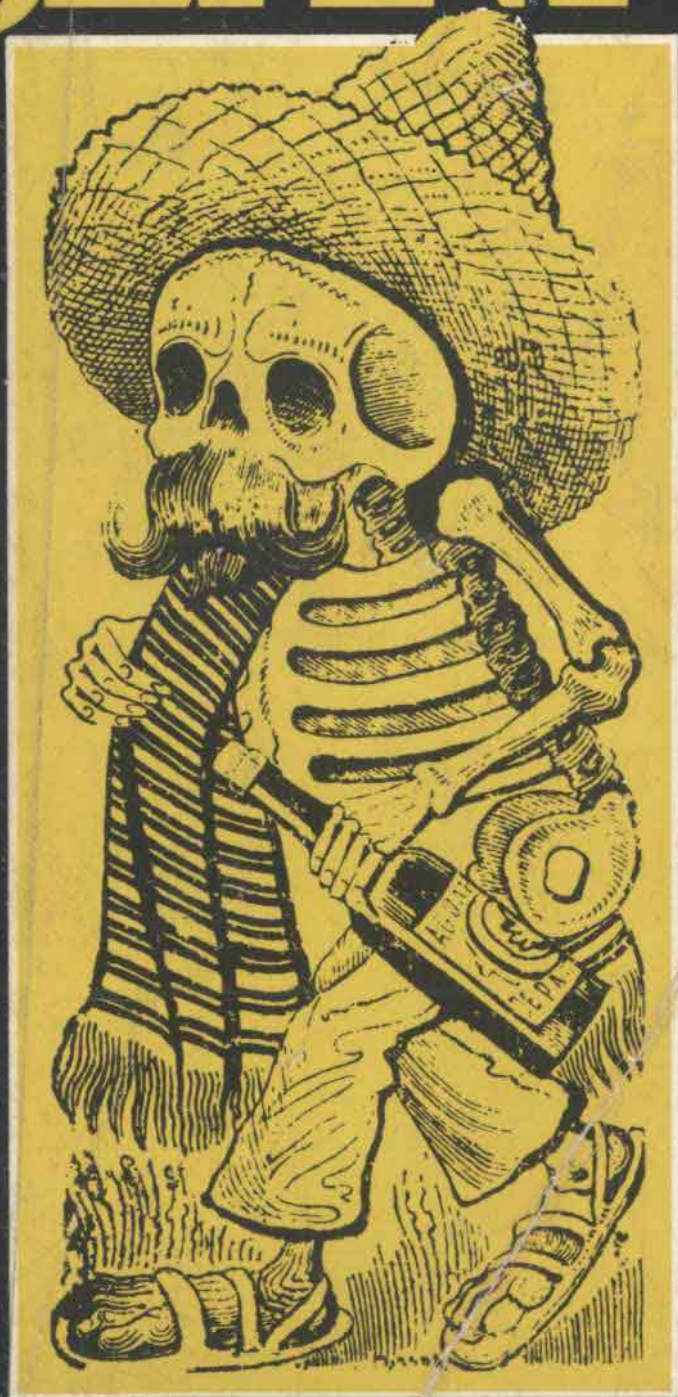


The MILAGRO BEANFIELD WAR



JOHN NICHOLS

Author of the NEW MEXICO TRILOGY which
includes THE MAGIC JOURNEY
and THE NIRVANA BLUES

THE
Milagro
Beanfield
War

by John Nichols

Illustrations by Rini Templeton

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Half of Joe's gardens and half his fields shriveled in a drought, even though Indian Creek practically formed a swimming pool in his living room. In fact, Milagro itself was half a ghost town, and all the old west side beanfields were barren, because over thirty-five years ago, during some complicated legal and political maneuverings known as the 1935 Interstate Water Compact, much of Milagro's Indian Creek water had been reallocated to big-time farmers down in the southeast portion of the state or in Texas, leaving folks like Joe Mondragón high and much too dry.

But then one day Joe suddenly decided to irrigate the little field in front of his dead parents' decaying west side home (which Joe still owned—in itself a miracle) and grow himself some beans. It was that simple. And yet irrigating that field was an act as irrevocable as Hitler's invasion of Poland, Castro's voyage on the *Granma*, or the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, because it was certain to catalyze tensions which had been building for years, certain to precipitate a war.

