



The Road to Delano

John DeSimone

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Devastating and triumphant, The Road to Delano is a meticulous historical novel that honors the bravery and sacrifices of the UFW strikers and those who stood with them.

In John DeSimone's gripping historical novel *The Road to Delano*, the UFW strikes, led by César Chavez, help to direct a high school senior's coming of age.

Following the death of Jack's father, he and his mother saw their once impressive farm reduced to a mere acre. Ten years later, from the windows of their Victorian home, they can still survey all of what used to be Duncan land, which now belongs to a calculating neighbor. With even this tentative homestead compromised by looming tax bills, Jack finds himself facing hard realities at too young of an age.

Even so: his troubles pale before those of his childhood best friend's. Adrian's father is helping to organize the strikes that have made Delano grapes the bane of housewives across America. Doing so puts him in the crosshairs of angry growers and the police forces sympathetic to them. Strikers are jailed and beaten; their children's educations are threatened; some people are deported.

Jack and Adrian have a common enemy in the grower who bought the Duncans' land out from beneath them, and who fired Adrian's father for wanting to form a union. Defeating him requires all of their stealth, bravery, and ingenuity—and, in Jack's case, the adoption of gambling. His father's legacy precedes him in the Valley poker halls where his father once amassed a fortune. On the table: not only his family's legacy, but his whole future, which depends on a baseball scholarship to UCLA, where he plans to study with Adrian and his firebrand girlfriend, Ella.

DeSimone's novel captures its settings and period well. Tule fog obscures the rural road that Jack travels just before his constructed reality falls apart; the elder Duncans survey the fertile land before building their home, marveling in its potential. The California growing region's beauty and centrality to American food chains is emphasized. Meanwhile, Valley citizens are depicted clashing not just over the strikes, but over local rivalries. On the baseball diamond, Adrian and Jack are challenged by added proof that so-called winners don't always play fair. Over illicit games of Texas Hold 'Em, Jack learns the same about local card sharps, for whom racial tensions add layers of competition.

But as exciting as the book's sports and gambling scenes are, the novel's staying power comes through its depictions of the strikes themselves. César Chavez is among its cast—a brilliant, imposing, and principled figure who urges strikers and pickers not to meet violence with violence. His calm, even in the midst of a weeks-long fast, gives Jack and Adrian the boosts they need to persist through perilous challenges.

Devastating and triumphant, *The Road to Delano* is a meticulous historical novel that honors the bravery and sacrifices of those who stand up to injustice, even at great peril to their own well being.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (February 7, 2021)

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