



The Last Days of Ellis Island

Gaëlle Josse

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World Editions (Nov 24, 2020)

Softcover \$15.99 (208pp)

978-1-64286-071-9

The harsh realities of immigration are filtered through a man's experiences in Gaëlle Josse's novel, *The Last Days of Ellis Island*.

Ellis Island, the legendary point of entry for millions of American immigrants, is set to shut its doors for the last time in November of 1954. John, the station's commissioner, is haunted by past tragedies that kept him bound to the island for decades. In the final days before his forced retirement, he unburdens himself through writing and reflection.

The narrative includes real historical figures and events in John's tale of sorrow and loneliness. Brief spots of joy pepper his life. Flowing, lyrical prose describes the hope and heartbreak he witnessed during his long tenure. After so many years, John knows all too well how often the promise of America is tarnished or denied by merciless bureaucracies and human failings, his own included.

Ellis Island is as much a character as any of the people in the book. It is home to John, safe and familiar. But to the immigrants who pass through it on their way to Manhattan, it is a frightening, unpredictable gauntlet. John relays both perspectives with tender details.

John is at first an unassuming, sympathetic figure. Shaped by love and loss, he uses Ellis Island as his own personal place of exile, viewing himself as unable to return home as the immigrants under his supervision are. It is only as he delves deeper into his own story that he becomes complicated, unlikable, and even monstrous—so much so that even his guilty self-awareness cannot wash away his sins. But John's story, and the stories of others who torment him still, is gripping.

The Last Days of Ellis Island is an absorbing novel in which beloved dreams are fast to shatter.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (November / December 2020)

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