Please turn the page for the rave reviews of
The Milagro Beanfield War

“More alive than a grasshopper on a hot skillet . . .
Full of good humor.”

The Kirkus Reviews

“A story teller of uncommon wit and inventiveness . . . A wholly first-rate comic novel . . . Engaging and fun to read.”

The Cleveland Plain Dealer

“A very important novel . . . It could be the salvation of us all!”

New Haven Register

“Nichols is a wise man who writes about human nature with a sense of humor and with delicate feeling. . . . It's a must-buy because of the important theme.”

Library Journal

“Tender and comic, mad and sly, real and funny, touching and hilarious . . . Excellent!”

Publishers Weekly

"This has to be the funniest book of the year and Nichols one of the best writers alive today. Better put seatbelts on your armchair though, or watch it, you'll roll out laughing."

Salisbury, North Carolina Post

"A comic masterpiece."

The Sunday Oklahoman

"A delightfully ridiculous story . . . John Nichols sees with a twinkle in his eye and writes with a prickly pointed pen. . . . It's a rollicking tale of Yankee ingenuity, with a Spanish accent."

Worcester Sunday Telegram

"The characters of John Nichols' hilarious new novel leave us feeling hopeful, gay, and even a little giddy. The author of **THE STERILE CUCKOO** and **THE WIZARD OF LONELINESS** has surpassed his earlier work with a book that has the ingredients of a best-seller."

Port Angeles, Washington, News

"Nichols has an eye for the vividly incongruous detail. **BEANFIELD** is outrageously funny throughout."

The Virginian-Pilot

Also by John Nichols:

Published by Ballantine Books:

**THE MAGIC JOURNEY
THE NIRVANA BLUES
AMERICAN BLOOD**

Other Fiction:

**THE STERILE CUCKOO
THE WIZARD OF LONELINESS
A GHOST IN THE MUSIC**

Non-fiction:

**IF MOUNTAINS DIE (with William Davis)
THE LAST BEAUTIFUL DAYS OF AUTUMN
ON THE MESA
A FRAGILE BEAUTY**

WITH MUCH LOVE, FOR RUBY.
AND FOR OUR CHILDREN,
LUKE AND TANIA.

*Also for: Andrés A. Martínez, and every
member of the Tres Ríos Association, fighters all.*

*Too, this book carries a shot and a beer for
Mike, in memory of the first night under Heart
Lake, suicidal cutthroats, the wrong side of the
mountain, and those five up-and-down miles to the
Latirs.*

And with thanks and love to Rini.

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
Yet if I am for myself only, what am I?

—*Hillel*



Prologue

“What’s that little half-pint
son of a bitch want to
cause so much trouble for?”

—Some people of Milagro



Many people in the Miracle Valley had theories about why Joe Mondragón did it. At first, the somewhat addlebrained but sympathetic sheriff, Bernabé Montoya, figured it was just one more irrational manifestation of an ornery temperament, of a kid, now almost middle-aged, with a king-sized chip on his shoulder, going slightly amuck. The Frontier Bar owner, Tranquilino Jeantete, said (with a sardonic wink) that Joe did it because he was hungry for an enchilada made from honest-to-God Milagro frijoles, with some Devine Company cojones mixed in. Nick Rael, the storekeeper, figured Joe might have done it because he could not pay the ninety-odd dollars he owed the store; or else maybe he did it just out of sheer renegade inbred spite, hoping to drive up ammo sales at the same time he put Nick out of business. The chief perpetrator of the Indian Creek Dam, Ladd Devine the Third, who held Milagro's fate in his hand like a fragile egg, considered what Joe did a personal assault on his empire, on the Indian Creek Dam, and on that egg. And the immortal old man, Amarante Córdova, who lived on the west side of the highway in the ghost town neighborhood, believed Joe did it because God had ordered him to start the Revolution without any further delay.

Whatever the case, if there were mixed opinions on the matter, there were also mixed ideas about what the consequences might be. "What's that little half-pint son of a bitch want to cause so much trouble for?"

some said. Others quietly intoned: "I'm not saying it's good, I'm not saying it's bad. Let's just wait and see what happens." Still others on both sides of the Indian Creek Dam question armed themselves and prepared for war, while the governor and the state engineer down in the capital chewed their fingernails, wondering how to maintain their own untenable positions.

