UL alumnus praised for 3rd book

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“The Last Ballad,” a historical fiction novel, has been released by an alumni of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette’s creative writing graduate program.

Set in Bessemer City, North Carolina, the book centers around Ella May Wiggins, a 28-year-old mill worker and single-mother attempting to feed four children with low pay in 1929.

In a segregated neighborhood, Wiggins receives less pay because she toils alongside African Americans. However, a union begins to organize, and Wiggins makes the decision to join, causing a permanent change for her and her children.

Wiley Cash, the author of the novel, which is his third to be released, said he was inspired to tell Wiggins’ story because tales like hers often go untold.

“This was a story that wasn’t taught in the schools where I grew up,” he said. “It is an important story and the foundational moments of American labor history and it happened in my hometown and I didn’t know it.”

Inspired by the true events of Wiggins, Cash derived the story from Gastonia, North Carolina, his hometown, but also where his parents and other relatives
worked in textile mills.
Cash said the purpose of the novel was partially so he could “learn more about it by writing about it.”

“What I didn’t know,” Cash added, “was how dangerous it was, how dirty it was and I didn’t know how low the pay was. I didn’t know people were literally dying because they couldn’t earn a living wage inside of the mills.”

Marcia Gaudet, professor emerita, served as head of the UL Lafayette English department when Cash was attending graduate school for his doctorate. She also served on Cash’s dissertation committee.

Gaudet said, at the time, Cash was interested in African American literature. Together with Reggie Young, another professor emeritus of UL Lafayette, he worked on a book about Ernest J. Gaines.

“With Wiley, many of us thought he had great promise as a writer, but it was very rare that one of, or any young writer, gets that kind of reputation and critical acclaim early in his career. That’s something for UL to be proud of also,” Gaudet said.

Cash presented the first draft of what would be his debut novel, “A Land More Kind Than Home,” as his dissertation, having attended Ernest J. Gaines’ last class while he served as writer-in-residence in 2003.

Cash said he had the chance to “become friends with and study under a professional writer.”

“With Ernest Gaines,” Gaudet said, “he’s always said he wanted to give the people and places that he always knew a voice.”

Asked how Gaines changed his perspective, Cash said, “Once I read his stories I thought, my gosh, these people can’t live anywhere else but south Louisiana. Maybe I should try writing about people who can’t live anywhere but northwestern North Carolina.”

With “The Last Ballad” set in 1929, Cash was asked how his work might address the burden of Southern history. Cash said because much of the story focuses on violent actions against communities of African Americans and women, the subject matter is “exactly what we see happening today.”

By writing about the area, Cash said he attempts “to make the local experience speak to the universal experience.”

“It got a really strong review in the New York Times Book Review,” Gaudet said. “That in itself is an amazing accomplishment for any writer, particularly one who is relatively young.”

Gaudet said she hopes Cash will be back at the Ernest J. Gaines center to do a reading, as he has done before. She added that Cash remains in touch with all the friends he’s made at UL Lafayette and the surrounding area.

Cash currently serves as writer-in-residence for the University of North Carolina at Asheville. He said he still reserves a place for UL Lafayette, however.

“I definitely miss the food, and how friendly the town was, and the campus,” Cash said.