



Magnificence

Lydia Millet

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Pulitzer Prize finalist Lydia Millet is "one of the most acclaimed novelists of her generation" (Scott Timberg, *Los Angeles Times*). *Salon* praised her for writing that is "always flawlessly beautiful, reaching for an experience that precedes language itself." The *Village Voice* added, "If Kurt Vonnegut were still alive, he would be extremely jealous."

This stunning new novel presents Susan Lindley, a woman adrift after her husband's death and the dissolution of her family. Embarking on a new phase in her life after inheriting her uncle's sprawling mansion and its vast collection of taxidermy, Susan decides to restore the neglected, moth-eaten animal mounts, tending to "the fur and feathers, the beaks, the bones and shimmering tails." Meanwhile an equally derelict human menagerie—including an unfaithful husband and a chorus of eccentric old women—joins her in residence.

In a setting both wondrous and absurd, Susan defends her legacy from freeloading relatives and explores the mansion's unknown spaces. Funny and heartbreaking, *Magnificence* explores evolution and extinction, children and parenthood, loss and revelation. The result is the rapturous final act to the critically acclaimed cycle of novels that began with *How the Dead Dream*.

Magnificence Details

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From Reader Review Magnificence for online ebook

Roxane says

This is a book I love because of its flaws. So many things go wrong here—the last 1/3 is rushed, the prose is full of excess and indulgence, the plot is thin and incomplete, there are overly convenient solutions to the problems the protagonist encounters, but it doesn't matter. A great writer can get away with these things. I really loved these flaws. I don't think women writers are allowed to be indulgent nearly enough. The writing is so lush and the protagonist, Susan is so human, so honest, so hard on herself, such a mess, I like her. I love that Millet wrote about a woman in her late forties as a very sexual being. I love that this is a novel about grief but it isn't, not really. Much of the prose is given over to meditations on men, sex, love, and solitude. When her husband Hal, dies, Susan sells her home and needs to find a new life for herself. She inherits an odd, sprawling mansion in Pasadena and makes the home her own, while exploring the mansion's many wonders--eclectic rooms, filled with an extensive taxidermy collection. It's such an odd little premise but Millet is unflappable in making the premise work. Magnificence is true to its title and a really satisfying, delightful read.

Holly says

I messed this one up: reading a series out of order is something *I just DON'T do*. But I'd never read anything by Lydia Millet and somewhere picked up the mistaken notion that although this book was third in a trilogy it was also "stand-alone" (that reading the first two novels wasn't essential). So I downloaded an audio version and didn't read any reviews or background on the book - just blithely listened over 3 runs and a bout of insomnia in the wee hours.

I really did like *Magnificence* on its own. There is a party scene that is so-well wrought that I'd put it in competition with others in recent fiction (as good as Lorrie Moore's in *A Gate at the Stairs*, although Moore's is lauded for different reasons). And after the slightly off-putting start in which the character Susan constantly refers to herself as "slut" and "murderer" the story began to move ahead and she increasingly became a woman I wanted to understand (not that the self-appellations "slut" and "murderer" aren't compelling themselves, but I didn't know how to put them in context in the early pages).

Now that I'm done and perused some reviews I've realized that reading the first two novels would have made this more satisfying - would have filled in the missing backstory/side story about some essential characters: T and his mother Angela, Hal's fatal trip to Belize, and Susan's daughter's car accident, and the powerful sense in the final chapters that something pretty grand was culminating.

Justin Evans says

It's taken me a long time, but I think I've finally worked out what makes Millet's trilogy so odd, even though the books are perfectly readable and lack the obvious oddness of her other recent work (e.g., *Mermaids in Paradise* or *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart!*) The novels in the 'Dead' trilogy present themselves as almost perfectly generic modern fiction--told from one close third person point of view, with little plot, and a lot of the 'realistic' psychological detail that people like James Woods really enjoy.

Novels like that are intrinsically limited: the protagonists are always upper middle class westerners who have

literally nothing interesting happen to them other than marriage/divorce, sex, and death. So those are the events that such novels deal with. That's fine, it's realistic, and these are supposedly the great themes of literature, but really, there's a lot more to life.

Millet's trilogy is strange because although they present themselves as realistic psychological novels, they actually deal with seemingly random events. Here, the book is set up by the death of Susan's husband, shortly after he realized that Susan was cheating on him (a lot). So far, so banally realistic. But then Susan inherits a house full of stuffed animals from a mysterious uncle she barely remembers, and suddenly we're in the world of nineteenth century gothic fiction. Then some old women move in, for no particularly good reason. In other words, there's no organic plot development in these novels. Everything that happens happens for no good reason. Modern realism just doesn't work like that.