Of course the final consensus of opinion, arrived at by both those who were for Joe Mondragón and those who were against him, was that in order for him to do what he did and thus precipitate the war that was bound to follow, Joe had to be crazy. People also figured only a miracle could save Joe from his foolhardy suicidal gesture.

Yet Milagro was a town whose citizens had a penchant not only for going crazy, but also for precipitating miracles.

Take, for example, an early nineteenth-century sheepherder named Cleofes Apodaca and the scruffy sheepdog he irreverently called Pendejo, which, translated loosely, means "idiot" or "fool"—or, translated more literally, means "pubic hair."

Today, Cleofes Apodaca might qualify to be called the Patron Saint Crazy of Milagro.

Almost from the start, when Cleofes was but a child, everybody had predicted a bad end for him. In those bygone days a bishop visited the Milagro parish about once every five years, and when the bishop came he confirmed all the small fry in town. It was the bishop's habit, right after confirming a child, to deliver the kid a cuff on the cheek, thus reminding him or her that he or she must always be prepared to suffer for religion. When the bishop laid a soft right to the plump cheek of little Cleofes Apodaca, however, the future sheepherder uncorked a retaliatory haymaker to the holy man's chin, causing the prelate to tumble over backward, striking his bald pate against the baptismal font. And from that day forth people figured Cleofes was in trouble up to his eyeballs.

For a long while, however, Cleofes led a fairly normal, if somewhat lonely, life. His neighbors kept their distance, claiming he had El Ojo, the "evil eye." Peo-

ple especially steered their babies away from Cleofes, afraid that if he admired the kids or tickled them under their fat chins, the children would sicken and grow humps. If the plants in somebody's garden suddenly withered or became infested with mites and aphids, the owner of that garden had a tendency to blame Cleofes Apodaca's evil eye. Pregnant women walked a mile out of their way just to avoid Cleofes and thus ensure that their offspring would not be born missing a nose or a finger or some other priceless appendage.

Folks also came to believe that at night this loner, who had slugged the bishop and named his dog Pen-dejo, turned himself into a black mongrel that waded along the irrigation ditches committing genocide on frogs. For this reason, during the first half of the nineteenth century, you seldom heard frogs at night in Milagro. In fact, for over a decade, when Cleofes Apodaca was in his prime, frogs were as scarce in that town as camels and gold bullion.

One farmer insisted Cleofes was responsible for the birth in his flock of six two-headed lambs in one springtime. But the most unusual anomaly accredited to this solitary rogue's evil eye was the job done on one of Timoteo Mondragón's goats, which was born with both a vagina and a penis, but no testicles. For years this schizoid beast pranced around the goat pen eagerly mounting any female in sight while at the same time it was being mounted by the billys. This made for a very unstable and confusing situation in the herd. In fact, pretty soon all the females became infertile, the billys impotent, and Timoteo's huge flock dwindled away to nothing—all because Cleofes Apodaca's evil eye had caused the hermaphrodite to be born.

Cleofes was also a stickler for eating the first slice of everything, even though evil spells always resided in the first slice; and he had a nasty habit of letting white geraniums bloom on his windowsill, even though white geraniums were a surefire invitation to death. Adding insult to injury, the arrogant aloof sheep-

herder never carried a little chunk of oshá in his pants pocket to ward off poisonous snakes.

"Sooner or later Cleofes is gonna get it," his superstitious peers whispered fearfully. And sure enough, they were right.

The downfall began when one day Pendejo disappeared. And Cleofes, who had never married, was heartbroken. He searched high and low for the dog, up in the Midnight Mountains, out on Strawberry Mesa, down in the Rio Grande gorge. But Pendejo had vanished from the face of this earth. Cleofes prayed to the saints for his dog's safe return. He begged the Santo Niño de Atocha to find his dog. And, because traditionally the Santo Niño wore out many shoes walking around the countryside performing miracles and errands of mercy, Cleofes began to sew little shoes for the small carving of this saint which occupied a niche in the church. In fact, it soon got so that every other day the balmy shepherdder showed up at the church with another pair of tiny shoes for the saint. This ritual continued for months, until the shoes formed a huge pile surrounding the santo, and trickles of miniature footwear were spreading out underneath the pews. But the Santo Niño refused to give Cleofes Apodaca back his beloved Pendejo.

