

Redemption Through Roadkill

Novelist Lydia Millet offers up a shrewdly funny take on money, death, and vanishing species

How the Dead Dream
 By Lydia Millet
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BY JAMES HANNAHAM

For a long time, Lydia Millet has had the makings of a great novelist. At least two of her five previous books have hinted at how far her gifts might take her, but her latest, *How the Dead Dream*, brings all her strengths into an impressive balance.

In 2005's *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart*, her fourth book, Millet farcically imagined what might happen if Oppenheimer, Szilard, and Fermi, the architects of the A-bomb, returned to earth in 2003, inexplicably resurrected by the dream of a New Mexico housewife. Despite a somewhat slow pace, Millet navigates the novel's death-defying high concept with a biting, historically and politically aware sense of humor some have called Pynchonesque. With wizard-like nuance she renders the real-life scientists, and also reveals an even rarer quality for fiction writers: a sincere concern for the fate of humanity.

However earnest her uneasiness, Millet has never served up her fears for the future without irony. Her brilliantly perverse third book, *My Happy Life* (2002), is a complex black comedy in which a nameless female narrator has been left behind in a condemned mental institution to ponder her past, scrawling her autobiography on the walls of her lonely, locked room. Though that sounds like a dreary read, the narrator unflinchingly recasts her horrible experiences in a positive light—not so easy, since they include abandonment, homelessness, child theft, and being beaten with a flail. But like a sister to the heroines of Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*, this modern Candide delivers a dead-on critique of memoir, a sarcastic feminist response to gendered self-help posturing, and a beautifully sad meditation on experience. Is the narrator simply deluding herself, the novel provokes us to think, or are even the most wrenching events of life somewhat glorious? "And I recall the lost things happily and swell in contentment that they ever were. At all,"

The things we zoo for love: Lydia Millet

the luckless heroine dreamily recounts.

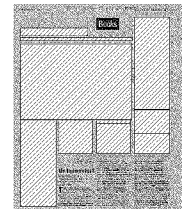
Initially more blank than the delusional inmate of *My Happy Life*, the chilly protagonist of *How the Dead Dream*, identified mostly as T., begins life as a money-obsessed kid who eventually parlays his business acumen into—what else?—a career as a real-estate developer. A secretive, insensate frat boy, he quickly arrives at the sort of absurd, quasi-religious conclusions encouraged by free-market capitalism: "Currency infused all things, from the small to the monolithic. . . . In the lurch and flux, in all the variation and the same, it was only money that could set a person free." But just as T. reaches the edge of *American Psycho* territory, Millet redeems him, in part by painting him as a clueless victim of his times, though not an innocent one.

T. kills a coyote, running it over with his sports car, and this first encounter with death starts the Buster Keaton-ish capitalist on an inner journey that eventually inverts his worldview. Doing penance for the roadkill, he rescues a dog from a local shelter, and it plants a seed of compassion in him that slowly germinates as the lives of his intimates spin into various, very human forms of chaos. His father disappears, triggering his mother's tranquilizer overdose; when T. tracks him down, his father comes out of the closet. T. meets an investor's assistant, Beth, with whom he falls in love. Not long after that, however, her heart suddenly gives out and she dies. T., in an eccentric method of grieving for Beth, develops a sympathy for the animals that his development projects have displaced, and he begins, compulsively, to break into zoos in order to spend time with endangered animals.

While this is perhaps one of the least credible elements of the novel, Millet handles it with convincing tenderness,

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linking T.'s loss of a mate to the loss of a species: "What arrested him in the zoo was the wilderness it contained—how far



this was from the realm of his competence. He wanted to meet it. He knew the zoo animals lived in cages but nothing more about them except that they were alone, most of them, not only alone in the cages, often, but alone on the earth, vanishing.”

My Happy Life may qualify as Millet's most beloved curiosity, and *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart* as her most ambitious (or at least longest) novel. But *How the Dead Dream* is certainly her most ac-

complished. By toning down her broad comedy, she emphasizes all the juicy ludicrousness inherent in the modern world, as we kill our habitats, our souls, and eventually, Millet warns, ourselves. In the process, she has pulled off her funniest, most shrewdly thoughtful and touching novel. If Kurt Vonnegut were still alive, he would be extremely jealous.

