The Milagro Beanfield War

By John Nichols

1. In what way is the history of the town, its inhabitants, and the United States in general relevant to the plot of the story? Could this story have been effectively told in a different town, or historical period?

2. Does Joe Mondragon’s lack of planning or sense of consequences regarding digging the ditch to irrigate his father’s land somehow mitigate his responsibility for the actions that happen thereafter?

3. Do the characters on the “other side” (Devine, the governor, etc.) respond rationally to the threat posed by Mondragon’s actions? Were other options available to them that would have had a more favorable outcome?

1) What, if anything, does author John Nichols say through his choice to have Joe Mondragon—the fiery and non-conforming fix-it man of Milagro—serve as the catalyst for change?

2) How does the class system affect the Milagro citizenry with respect to understanding their rights, exercising their rights, etc.?

3) Does Nichols’ distinct writing style add significantly to the reader’s experience? Consider his frequent use of almost poetic language, his strong wit, his detailed description of characters, etc.

1. Did you like Joe's character? Why or why not?

2. Do you think he had a reason for watering the beanfield in the beginning and if so what do you think it was?

3. Why did the citizens, including the sheriff, not just enforce the law?

1). The author paints a vivid picture of each character's background. How does Joe's background effect his views of the water laws preventing him from irrigating the land?

2). Is this war a war between the rich & poor? The smart & the ignorant? The lawful & the lawless?

3). Why does Joe do this when the odds are against him & the lawyer isn't able to really offer any solutions?

1. What role do the non-adverse "outsiders" and the adverse "insiders" play in the story?
2. Which character do you relate to or like the most? (Mine: Herbie Goldfarb. Poor kid.)

3. How does the feel of the prose and colorful language/imagery compare with other selections we've read? Did that make it more or less engaging?

1) What significance do the elements have within the story, i.e. the mud (p. 246), the direction of the wind (p. 331), the hailstones (p. 391), and the snow (p. 409)?

2) In what other contexts might the law forgive some indiscretions to prevent the exposure of others?

3) Is there anyone within the story that the readers could fairly call a hero?

1. Throughout the book, who is ultimately fighting whom?

2. Why do Charley and Herbie have such a difficult time adapting to life in Milagro?

3. What does the war symbolize, and why is it so important to those involved?

1) Discuss the elements of community that are seen throughout the novel.

2) Why do you think Joe Mondragon is so reluctant to sign Ruby’s petition?

3) Why do you think Joe’s beanfield becomes Ruby’s personal crusade?

1. Do you think this novel fits the genre definition of "magical realism," or is it more like Don Quixote?

2. This novel is obviously intended as comedy fiction. Lawyers can find humor in their profession, but can the law be funny to laypeople, apart from dead lawyer jokes?

3. Is the story focused more on local communities vs. big businesses, or on race relations?

1) Joe Mondragon is hardly a hero and he doesn’t want to be the voice of the city’s rebellion. Is he the true protagonist of the story, or is it the community as a whole?

2) Milagro seems to function best when its operating outside the boundaries of the law. What do you think Nichols was trying to say about the role of law in our society?

3) Why in one of the last scenes does Joe punch the VISTA volunteer Herbie in the mouth after Herbie successfully rides the horse, Sunflower?

1. Despite Charley Bloom's wishes to not represent the people of Milagro, is Bloom still considered somewhat of a hero for doing it any?
2. Do you think the purpose of Herbie successfully riding Sunflower was to show each character, from a lower status in life, having some form of victory?

3. Do you think the author lost interest of his audience at times by providing so much character development or was this an attempt to bring the reader to an understanding of the people's situation?

1) How does Jose Mondragon's reluctance to be a hero affect the reader's sympathies? Can we root for a "hero" that demonstrates the amount of ambivalence Mondragon does?

2) How do the overlap of the Christian and animist imagery inform the story?

3) What is the significance of Pacheco's attachment to the animals in his life -- the pig and the robin? How does the fact that the pig constantly tries to escape while the robin is exceptionally attached to Pacheco affect this analysis? What about the different methods of these animals' deaths -- the Robin at the hand of Pacheco and the pig at the hand of Joe Mondragon?

1. Why did Joe water the bean field? Did he even know at the time why he was doing it? Do you think he is a leader? Would you have watered the bean field?

2. When the people of Milagro united to get Joe's cow back - it seems as if this is a first. Why do you think the people were not united before? What caused the change in their behavior?

3. Who is your favorite character in the novel? Do the people of Milagro seem like real people? Do you like the town?

1) What is the “miracle in the Milagro Beanfield War.

2) Does the historical use of water by the community entitle the people to its use forever?

3) Compare Kyril Montana to the other lawyers we have studied.

1. Would you have signed Montana’s petition?

2. What is old man Cordovas secret to long life?

3. How could Joe have legally applied for a portion of water rights?