

Author Spotlight

WILEY CASH



Wiley Cash is the author of *A Land More Kind Than Home* (2012), *This Dark Road to Mercy* (2014) and *The Last Ballad* (2017). Wiley holds a B.A. in Literature from the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Louisiana-Lafayette (where he studied under author Ernest Gaines). A native of North Carolina, he has received grants and fellowships from the Asheville Area Arts Council, the Thomas Wolfe Society, the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo and the Weymouth Center. He is the writer-in-residence at the University of North Carolina at Asheville and teaches creative writing in the Mountainview Low-Residency MFA. He lives in Wilmington, North Carolina, with his wife and two daughters.

Western North Carolina is a region that figures prominently into Cash's fiction. Inspired by actual events and set in the Appalachian foothills of North Carolina in 1929, *The Last Ballad* chronicles an ordinary woman's struggle for dignity and her rights in a textile mill. It is the story about the life and tragic murder of Ella Mae Wiggins surrounding the events of the most notorious textile labor struggle—the Gastonia Strike. The strike happened in Gastonia, North Carolina in the spring, summer and early fall of 1929 at the Loray Mill—the largest single room textile mill in the state with more than 2,000 workers.

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.

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.

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. *The Last Ballad* is a moving tale of courage in the face of oppression and injustice.

Prepared by Maureen Socha
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Sources: www.litlovers.com, www.readinggroupguides.com and the *Encyclopedia of North Carolina*



Discussion Questions for *The Last Ballad*

1. Talk about the quality, or more like the lack of quality, of Ella May Wiggins's life and her daily struggles to support herself and children. What are the particular challenges she faced?
2. Describe the abusive working conditions in the Loray Mill, which eventually led to the workers' strike in 1929.
3. Many, if not all, of the strike leaders were communists. How did its leadership's affiliation affect the national media and general public support?
4. Even though it ultimately failed, what role did the strike play in galvanizing the national labor movement?
5. The workers were captivated and empowered by Wiggins's songs. Later, the failed strike inspired other songwriters of the era, such as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. Why does music hold such power over us?
6. Consider Wiggins's rise to union leadership. Her actions were incredibly risky; do you think those risks were unfair to her four children? Would any of us today have had her courage?
7. Why do you think Cash decided to use the voices of Wiggins's daughter, the mill-owner's wife, a black Pullman porter, and the old man who pulls the "dope wagon" to tell the story? What does each bring to the telling that gives it a unique perspective?
8. Today's labor movement has shrunk in both numbers and power. Use Cash's book as a starting point to discuss the pros and cons of organized labor in the U.S. — its history, its demise, and whether or not it is needed today.
9. Does the story resonate in today's world, given the growth of populism and concern over income disparity?

Source: www.litlovers.com



Further Reading by Wiley Cash—a list of resources used by the author to write the novel are available in the back of the book included in this book club kit.

*Fiction:

The Given Day by Dennis Lehane
In Dubious Battle by John Steinbeck
The Secret Wisdom of the Earth by Chris Scotton
Serena by Ron Rash
Sometimes a Great Notion by Ken Kesey
Triangle by Katharine Weber
Work Song by Ivan Doig

Film:

Harlan County, USA (1976)—Director Barbara Kopple won an Oscar for Best Documentary for her on-the-spot reporting of a 1972 Kentucky miners' strike in *Harlan County, USA*. Confrontations between striking workers and hired strikebreakers quickly became violent, and even Kopple and her cameraman were beaten.

Matewan (1987)—Chris Cooper, James Earl Jones and Mary McConnell star in this fictionalized recreation of a 1920 struggle between West Virginia coal miners trying to improve their lot by organizing a union and the owners (and their hired thugs) who want to continue to exploit them.

Norma Rae (1979)—starring Oscar-winner Sally Field and Ron Liebman, the film focuses on a union organizing campaign in a southern textile mill.

On the Waterfront—for many people of a certain age, Elia Kazan's movie of conflict on the docks between a brutal union leader (Johnny Friendly, played by Lee J. Cobb) and a disillusioned dockworker (Marlon Brando) was their first introduction to the idea of a union and it was not a positive image.

Silkwood (1983)—this taut thriller about an employee of a plutonium company who stumbles on to some serious safety defects in the radioactive products. Streep plays a union steward at Kerr-McGee and it is clearly her association with the union that underlies much of her activity in the second half of the movie.

(Source: The Best Labor Union Movies of All Time by John Becker, October 23, 2015)

*Books not in the OCPL collection, may be available through Interlibrary Loan (ILL).

