

Money for nothing

By CAROLYN KELLOGG

How the Dead Dream

A Novel

Lydia Millet

Counterpoint: 244 pp., \$24

A boy is so entranced by money that he holds dimes and quarters in his mouth, an act that is partly love, partly a wish for assimilation. In a rare moment of rebellion — a tactic, really, in a negotiation with his parents — he interrupts his mother's book club, spewing out coins like a human slot machine. (He gets what he wants: a savings account.)

"How the Dead Dream," Lydia Millet's sixth novel, follows this boy, known as T., into adulthood with an economy of language and a fullness of heart. T. is on track to be a classic cold-hearted capitalist until the vicissitudes of his life lead him to find unexpected solace in animals, the more endangered the better. Eventually, he breaks into zoos at night, once getting so close to the elephants that "he felt their breath, a warm wind of eaten hay." T.'s evolution from capitalist to caretaker functions both as allegory and character study, and works if the reader lends T. his sympathies.

At first, T. might seem hard to like — he's a child who turns schoolyard bullying into a business, and when he collects for the unfortunate, he keeps the bulk of the take without a twinge of conscience. But he's rendered in such complex, fine detail — as carefully etched as one of the engravings he studies on the backs of dollar bills — that he comes alive, irresistibly sympathetic, both deadpan and deep.

"He read old texts with great pleasure, particularly those written by certain stalwart Puritans whose parsimony seemed born of a voluptuous and secret greed. He combed through the texts for signs of this sinful covetousness — a pornography of spirit, for nothing was more of a guilty pleasure than the greed of those who believed themselves righteous."

With one major real estate success behind him, T. launches an enormous Southern California desert development. One night, driving there in his Mercedes, he hits a coyote and stops without really understanding why. As he tends to the dying animal, he is bewildered by the depth of his emotion: "The fullness, the terrible sympathy!" This intensity fades, but the encounter is his first sign of compassion, a hairline fracture in his entrepreneur's shell.

Soon he adopts a dog, an effort to reach out. When his parents split up, his mother moves close to him —

he takes care of her, somewhat reluctantly, by allowing her to take care of him. He spots a beautiful girl, Beth, and wins her. His life expands: Mom takes the dog for walks, Beth takes Mom shopping. When tragedy strikes, T. is absolutely undone. Even though the story is not told in the first person, the narrative is so close to T. that the text is flattened and strangled by his inarticulate grief.

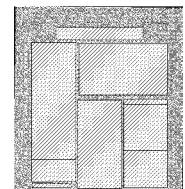
"Then the food was cold and limp and she took it away again. He drank water from time to time, finding a glass in his hand with ice cubes that clicked against it thinly, but nothing else entered him. He had the suspicion that cogs were spinning, the universe beyond his walls was functioning and he was not, but he had no choice."

Loss opens T. up in strange ways. He begins to think about animals — the "last animals" — endangered, nearly lost, all but dead. He remembers, regretfully, a kangaroo rat condemned to extinction by his development. Without intruding on his success as a builder — he pays millions in taxes, he says — he plans business trips around zoos. He sneaks in at night to get close to the rarest animals, never considering that he might be putting himself at risk, professionally and physically. Nor does he use his resources to help the animals; where he might choose to be a guardian, he instead is simply a witness.

As the novel winds toward its conclusion, T.'s limits become apparent. He screws up a vital friendship, insults a key business partner, watches a loved one slip away and is unable even to protect his dog. Checking in on his latest development-in-progress, a resort off the coast of Brazil, he decides to visit an animal preserve — the only way to get there is a Conradian trip up a jungle river. Through it all he ponders the ends of things. Extinction. Death.

Remarkably, it isn't at all turgid. The story is peppered with humor: T.'s women treat his buddies with witty disdain; an upper-class woman's near-death experience includes such an underwhelming, fluorescent-lighted vision of the afterlife that it is laugh-out-loud. Even when T. is so sad he can barely stand, the narration carries a wry humor. "[T]his was a Catholic hospital, he realized, a feature he had not noticed before despite the name of it, which was the name of a saint."

T.'s moniker seems Victorian, old-world, and to follow his story is to read at a distance. As carefully wrought as T. is, he is also a stand-in, an allegory. His growing awareness — twinned with an ineffective guardianship — serves as a parable for our society's relationship to the natural world.



