

This Dark Road to Mercy (Cash) - Author Bio

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Author Bio

- Birth—ca. 1977-78
- Where—Gastonia, North Carolina, USA
- Education—B.A., M.A., University of North Carolina;
Ph.D., University of Louisiana
- Currently—lives in Wilmington, North Carolina

Wiley Cash is from western North Carolina, a region that figures prominently in his fiction. *A Land More Than Home*, his first novel was published in 2012, followed by *This Dark Road to Mercy* in 2014.

Wiley holds a B.A. in Literature from the University of North Carolina-Asheville, an M.A. in English 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).

He has received grants and fellowships from the Asheville Area Arts Council, the Thomas Wolfe Society, the MacDowell Colony, and Yaddo. His stories have appeared in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Roanoke Review* and *Carolina Quarterly*, and his essays on Southern literature have appeared in *American Literary Realism*, *South Carolina Review*, and other publications.

Wiley lives with his wife and two daughters in Wilmington, North Carolina. He serves as the writer-in-residence at the University of North Carolina-Asheville and teaches in the Mountainview Low-Residency MFA. (*Adapted from previous and current bios on the author's website* (<http://www.wileycash.com>) . Retrieved 10/4/2017.)

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This Dark Road to Mercy (Cash) - Discussion Questions

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Discussion Questions

1. In *This Dark Road to Mercy*, people are not always what they seem, and assumptions are sometimes proven wrong. Easter, for example, may be a kid, but she's incredibly smart and mature for her age as evidenced from the very first page of the novel. What assumptions does Easter make about Wade, based on her mother's stories and her fragmented memories? Do you think she was right about him? Why or why not? Who else has suffered because of assumptions made about them by others?
2. Wade makes two remarks to Easter regarding their skin color (white) versus that of their schoolmates (black) during their first meeting in the book. Later on, Wade unthinkingly buys the girls an inflatable raft decorated with the Confederate flag. Discuss the subtle themes of race, class, and other social factors running through this novel. How important to the story is it that the main characters are underprivileged or otherwise struggling financially? How might the story have been different if the characters were middle class, or even wealthy?
3. When Easter discovers her mother unconscious and on drugs, she decides not to call 911, but to let her mother sleep it off. Why? Identify other moments in the novel where Easter decides to do something other than the more obvious or expected thing. What effect does this have on your opinion of her?
4. Marcus accuses Easter of not wanting anyone to know about their relationship. He seems to be hinting that it's because he is black and she is white. Do you think he's right? Why or why not? Why else might Easter have wanted to keep her feelings about Marcus private?
5. Though we don't yet know his motivations, we are introduced to Wade when he first contacts Easter on the schoolyard after school one day. Later she overhears him talking to Miss Crawford about trying to get the girls back. He claims he was tricked into signing away his parental rights and says, "I know how the law works, and I know it never works for people like me." What does he mean by this? Do you feel sympathetic toward Wade? Use examples from the novel to illustrate your opinion.
6. Wade and the girls are on the run for most of the novel. Identify what, and whom, they are running from and discuss how other characters are similarly "on the run," either literally or metaphorically.
7. Easter often seems fearless. When Pruitt first approaches her on the edge of the schoolyard, she instinctively denies her name and pretends not to know Wade at the same time that she understands instinctively that Pruitt is trying to scare her. Describe how she balances some fears, such as she feels walking away from Pruitt,

Books

‘This Dark Road to Mercy,’ by Wiley Cash

By Ron Charles January 28, 2014

‘Moderation in all things’ is not bad advice, but Aristotle never wrote any good Southern gothic novels. In that macabre world, the last thing we want is moderation. Faulkner knew this. (Necrophilia? Check.) Ron Rash knows this. (Pet killer eagle? Check.) And in his first novel, “A Land More Kind Than Home,” Wiley Cash proved that he knew it, too. (Snake-handling preacher? Check.)