In the process of becoming such an industrious cobbler, the shepherdder neglected his animals, his fields, his house—everything had fallen into disrepair. Seeing this, the townspeople rubbed their hands, smirking as they cackled smugly: "Okay, *now* Cleofes is getting it back in spades for clobbering the bishop." At about this same time too, frogs reappeared in the irrigation ditches, and folks once more heard them singing at night, obviously because the old shepherdder had become so busy stitching miniature clodhoppers for the Sainted Child and otherwise trying to bring back Pendejo that he no longer had time for his nocturnal canine patrol of the waterways.

Following his shoemaking phase, Cleofes began to traipse around the county carrying a little statue of Santa Inéz del Campo, who was supposed to find missing animals. But with her he struck out as badly

as with the Santo Niño de Atocha. To boot, he wore out his own shoes and blistered his feet until they bled. Then he tramped around barefoot, weeping and sobbing and beating his breast and tearing his hair, while microscopic parasites crawled out of horseshit piles and penetrated up into his bare feet and entered his bloodstream, lodging eventually in his guts, in his stomach, and in his liver. Some enterprising filarial worms, having worked their way up into his eyeballs, started making him blind, and he grew very gaunt and miserable. Confused, the shepherd invoked Saint Anthony's aid, even though that saint possessed nowhere near Santa Inéz's power when it came to locating lost pets.

Then suddenly, one stormy summer day, Cleofes heard Pendejo barking. Which gave him great joy except for one minor consideration: the barking came from underneath the ground in an alfalfa field where a thousand graceful, noisy birds called killdeer were nesting. No matter, though, the shepherd grabbed a shovel and set to, vehemently attacking the earth under which his dog apparently was trapped.

For countless mornings and afternoons, through new moons and full moons and old moons, through rainstorms and starry evenings and windy days, Cleofes wielded his spade, digging deeper and deeper toward his beloved friend who never for a moment ceased barking, whining, growling, yipping, and whimpering, as dogs will when eagerly awaiting the arrival of their masters. At first the nesting killdeer screeched and whistled in alarm, flying frantically in all directions and repeatedly dive-bombing the mad shepherd dressed in rags, who paid them no mind. But after a while the birds got used to the digging, resettled upon their freckled eggs, and hatched out ten thousand little killdeer that scurried around Cleofes Apodaca's pit peeping hysterically. Meanwhile, curious townspeople gathered along the edges of the field, fascinated by the absurd scene, eagerly awaiting Pendejo's arrival. When they realized his appearance was not to be immediately forthcoming, men and women brought buckets which they turned upside down to sit on, or they rode

horses to the site and sat astride their mounts bemusedly looking on. Pretty soon an enterprising fellow named Carlos Lavadie (the great-great-granduncle of the present-day bastard Eusebio Lavadie) lugged over two dozen wooden chairs, which he rented out for a duro each. By the time the Pendejo affair was resolved, Carlos had become a very rich man, who subsequently sired a line of the town's most hated patróns.

Never for a moment did Pendejo quit barking and whining; so Cleofes kept digging. He unearthed bones and arrowheads and beautiful clay pots; he tossed out lovely silver goblets and mammoth gold coins, and stones that sparkled, full of stars. In fact, he discovered the treasure of the Seven Cities of Cibola which had drawn Coronado north from Mexico not so many years before. But the shepherd merely chucked all these iridescent artifacts into a great gleaming pile and flailed away some more with his shovel. In due course he extended long ladders into the hole. Laboriously, step-by-feeble-step, he lugged earth-filled pails up the rungs and dumped them onto the huge mound rising beside his hole. The baby killdeer matured and migrated away. The rainy season came and went and golden aspen leaves skippety-hopped across the field into his hole. Then a frost glazed the ground—winter came; relentlessly, the dog pleaded to be set free; unflaggingly, Cleofes persevered. To survive, he ate worms and snails and other sluggish, deaf, and blind little creatures that inhabited the soft, mysterious soil.

All at once Cleofes struck a hot spring. In an instant the pit filled with steaming mineral water; the crazy shepherd drowned; the treasure of the Seven Cities of Cibola disappeared; "*Que milagro!*" spectators cried; Pendejo stopped barking; it began to snow; and for days a chorus of joyful, almost-drunken frog chug-a-lugging drowned out the neighborhood magpies, roosters, dogs, and coyotes.

Yet for years afterward, according to the most imaginative storytellers, air bubbles kept rising to the surface of that hot spring, and a lone buzzard was said to have circled nonstop directly above the spot