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## The Sin Eater

**Alice Thomas Ellis**
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With the vividness of description found in Fairy Tale (1998), and with a mind-shattering use of symbolism only understood after looking back upon the story as a whole, Ellis takes her readers through a weekend of events not soon forgotten.

At their ancestral home on the coastline of Wales, a family is gathering for more than just the traditional cricket match where the gentry host the villagers; “the Captain,” patriarch of the estate, is dying of leukemia. While ignoring the deathbed upstairs, family members and servants alike stir up old petty rivalries and hatreds as the weekend progresses from one event to the next. Sister-in-law Rose, minus her twins she has sent away from the impending death, plays hostess to visiting family members while covertly scheming for what is best for herself: making cutting and hypocritical remarks to others about themselves or religion to make them feel uneasy; hoarding the estate’s belongings to herself; and by assuring the annual cricket game is not continued in the future by getting her family drunk the evening before. Unknown to her, others have their own agendas: Phyllis, the maid, tries to make things as uncomfortable as she can for the Captain’s second son, Michael, who she has always hated—including tampering with his car under the guise of repairing it; Gomer lusts after the Captain’s teenage daughter, Ermyn, and is biding his time; Rose’s husband, Henry, wants traditions held onto by the family stopped; and Michael and Angela, bored with each other, are looking for diversions.

The only one who is playing straight is young and inexperienced Ermyn, who hasn’t learned to put on a false front—yet. It is through her pained yet honest eyes that we begin to understand why there can be danger when expectations and reality clash. As the weekend unfolds palpable tension builds and finally peaks as Ermyn learns to play the game of selfishness and revenge; watching in satisfaction as the Sin Eater is forced to eat her own sins.

The Sin Eater takes a profound look into the darker side of human motivations; where selfish interests push aside traditions meant to preserve the whole and where hypocrisy and subterfuge lead those who cast the falsest shadows into paying the highest price. Somber in tone, yet fascinating in its depth and sophistication, this latest Ellis novel is one to savor.

NELLY HEITMAN (December 16, 1998)

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