

## FICTION

# T. as in tough, tender, terrific

CATHERINE BUSH  
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## HOW THE DEAD DREAM

By Lydia Millet

Counterpoint, 244 pages, \$26.50

I found it impossible to read Lydia Millet's new novel, *How the Dead Dream*, without thinking of comments Millet has made on the state of North American literary fiction, some of which were articulated in these very pages, in a review of Alice Munro's last collection.

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"Why," Millet asked, "this insistent choice of the merely personal, the proximate world of the self and its near relations?" when fiction, particularly literary fiction, might move beyond the scrutiny of the self and the very North American obsession with "people with problems," and take in "the vast universe beyond the minutely personal." She isn't advocating taking the self out of fiction altogether, however, but arguing for a more expansive vision of the self "in relation to the larger mysteries of the world."

Again: "It may be worth asking simply whether, in a culture where mainstream society is already wholly consecrated to the worship of self, literary culture should be consecrated to the same faith." Note the idea of consecration. This is as much credo as critique.

Millet's last novel was the near-epic *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart*, in which three architects of the atom bomb, scientists Robert Oppenheimer, Enrico Fermi and Leo Szilard, are, at the instant of the first nuclear test explosion in the New Mexico desert, transported forward in time to the chaos of the United States in 2003. Large in both reach and grasp, both serious and seriously absurd, this is a novel that tackles some of the most destructive impulses in 20th-century, no, in human history, but doesn't avoid the personal, and at its heart lies the deeply particularized relationship between a youngish husband and wife, whose lives are sent on a radical tangent when three supposedly dead scientists stumble across their doorstep.

If that work was symphonic in scope, *How the Dead Dream* is a chamber piece, which is not to suggest any diminution in vision, only a shift to a tighter and more intimate focus. The new novel, Millet's sixth, is in fact a kind of *bildungsroman*, following the trajectory of a single protagonist, a young man named Thomas, who generally goes by the abbreviation T. At first I thought this was a device, the author choosing to abbreviate her character's name, to make him an everyman, to depersonalize him, even Kafka-ize him; it may be, but other people in the novel, including his mother, also call him T.

As a child, T. is obsessed with money. Literally. With coins, the images on bills. In one notable sequence, his parents attempt to counter his penchant for storing coins in his mouth by suggesting that he start keeping his money in a savings account. T. is dubious: What if the money is stolen? He suggests that they try the scheme out for him, deposit some money in his name, and if it doesn't vanish, he'll do the same with his own cash. Taken aback by his precocity in the art of extortion, they refuse, until T. begins vomiting up a rain of coins in front of the women in his mother's book club. This is vintage Millet, social critique jousting with absurdity, familiar suburban domesticity infected with a slightly alien sensibility.

In these opening sections, the tone of social critique seems uppermost, and T. a particularly vivid type, one whose manipulative ambitiousness, lack of fellow-feeling and money-love seem likely to reach their apotheosis before tumbling him into a justifiable fall. Instead, the novel is stranger than that, Millet's characterization too subtle and unpredictable, too given, as good fiction is, to the art of the swerve.

Not long after his post-collegiate arrival in L.A., where he is already a successful real-estate developer, T. runs over a coyote on the highway. Crouching by her as she dies, he is struck by a sudden and shocking empathy. In the wake of this encounter, he acquires a dog, allowing her to knock a chink in the armour of his solitude. Then his mother, suddenly and mysteriously abandoned by his father, flies across the country and arrives in some dishevelment in T.'s office. However much he may be driven by dreams of gain and eminence, T. is still capable of taking her into his home and attempting to care for her. He's more sensitive and not quite as manically self-interested as we might think.

In fact, the relationship between son and mother becomes the central one of the novel, both thematically and because these two characters are the ones most capable of transforming. If they seem at moments unknowable, it is in the way of those closest to us, perplexing in their refusal to be consistent. Something of the particularity and peculiar playfulness of Millet's method is summed up in an exchange between mother and son over a

figurine she has bought to hold guest soap in his bathroom, which T. fails to recognize as Dresden china.

His response provokes her disquisition first on "our boys" killed during the carpet-bombing of Dresden in the Second World War, then on the terrible deaths of the inhabitants of Dresden itself, a train of thought which, while it offers an expanded view of the world's horrors, T. (like us) judges hysterical and far-fetched. Just as his mother (a Catholic, which is not incidental) is made to look ridiculous, Millet swerves and gives her a clarifying moment of perception: "Your generation thinks that wanting means getting. But for most of the people in the whole world ... what they want has nothing to do with their life. ... But one thing they have you and your friends will never have . ... Longing, dear. Longing makes the soul." The remark moves T. to tenderness.

Millet is a writer capable of great tenderness and empathy toward her characters, a tenderness that moves outward from human beings to encompass the natural world. T.'s belief in the edifices of civilization, in building things and built things, in a world that he and others like him can control, suffers increasing incursions. The fact that the novel is set during the 1980s and '90s may make this belief initially easier to maintain, but, disturbingly, people around him keep disappearing or dying; some of his solitude is not self-induced. He starts breaking into zoos at night to commune with the animals, particularly animals on the verge of extinction, whose ultimate loneliness, as the last of their kind, begins to obsess him. Animals (and mothers) become the enigmatic agents of his moral and emotional growth.

In its dramatizing of the belief that animals must enter our moral thought, Millet's novel recalls the recent work of J. M. Coetzee. But Millet also wants animals to enter our imaginative thought - for us, like T., to begin think our way into their lives and consciousness - and in this her novel evokes, if indirectly, Barbara Gowdy's skill in transporting us into the minds of elephants in *The White Bone*.

*How the Dead Dream* is hardly didactic. In T., Millet creates a complex self capable of complex encounters. It's hard, in fact, to convey how invigorating Millet's fiction is, how intelligent and thematically rich, how processes of thought are themselves made urgent and lively through the specificity of her observations and sentences that offer startlement, small and large. This isn't fiction that tells us how to live. Instead, it dramatizes the power of attentiveness to an expanded, if terribly flawed and potentially dying, world, attentiveness being a kind of tenderness, which is a kind of love.

*Catherine Bush, the author most recently of the novel Claire's Head and writer-in-residence at the University of Guelph, tries to be attentive to her animal companion.*

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