In her last book, "Oh Pure and Radiant Heart," Millet also created a fable, transporting three fathers of the atom bomb — J. Robert Oppenheimer, Enrico Fermi and Leo Szilard — to present-day New Mexico, where a librarian takes them under her wing. Like this book, her last mixed the most serious of questions — the import of the atomic age — with low humor and satire. In lesser hands, this might be obnoxious, but Millet achieves a balance of humor and seriousness.

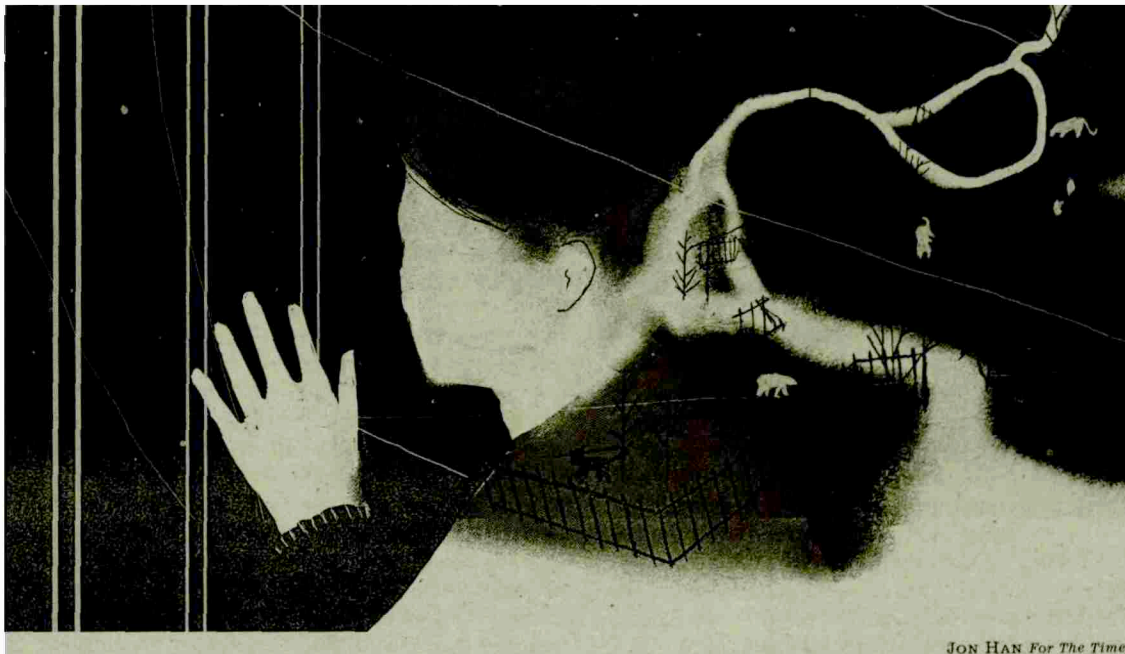
Her earlier novels tend to be more one or the other. The PEN-USA award-winning "My Happy Life" (2002) is a tragic, lyrical cry from a dreamscape — the story of a woman whose life was never her own and whose ability to recount it has been almost completely obliterated. "Everyone's Pretty" (2005) is rambunctious, featuring a hyper-articulate, drunken pornographer and the oddball Angelenos who cross his path — a sexually repressed Christian Scientist and his dim-witted, horny wife, a biker with a quick fist and a pet parrot, a thoughtful blond with a self-destructive streak.

Some incidents recur — a visit to the coast of South

America appears in two books, as do characters taking notice of goldfish pooping. More significantly, themes do too: the search for self and for purity; the difference between espousing virtues and living them; our responsibilities and limitations as people and as heedless human participants in an ecosystem vulnerable to our actions.

These themes come together in T., who is above all a thoughtful protagonist. Millet has drawn a man whose weaknesses actually empower the reader. When it comes to water resources, endangered species, shrinking habitats, global warming, couldn't we all do more than feel the warm breath against our cheeks? In "How the Dead Dream," Millet has hit on a wonderfully unique formula: To write engaging fiction about serious matters, it helps to mix in the plain dumb silliness of goldfish poop. ■

Carolyn Kellogg hosts the literary blog *Pinky's Paperhaus* at www.pinkypaperhaus.com.



JON HAN For The Times

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