

# He does more than talk to the animals

## How the Dead Dream

By Lydia Millet

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By Andrew Leland

Lydia Millet is generous with her satire. In her novels, abstract, poetic passages bemoan the fate of humanity alongside goofy, broad-stroked depictions of overweight Americans saying, doing and wearing idiotic things. Her new novel is no exception. It's suffused with lyrical elegies for extinct species as well as caustic, cartoonish portraits of the people responsible for their extinction. "How the Dead Dream" synthesizes the two styles of Millet's fiction — the harrowing and the madcap — with a new elegance. The chapters are longer, the narrative voice more coherent, and, as a result, the outrage in her fiction achieves an unprecedented depth of focus.

It's tempting to describe "How the Dead Dream" as a book about a man who breaks into zoos and sleeps with the animals. It's a memorable conceit, but only a fraction of the narrative. The book follows the metamorphosis of Thomas — he goes by T. — from an alienated and largely emotionless real estate developer into a compassionate child of mother nature. T. is a born capitalist ("His first idol was Andrew Jackson"), and he spends his childhood making, hoarding and coveting money. He extorts cash from his schoolmates and swindles local charity groups — but he always gives a cut to the "cause at hand." His justification, that "his efforts, if not entirely selfless, yielded what he liked to call a 'positive net effect,'"

sounds like an argument a large, corrupt corporation or government would make. And indeed, throughout his early life, T. behaves like a wealthy, heartless institution. He doesn't have any relationships that don't contribute to his monomaniacal focus on wealth.

After college, T. brokers the sale of a derelict apartment building and moves to Los Angeles to begin his career as a real estate developer. In California, exploiting the "greatness in open space," a series of deaths catalyzes his conversion from institution to human being. The first comes on the way to Las Vegas, when, driving at night, he hits a coyote. T. drags it off of the road, and, overwhelmed by unfamiliar emotions, watches it die. He marvels that none of the passing drivers care that a sentient creature lies with its legs crushed and imagines the "lines of stopped traffic for miles" that would materialize if it were him, and not the coyote, dying beside the highway. T.'s sudden, convulsive reaction — "[t]he fullness, the terrible sympathy!" — is jarring, but by the time T. drives away, the coyote's elevation from the status of road kill's "sad lumps of dirty meat" is genuinely moving.

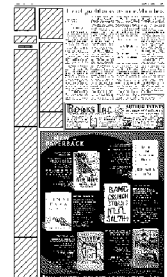
T. undergoes another sudden conversion after he falls in love with an investor's assistant, but his new girlfriend ("Beth, she had said"), is rendered with significantly less sympathy than the dying coyote. We know that "she had erect posture, an effortless dignity and perfect light-brown skin," and they do seem to get along. But before the relationship develops beyond mere plot contrivance, she's killed by a mysterious disease that gives her a heart attack while driving. The brevity and opacity of her character don't support the histrionic period of mourning that follows, which, along with T.'s strained relationship with his out-of-the-closet father and his mother's descent into dementia, slow down the middle section of the novel considerably. But Beth's death is necessary to T.'s conversion.

One day, on a lark, he visits a zoo.

He accosts a family whose children are throwing garbage at a bear. The confrontation is shrill: "It is my business," T. says to the family, "Just like it would be if you threw garbage at my sister." His new conviction makes him sound like an eco-superhero realizing his new powers: "This was who he was, he thought; he was a person who would defend, who would swear and threaten and feel the heat and the cliff-edge of opinion." His obsession with endangered animals intensifies, and he begins breaking into zoos at night, at first just watching the animals, and eventually falling asleep inside the exhibits. Millet's observations of captive animals and the torpid atmosphere of zoos feature some of the best writing in the book. After the garbage-throwing family leaves, for example, the tormented bear was "still turning bleakly round, tossing its head as though trapped in a nightmare"; the first thing T. notices about elephants is their "breath, a warm wind of eaten hay."

Despite the evenings he spends in animal cages, T. still finds time to develop his real estate projects, in particular a resort island in Belize. He flies there to oversee construction, and the final chapter, which completes T.'s ideological transformation on a calamitous river journey into the rain forest, is the novel's most vivid and consuming scene.

The book's conclusion raises the question: How didactic is "How the Dead Dream"? It is hard to imagine a global profiteer finishing the novel and resolving to change his ways. Millet's book is far too quirky for that — viz. the scene where T. has sex with a paraplegic woman after she hurls herself into a swimming pool. On the other hand, it may be difficult for nominally liberal readers to identify with T., who up until the end absently destroys a tropical island while daydreaming about his dead girlfriend. Perhaps Millet's novel isn't meant as an environmental wake-up call for its readers, though it provides all the information such an awakening would require. Instead, by presenting the



facts of biological extinction in a bizarre and compelling fiction, the novel behaves more like the zoo animals T. visits: You may be interested in them, but they're not necessarily interested in you. ■

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