But now, in his second novel, the poetically titled “This Dark Road to Mercy,” Cash seems to have lost his nerve, which is a deadly mistake in these dark woods. All the elements are here for a thrilling drama: imperiled children, a duffel bag full of money and — most important — a disfigured psychopath thirsty for vengeance. But the whole production never generates much heat: a pinch of sentimentality, a touch of suspense, a little off-camera cruelty. This is Cormac McCarthy by way of Sears: “Some Country for Middle-Aged Men.”

That’s regrettable, because Cash knows his way around a good story. As he did in “A Land More Kind Than Home,” he once again gives us several different narrators. Easter Quillby is just 12, but she knows enough to be wary of her errant father, Wade, whose minor league baseball career struck out years ago. Three months after Easter’s mom overdoses in their squalid home, Wade shows up expecting to play daddy:

“Why are you here?” Easter demands.

“I just want to spend some time with you and your sister.”

“You can’t,” Easter tells him. “It’s too late.”

Wade, though, is a man with a dream of fatherhood, no matter how much it might endanger his two daughters. A few nights after reintroducing himself, he climbs through the window of their foster home in Gastonia, N.C., and tells the girls, “We’ve got to go.” You might think that petitioning the family court for custody would be a better plan than this midnight raid, but Wade has no time to start down that complicated legal path. Aside from kidnapping charges, he’s also outrunning an old baseball foe named Pruitt, who’s been hired to recover a stash of money Wade stole from the “hillbilly Mafia.”

The novel's potentially exciting chase is well designed: Easter is a wise, broken-hearted kid who knows better than to hope for much from the adults in her life; Wade is a lovable fool who thinks he can finally beat his bad luck; and Pruitt, with his weirdly high-pitched voice and steroid-fueled muscles, is a terrifying, implacable assassin. For good measure, they're all being pursued by the girls' legal guardian, a sad-sack ex-cop who hopes he can atone for his sins by rescuing Easter and her sister. And *all of them* are being chased by the FBI. It's a mad, mad, mad, noir world!

Strangely, for a story with so much momentum, Cash's best scenes are flashbacks. His description of Easter and her sister finding their mother comatose in bed is swept with crosscurrents of dread and innocence. And Pruitt's childhood memory of being showered in shattered glass from smashed beer bottles suggests so much about the monster that spawned him.

But this earnest novel seems reluctant to depart from the deeply etched dimensions of its standard plot. Early on, for instance, Cash begins to explore white poverty in a racially mixed neighborhood, but he quickly abandons that complex issue for far more predictable material. In one of the novel's longest scenes, when some cool kid makes fun of Easter at a boardwalk arcade, we know in our apple-pie-lovin' bones that Wade will eventually vanquish those punks and win the big stuffed teddy bear for his daughter. "It felt like a movie," Easter says, perhaps recognizing it from any number of movies we've all seen.

That lack of surprise and emotional intensity wears on the story as the chase stretches out to the Midwest. None of these narrators is up to the task of building sufficient tension. Pruitt only hints at his creepier thoughts, drawing a shade over his most heinous actions, which mutes the novel's horror. And the girls' dogged guardian is prone to reusing old tea bags like this: "If twenty years as a cop taught me anything it's that when folks disappear it usually means, one, they're dead, or two, they don't want to be found." Even Easter, for all her spunky, childlike wisdom, doesn't give us much heartache, and her powers of observation are thin. Seeing the St. Louis Arch for the first time, she says, "It was a huge white half-circle that looked to be sitting in a field off to our right," which is the least awed description of the country's tallest monument any child has ever uttered.

Good for Easter; she never gets overexcited. But neither will readers of this novel.

Charles is the deputy editor of Book World. You can follow him on Twitter @RonCharles.

