The Financial Lives of the Poets* was *Time Magazine's* #2 novel of the year and Walter's story collection, *We Live in Water*, was longlisted for the Story Prize and the Frank O'Connor Short Story Award. Walter's latest book is a collection of short fiction titled *The Angel of Rome and Other Stories*.

Walter lives with his wife Anne and children, Brooklyn, Ava, and Alec, in Spokane, Washington.

(Biography taken from [www.jesswalter.com](http://www.jesswalter.com).)



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### Discussion Questions

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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
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?
5. 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?
6. How are Del Dalveaux and Early Reston similar, and how are they different? Did you find that you had sympathy for either character?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

(Discussion questions from HarperCollins Publishers.)