



*The Last Man: A Novel* by P.T. Deutermann.

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The setting of *The Last Man* is similar to those of its author's other books, but only analogously. After serving for twenty-six years in the US Navy (1963–89), reaching the rank of captain, P.T. Deutermann has written eighteen suspense novels, most of them set in active warzones. (A few exceptions feature a retired policeman solving murder cases in southeastern US hill country.) "The Last Man" of this book's title is a member of a group of Jewish rebels who, according to Flavius Josephus,<sup>1</sup> committed mass suicide in AD 73 after a six-month siege by Roman soldiers who were about to overrun their fortress atop the mesa-like plateau of Masada (Metsadá in Hebrew), near the Dead Sea. This is the location of the novel's warzone two millennia later.

The main character, David Hall, an American chemical engineer, is unemployed after whistleblowing misdeeds at a nuclear facility where he worked. Coincidentally (or not?), he has been persuaded by an Israeli woman who has since disappeared that there are things yet to be discovered at Masada. As a symbol of heroic resistance, the fortress has become a revered and carefully guarded historical site in Israel; access to it must be secured through an agency charged with its protection. Dissembling his real objective, Hall receives limited permission to explore parts of the site. But the authorities distrust his motives, conceivably because Masada is only a short distance from Israel's atomic energy research facility near Dimona in the Negev Desert. Hall is thus under surveillance from the moment he lands in Tel Aviv. Archaeologist Dr. Judith Ressler is assigned to "escort" him through his three-day visit to the famous cliff-top fortress. Her former husband, a physicist who worked at Dimona but opposed nuclear weaponry, died in a mysterious accident. Unaware of this background, Hall sets off with Ressler in pursuit of his secret agenda. Each night, instead of sleeping, he explores the ancient fortress.

From the outset, the reader recognizes that Hall's interests are unlike those of an inquisitive tourist or amateur archaeologist, a suspicion confirmed by curious links between Ressler and members of the Israeli intelligence and counterespionage agencies. On a superficial level, the reader wonders whether a romance might develop between the two characters, despite Ressler's impassive exterior and murky personal history.

As this engrossing plot unfolds, the author gradually moves beyond the revelations attributable to Hall's clandestine explorations. We learn that a complex of natural cisterns inside the mountain holds the accumulated rainwater of thousands of years and that searching them requires tricky, carefully managed deep-water dives. All this is described with great technical authenticity.

Though the story Deutermann tells is most entertaining, it never quite induced me to suspend my disbelief. One doubts, for instance, that any real, badly sleep-deprived person, however fit, could remain as peppy and alert as the novel's protagonist. Then there is his phenomenal luck in surviving repeated dives in an unmapped and poorly lit cistern. Finally, one need not be a hydrologist to question whether so much water could have gone unnoticed all those centuries. But this is nit-picking.

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1. *Bellum Judaicum* 7.275–406.

Not until the very end of the novel do we learn in depth (pun fully intended) that the true objects of Hall's investigation are not ancient but modern rebels, who have grievously offended Israel's secret services. Before reaching this denouement, one must find answers to other questions. Why, for example, do the authorities care what Hall finds, as long as he does no damage to the site? And are Ms. Ressler's problems anything more than a teasing deterrent to romance? P.T. Deutermann skillfully maintains the suspense right to the point when the reader begins to grasp that the profound mystery at Masada concerns not the remote past but the world's future.