

The Last Ballad

Wiley Cash

This third novel from a promising young voice in Southern fiction (*A Land More Kind Than Home*) concerns a North Carolina woman's fight for workers' rights. By 1929, 28-year-old Ella May Wiggins has had four children, the eldest of whom watches the others while their mother works nights at American Mill No. 2 as a spinner, and a husband who disappeared shortly after a fifth child died in infancy. Hearing of a rally in nearby Gastonia advocating a minimum wage and a 40-hour workweek, Ella May sees no choice but to attend. When asked to speak about mill conditions, she instead delivers a moving song of her own creation, becoming the face of the union struggle—and a target for anti-Communists. As in his previous books, Cash uses various voices from different periods to tell his story, here including a mill owner, a train porter, and Ella May's elderly daughter reflecting on her mother's complicated legacy in 2005. He writes with earnestness and great sympathy but reveals the outcome early, taking the bite out of the story's climax. **VERDICT** Admirers of Ron Rash's *Serena* and its Appalachian setting will find much to like here.

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