



Discussion Questions for *The Milagro Beanfield War* by John Nichols

John Nichols: A Brief Biography

John Nichols was born in 1940 in Berkeley, California. While living in New York City during the 1960s, he became a prolific fiction writer and ardent antiwar activist. Unfortunately, his novels were not achieving the success he had hoped for and his marriage was in crisis, leading him to leave the East Coast in 1969. He headed for Taos, New Mexico, with his wife, Ruby, and his son, Luke. Nichols soon launched a muckraking journal and became active in a group called the Tres Ríos Association, which challenged a proposed conservancy district and the building of the Indian Camp Dam. *The Milagro Beanfield War* was born during this period of Nichols's life; he produced the five-hundred-page draft in forty days on a rickety Hermes Rocket typewriter. Nichols was thirty-four years old when the book was published. Over the past three decades, it has evolved from being a regional cult favorite to a classic of American literature.

The first volume in Nichols's New Mexico Trilogy, this is the story of Joe Mondragón, a cantankerous thirty-six-year-old hustler with a talent for trouble who impulsively decides to illegally water his father's bean field by tapping the main irrigation channel of Milagro, his tiny hometown. This act pits local farmers and sheepmen, who have lost their rights and their lands over the years, against Ladd Devine the Third, a local despot and would-be developer of the Miracle Valley Recreation Area. As their patchwork war unfolds, Nichols blends a comedy of errors with a stinging indictment of those who would put commercial progress before the lives of individuals.

Nichols has published a total of six nonfiction books and nine novels, including *The Magic Journey* and *The Nirvana Blues*, the two other volumes in the trilogy begun with *The Milagro Beanfield War*. He lives in northern New Mexico.

Discussion Questions

1. How can the story of Joe Mondragón's bean field be applied to current clashes between independent landowners and developers? How does the tiny town of Milagro reflect current disputes in borderlands around the world?
2. What role do outsiders play in the Milagro war? How are Bloom and Goldfarb received? Did their lives on the East Coast prepare them for what they would encounter in the Southwest?
3. How does Bernabé Montoya manage his role as sheriff? Where do his loyalties lie? What sort of enforcer is he? Is he right to be so afraid of symbolic acts?
4. Did your opinion of Joe Mondragón shift throughout the novel? Is he an accidental hero, or does he possess a calculated bravery that other revolutionaries would do well to emulate?

5. Discuss the notion of “*milagro*,” the Spanish word for “miracle”, as it applies to the novel. How does Amarante Córdova, whose longevity astonishes those who know him, perceive the line between miracle and self-determination? How do surreal stories and spirituality shape the way the peasants of Milagro view their destiny?
6. Revisit the novel’s plot as if you were reviewing a bona fide war. When did the initial act of aggression really occur? What were the battlefield strategies? Besides guns, what weapons were used (jobs, laws)? Who were the most powerful factions at various points, and why? Was victory won through violence or diplomacy, or something else altogether?
7. How would Pacheco’s pig describe the Milagro situation? From his point of view, can boundaries ever successfully be applied to any natural resources? What is the true nature of the disputes between local residents and the Forest Service about trespassing and livestock?
8. What is the role of the press in *The Milagro Beanfield War*? How do the residents of Milagro view the distinction between journalism and storytelling? Does a public relations campaign make up for their lack of political clout? How does Kyril Montana play the information game while he’s undercover?
9. How does the author balance slapstick comedy and drama in the novel? How is humor used to display the cultural gulf between Milagro’s underdogs and power brokers?
10. In his epilogue, Nichols describes his occasional frustration that *The Milagro Beanfield War* has overshadowed his other accomplishments as a writer. To what do you attribute the enduring success of this novel? How has its context shifted from the early 1970s when it was written to a readership in the twenty-first century? What themes or tones link it to the other John Nichols works you have read? What makes it unique, even within the trilogy?