

Reading Group Guide for *How the Dead Dream* by Lydia Millet

Introduction

T. has grown up in suburban New England with a devoted Catholic mother, an invisible father, and bold entrepreneurial schemes. As a boy, he worships the images of dead presidents on dollar bills and takes a generous cut of all the money he raises doing door-to-door collection for charity. Bright, ambitious, tightly controlled, and with a reverence for the institutions of capital, he moves to Los Angeles after college, where he goes into real estate and is instantly successful. He has just fallen in love for the first time, and is trading in one high-end Mercedes for the next, when his neatly organized, upwardly mobile life is thrown into chaos by the appearance of his once-loving, now distraught and unbalanced mother. She's fled the East Coast seeking comfort from T. after his father's sudden desertion, and promptly moves into his bachelor apartment.



Struggling to keep her from breaking down without pushing away his new girlfriend, T. finds events spinning out of his control, and a series of painful losses leaves him isolated. Spiraling through grief to recovery he begins to nurture an obsession with rare and vanishing species; soon he's living a double life, building sprawling subdivisions by day and breaking into zoos at night to be with animals who are the last of their kind—a journey that changes who he is and what he believes and eventually takes him on a dangerous boat ride up a remote tropical river in a hurricane-ravaged Caribbean jungle.

Questions for Discussion

1. T.'s father is never a major presence in his life. How do you think his distance from his father affects T.'s social development? Would T. have grown into the same kind of man with a more expressive or engaged father?

2. How does his mother's increased distance and disintegration, as T. goes through young adulthood, affect her son?
3. Does hitting the coyote with his Mercedes change T.'s behavior or mindset? Is it a coincidence that this event occurs immediately before he begins his first real relationship? And what do you think is the connection between the coyote episode and T.'s adoption of a pet?
4. Chapter 4 is a major turning point for T.: the kangaroo rats in his subdivision go extinct, and in Chapter 5 he begins breaking into zoos and captive-breeding facilities. On pg. 125, he dreams not of the rats but of ants:

When he slept that night it was the ants abandoning ship.
They left in their billions, all of them, and as they went away
holes opened up in the earth, yawning sinkholes into which
oceans and mountains poured.

- What does this vision of the ants' departure mean to T.? What drives him to confront the family throwing garbage at a bear?
5. What is it about T.'s situation, after his losses, that leads him to seek the company of animals on the brink of extinction? What do these animals mean to him?
 6. Does T. seem to have meaningful contact with the species he tries to get close to? Do you think he understands them or learns from them? Do you think he may in fact be harming them with his invasions?
 7. How do T.'s relationships with other people compare or contrast with his relationships with vanishing animals?
 8. Do you feel more positive about T. as a real estate developer or a man who breaks into zoos? Do you think the author intends to portray him as a venal character who ultimately finds an enlightened path, or as a troubled but well-meaning individual who succumbs to mental breakdown?
 9. At the end of *How the Dead Dream* T. seems to experience a conversion. Do you feel he's found God or simply embraced a new politics or philosophy? Is his "conversion" genuine?

10. What does the book's final line mean to you?

Biography of Lydia Millet

Lydia Millet was born in 1968 to a librarian mother and Egyptologist father in Boston, Massachusetts. The family moved to Canada when she was a small child, and Millet spend her childhood in the city of Toronto during the school year and small-town Georgia during the summers, where her mother's family had a peach farm. She moved back to the U.S. to go to college at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, received a master's at Duke University in environmental economics and policy, then lived in New York, where for several years she was a writer for the Natural Resources Defense Council. In 1999 she left New York for the Arizona desert, where she lives and works for the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity. *How the Dead Dream* is Millet's sixth novel and is the first in a trilogy; her 2002 book *My Happy Life* won the PEN-USA Award for fiction, and 2005's *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart*, about the physicists who invented the atomic bomb, was shortlisted for Britain's Arthur C. Clarke Prize. Her essays have appeared in numerous anthologies, and recent short stories can be found in *McSweeney's* and *Tin House*.