THIS DARK ROAD TO MERCY

By Wiley Cash

Morrow. 232 pp. \$25.99

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Review: 'This Dark Road to Mercy' by Wiley Cash

By Hope Reese

January 31, 2014

Twelve-year-old Easter Quillby's earliest memory of her father was watching him, from a distance, play baseball. When she was 9, Wade Chesterfield (she calls him "Wade," not "Dad") abandoned Easter, her younger sister Ruby, and their mom, Corinne. Three years later, when Corinne dies from a drug overdose, the girls are placed in a foster home. But Wade, who had forfeited parental rights, soon reappears in town to steal back his daughters. It's fitting that the ex-minor leaguer finds them on a softball diamond.

This all happens in the first few pages of "This Dark Road to Mercy," Wiley Cash's new fast-paced novel set in Gastonia, N.C., where he grew up. But what begins as a tale of a father's reunion with his children is, Cash hints early on, more complicated.

Wade Chesterfield is at the heart of the story, which is told (like Cash's debut "A Land More Kind Than Home") in three voices, each seeking Wade for a different reason. Easter (who has her mother's last name) is the moral compass of the tale — old enough to remember the hurt her father caused, but young enough to remain hopeful about his role in her life. Then there's Brady Weller, the girls' court-appointed guardian and a former cop, haunted by a tragic misstep from his past. Finally, there's the wildly violent Pruitt, an ex-con bounty hunter nursing an old grudge against Wade from back in their minor-league days.

A lot of plot is packed into this short novel. Wade kidnaps his girls from their foster home in the middle of the night, taking them on the road with him with no visible plan. Brady steps out of his role as guardian, reconnecting with his old buddy in the police force and immersing himself in an investigation involving Wade, hoping to bring the girls home safely. Pruitt, angry and wild, hunts Wade; not just for his finder's-fee, but to

exact revenge. The three storylines (and narrators) collide in a pivotal scene toward the end of the novel at — where else? — a baseball stadium.

But despite its juicy elements — abandonment, mystery, a cross-country police chase — set against the all-American backdrop of baseball, the novel fails to deliver on its most promising theme: a renewed bond between father and daughter.

Cash has a knack for flow and dialogue, and his spare, simple prose keeps the story moving steadily. What's missing, though, are the details that could make the characters and places come to life. Scenes are sketched lightly. We see hints of poverty — the book is set close to the Blue Ridge Mountains in rural Appalachia — but could use more specifics.

"This Dark Road to Mercy" unfolds during the summer of 1998, when [Mark McGwire](#) and [Sammy Sosa](#) battled to break the home-run record, but the pages don't contain many other markers of the late '90s. The story, like the game of baseball, seems to belong to a bygone era.

And despite a rich premise, Cash fails to let the emotional turmoil of the girls' circumstances fully resonate. The story rushes from scene to scene, raising more questions than it answers. How often was Wade gone, and what kind of father was he when he was around? Why did he decide to return to Gastonia? What had he been doing in the meantime? What kind of mother was Corinne? Corinne, who must have been the dominant force in the girls' lives, is barely mentioned after her sudden death. Another character, young Easter's schoolgirl crush, seems important early on but quickly vanishes.

Cash might have benefited from sticking to one perspective: Easter's. In bringing in the voices of Brady Weller and Pruitt, the story feels filtered down. And while Brady's character is complex and sympathetic, Pruitt, a brute, comes off as a gangster cliché. The tone is off balance: out of its 34 chapters, only seven are in Pruitt's voice, while 15 are narrated by Easter.

Cash's first novel was widely praised; some even dubbed him a new rising star of the South. In this newer work, he clearly aims to tell a heartfelt and nuanced story, exploring the lines between fear and trust, redemption and love. Unfortunately, these boundaries are examined lightly.

Easter is less naive than a 12-year-old ought to be; still, she forgives her father for disappearing. The crucial moments of father-daughter bonding that might lead her to that conclusion, however, depend on the reader's imagination.

Hope Reese, a writer and editor in Louisville, has contributed to several publications including The Atlantic, [The Boston Globe](#), the Harvard Review and the Los Angeles Review of Books.

"This Dark Road to Mercy"

By Wiley Cash, William Morrow, 240 pages, \$25.99

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