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The man who loved money

Witness the sentimental education of an Information Age Everyman -- and his salvation -- in Lydia Millet's beautiful new novel.

By Laura Miller

Feb. 04, 2008 | T., the hero of Lydia Millet's new [novel](#), "How the Dead Dream," falls in love at a tender age; the object of his infatuation is currency. His early admiration of the lithographs on the \$20 and \$10 bills -- the "grave and finely etched countenance" of Andrew Jackson and the "nobility and feminine grace" of Alexander Hamilton -- naturally segues into a veneration of [money](#) in all its abstract and translated forms. He subscribes to a tranquil faith in the "great institutions and the tall columns and white soaring domes that stood for them."

T. grows into the sort of man who carefully observes but never participates in the follies of his frat boy peers, a closet day trader who thrills to the frictionless flow of capital and the solid, smoothly functioning systems it builds, from cities to markets. Without forfeiting a certain blinkered integrity, he becomes a real estate developer in Southern California, priding himself on the well-made and orderly subdivision he erects in the shadow of the Panamint Mountains.

"How the Dead Dream" describes the sentimental education and eventual salvation of T., who despite a personal history that leans toward caricature, remains a sympathetic figure throughout. He's no asshole, unlike the drunken, privileged louts he often works with. Millet asks us to believe that T. reaches his early 20s without a serious ding on his conscience, without once being compelled to see the collateral damage caused by the amassing of wealth and power. OK -- it's a tall order, but if you give her that, then T. becomes a viable Information Age Everyman, inhabiting a world that's been stripped, graded and paved to facilitate his fluid progress. His ignorance of the hidden price paid for all this comfort is more common than many of us would like to think.

T.'s titanium casing first develops a crack when, while driving through Nevada one night, he hits a coyote with his Mercedes. The animal doesn't die right away, and when T. gets out to check on it, he's invaded by emotion -- pity, even empathy. He finds himself crouched by the coyote's side, imagining its pain and fear as it dies amid "the smells of asphalt, exhaust, and gasoline, no doubt also the smell of her own blood, and him, and other smells he could not know himself." The incident spooks and transforms him. He brings a shelter dog into his previously attachment-free life. Then his fastidious Catholic mother moves in after being abandoned by her husband of 30 years. And then T. falls in love, with a warm, gracious young woman he can easily imagine gliding alongside him through his charmed existence -- whereupon she dies suddenly in a freak accident.

Millet's prose is cool and honed, which makes T.'s growing preoccupation with the irregular, the organic and the doomed -- embodied in the various endangered animal species with which he becomes obsessed -- an oblique counter-current to the narrative style. The DeLillo-esque sheen to the surface of the novel is also subtly undercut by a homely drollery that keeps the reader off balance. Coming out of a stroke-induced coma, T.'s mother claims that she has visited the afterlife, and it's an International House of Pancakes.

Dismayed ("I thought it would be more expensive than that"), she redoubles her religious activities, hoping to get herself and her son into a better version of heaven.

T.'s fixation on endangered species takes an unlikely form, and eventually it delivers him to a place that couldn't be more different from his tidy desert subdivision. He comes to feel that the globe's vanishing [animals](#) are "at the forefront of aloneness, like pioneers. They were the ones sent ahead to see what the new world was like." Could the meaning of everything he once cherished be secretly leaking away, from some breach deep within its foundations? What would it mean to be human and civilized in a world from which animals and the wild have disappeared? As soon as T. considers this possibility, his once-serene faith in authority and institutions begins to crumble. He becomes eccentric in the eyes of his colleagues, befriending a surly paraplegic girl and alienating an important investor because he pushes away T.'s dog.

Unlike the most literary pilgrims headed into the heart of darkness, T. grows to crave dissolution, the breakdown of the barrier between humanity and [nature](#). "Cities were the works of men," he decides, "but the earth before and after those cities, outside and beneath and around them, was the dream of a sleeping leviathan -- it was god sleeping there and dreaming, the same god that was time and transfiguration. From whatever dreamed the dream at the source, atom or energy, flowed all the miracles of evolution."

As you might conclude from the quotation above, "How the Dead Dream" becomes almost mystical as T. nears his goal. The writing is always flawlessly beautiful, reaching for an experience that precedes language itself. When T. finally finds what he's looking for, the moment is both immensely comforting and infinitely sad.

-- By Laura Miller

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