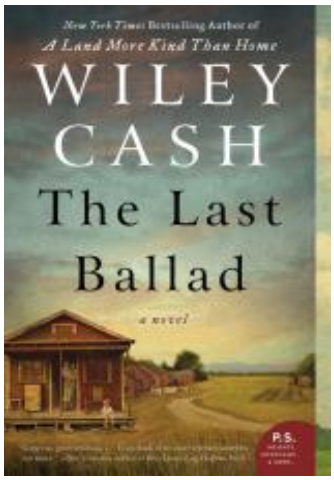
The Last Ballad

by Wiley Cash



About the Book

The *New York Times* bestselling author of the celebrated A LAND MORE KIND THAN HOME and THIS DARK ROAD TO MERCY returns with this eagerly awaited new novel, set in the Appalachian foothills of North Carolina in 1929 and inspired by actual events. The chronicle of an ordinary woman?s struggle for dignity and her rights in a textile mill, THE LAST BALLAD is a moving tale of courage in the face of oppression and injustice, with the emotional power of Ron Rash?s SERENA, Dennis Lehane?s THE GIVEN DAY, and the unforgettable films *Norma Rae* and *Silkwood.*

Twelve times a week, 28-year-old Ella May Wiggins makes the two-mile trek to and from her job on the night shift at American Mill No. 2 in Bessemer City, North Carolina. The insular community considers the mill?s owners --- the newly arrived Goldberg brothers --- white but not American and expects them to pay Ella May and other workers less because they toil alongside African Americans like Violet, Ella May?s best friend. While the dirty, hazardous job at the mill earns Ella May a paltry nine dollars for 72 hours of work each week, it?s the only opportunity she has. Her no-good husband, John, has run off again, and she must keep her four young children alive with whatever work she can find.

When the union leaflets begin circulating, Ella May has a taste of hope, a yearning for the better life the organizers promise. But the mill owners, backed by other nefarious forces, claim the union is nothing but a front for the Bolshevik menace sweeping across Europe. To maintain their control, the owners will use every means in their power, including bloodshed, to prevent workers from banding together. On the night of the county?s biggest rally, Ella May, weighing the costs of her choice, makes up her mind to join the movement. It's a decision that will have lasting consequences for her children, her friends, her town --- indeed all that she loves.

Seventy-five years later, Ella May?s daughter Lilly, now an elderly woman, tells her nephew about his grandmother and the events that transformed their family. Illuminating the most painful corners of their history, she reveals, for the first time, the tragedy that befell Ella May after that fateful union meeting in 1929.

Intertwining myriad voices, Wiley Cash brings to life the heartbreak and bravery of the now-forgotten struggle of the labor movement in early 20th-century America --- and pays tribute to the thousands of heroic women and men who risked their lives to win basic rights for all workers. Lyrical, heartbreaking and haunting, this eloquent novel confirms Wiley Cash?s place among our nation?s finest writers.

Discussion Guide

While no guide is available at this time, be sure to check out our historical fiction discussion questions, which may help you in your group's discussion of the book.

Author Bio

Wiley Cash is the *New York Times* bestselling author of A LAND MORE KIND THAN HOME, the acclaimed THIS DARK ROAD TO MERCY, THE LAST BALLAD and, most recently, WHEN GHOSTS COME HOME. He won the SIBA Book Award and the Conroy Legacy Award, was a finalist for the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize and the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Novel, and has been nominated for many more. A native of North Carolina, he is the Alumni Author-in-Residence at the University of North Carolina Asheville. He lives in Wilmington, NC with his wife, photographer Mallory Cash, and their two daughters.

Critical Praise

?A powerful book that speaks to contemporary concerns through historical injustice? Cash vividly blends the archival with the imaginative? With care and steadiness, (Cash) has pulled from the wreckage of the past a lost moment of Southern progressivism. Perhaps fiction can help us bear the burden of Southern history.?

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