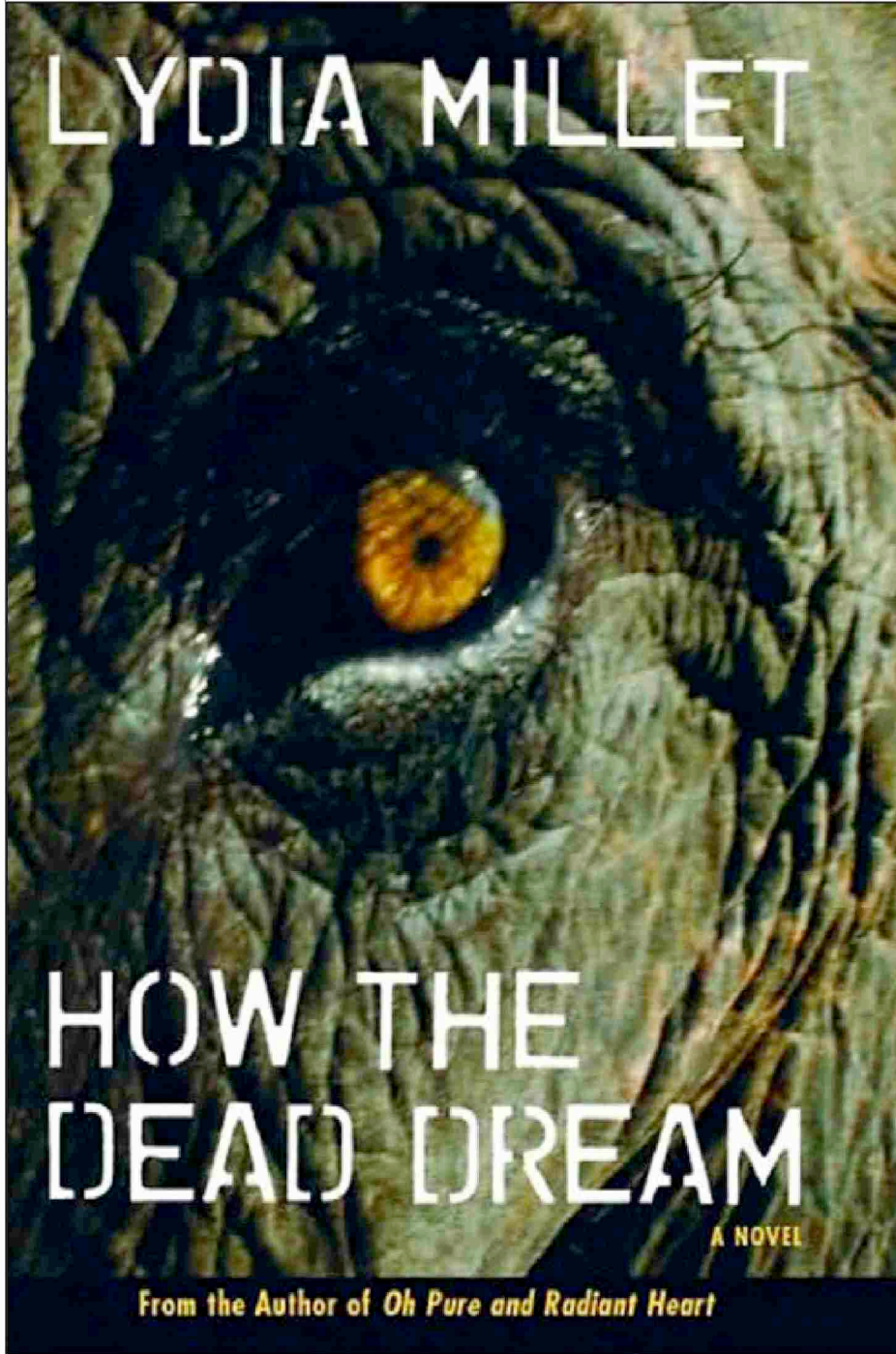
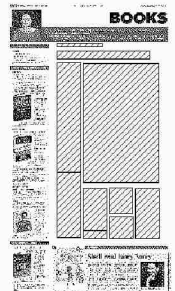


REVIEW | *How the Dead Dream*

FEAR FOR 'FINAL ANIMALS'?



How the Dead Dream, by Lydia Millet (244 pages; Counterpoint; \$24)



Lydia Millet writes a waking dream of nature in peril.

By JEFFREY ANN GOUDIE
Special to The Star

What if the shorelines were receding and animals were going extinct and nobody seemed to care?

Lydia Millet cares, and in her sixth novel, *How the Dead Dream*, she writes a satirical allegory about our peril that is involving, dead-on funny and urgent.

Millet's fifth book, *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart*, was a brilliant novel about the fathers of the A-bomb awakening on the streets of 2003 Santa Fe to a concrete dystopia. In this new novel, Millet continues her concern with the casual paving-over of nature.

How the Dead Dream is about "final animals." With thematic echoes of *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart*, the novel is its own original self.

At the outset, T., the protagonist, is a small child in love with the mighty dollar. He schemes and studies the portraits of the great statesmen who adorn paper currency.

T. grows from a somewhat menacing child into a self-contained college student. While his frat brothers trip out on LSD, he remains cool and contained, a small Babbitt wiping up the messes of his hedonistic peers.

At the tender age of 22, he turns his first six-figure profit. He sets off for L.A., where he establishes himself as a real-estate developer with a small staff. Money seems to fall in his lap.

Millet writes: "The rules for

his own comportment were few and simple, and first among them was, always speak as though unimpressed by large figures; always convey the impression that the grandiose is commonplace."

T.'s self-containment begins to crack after he accidentally hits and kills a coyote on the highway. He is unexpectedly moved by the plight of this fallen animal.

Shortly thereafter, he picks out a dog at the humane shelter, and before he knows it, his mother shows up on his doorstep. T.'s father has left without a trace.

She takes up residence in his apartment. She adds bizarre domestic touches, such as a china shepherdess on his toilet tank. In conversation she veers between free-associative wackiness and understated perspicacity.

T. begins to develop a tract of land in the desert, and he falls for a young woman, Beth: "The room was a holding pen, a split moment. Outside the room was the rest of his existence. For years he had been detached and now in a stroke of time he was not."

In short order, crises shatter T.'s fleeting happiness. Served with divorce papers, his mother overdoses on tranquilizers and has a stroke. He discovers his father working at a Key West transvestite bar. His lover Beth dies suddenly of a rare heart ailment.

Disturbed that his suburban subdivision in the Mojave Desert has displaced and destroyed a colony of kangaroo rats, T. begins to break into zoos to sleep near representatives of endangered species: "... they were at the forefront of aloneness, like pioneers.

They were the ones sent ahead to see what the new world was like."

This is his life by night. By day he is still a successful developer. After a hurricane decimates his resort construction on an island off Belize, T. has a ripping heart-of-darkness moment in the jungle, not to discover innate human savagery, but something far simpler and more benign.

Wonderful secondary characters abound in this end-time novel, including T.'s spacey mother, his over-the-top gay father, a saucy paraplegic friend, a testosterone-driven egomaniac investor and fraternity brothers straight off the set of "Animal House."

With a master's in environmental policy from Duke, Millet sees the natural world with clear-eyed urgency and the social landscape with wisecracking, dark humor.

How the Dead Dream is an edgy telegram on behalf of nature and its singular beasts. As Millet writes: "The quiet mass disappearance, the inversion of the Ark, was passing unnoticed."

Jeffrey Ann Goudie is a freelance writer and reviewer and member of the National Book Critics Circle.



Lydia Millet