Particularly in 'Ghost Lights,' I found this contrived and pointless. But this novel is something else, a great conclusion to the work. It became clear fairly quickly that the important part of the book wasn't its depiction of post-menopausal sexuality, or grief, or whatever (though that was fine). The important part is the house itself, with its unworthy inheritor, its collection of animals hunted by the mysterious uncle, the old women who come to live there as well, and then the conclusion to the book, another out of nowhere piece of improbability that nonetheless makes perfect intellectual sense.

Millet did the same thing at the end of 'Mermaids,' and there it was just too ridiculous and implausible to justify the very slight gain in intellectual depth. Here, the improbabilities make a strong enough point that I wasn't bothered by the jarring effect.

Plot spoiler! What is that intellectual depth?

The uncle turns out to have a secret cache of extinct animals in a secret cellar, including the dodo and, chillingly, humans from extinct tribes. The house is cut off from the cellar, but also built on top of it; Susan and the older women are essentially taking care of all of these biological specimens, or, rather, the memories of them--which ties in perfectly to the memories of her husband.

The other possible, virtuous response to ecological destruction is taken by T. and Susan's daughter Casey--they jet around the world, trying to save animals and help the victims of capitalism/environmental destruction. That's not for everyone, and in particular it's not for me, so I appreciate the 'keep the memory alive, do the best you can' aspects of this one. It is open to one fairly obvious criticism, of course: Susan inherits massive wealth, and T. makes massive wealth doing bad things. In other words, lots of massive wealth. It's interesting to think what Millet might do with some ordinary middle class types and her usual environmental themes.

martha says

are you out of your mind? Great set -up with a weird death in a foreign country, a bereaved (but barely) widow, and her inheritance of a house full of taxidermy. But shit, Lydia does nothing with it! We just read placards of the animal types - who cares? what we want to know is how it changes her. it doesn't change her at ALL.

how can a book with no antagonist be so highly acclaimed?

Kat says

I never thought I would enjoy a novel in which taxidermy played a prominent part, but I loved this entertaining and amusing novel filled with preposterous events. I found Susan, the main character, sympathetic in spite of her misdeeds, and the mysterious lost basement that she's in search of kept me guessing. Meanwhile, the house is nearly taken over by the white-haired ladies of a church book group. The final pages of the novel are a moving lament for the loss of species.

Kelly says

After reading other reviews I'm curious what people found so despicable about the protagonist. She was just honestly human, the way I see it.

In any case, I thought this book was really great. Sort of a commentary about life and death, about being remembered and being forgotten, about love returned and love unrequited. In addition to the story being compelling in an undercurrent sort of way, it was sprinkled throughout with sentences that either reflected my own sentiments or were just simple and beautifully written.

This book is among whispers as a contender for the Pulitzer, which is why I read it, and I can see why. I do wonder, though, if it doesn't have the American perspective that Pulitzer winners are usually required to have. And also, there are portions of the book that seemed sorta man-hating (not the parts that reflected my own sentiments, by the way.).

Opens with this idea: "Now she was missing something and she always would be. That was all she had now: the freedom of nothing."

Closes with this: "Now I'm with you, but I'm also with him and I always will be. I'm staying with both of you. We are the memory of others, we are the memory of ourselves."

Sort of a reckoning of the same idea. Begins in despair and ends in hope.

Holly Madison says

I did not realize that this book was a part of a series when I began reading it. I am not sure if reading the other books would have changed my review or not, as the story seems to stand alright on its own. That being said, I did not enjoy this book. It felt like more of a chore than it should have, and I found the plot both dull and somewhat pointless.

The book follows a woman named Susan Lindley after she finds out that her husband was killed. She goes on to inherit her uncle's mansion full of taxidermy animals, and that is pretty much it. There are other embellishments throughout the story, such as references to Susan's constant need to sleep with men (both now and before her husband was dead), and she is not a likeable character. Still, I did find myself at least slightly sympathetic of her situation at losing a husband and having a somewhat complicated relationship with her crippled daughter. Still, this is not the kind of story I was expecting, and it felt devoid of any true purpose.

My main problem with this book isn't just the empty plot, but it is also Lydia Millet's writing style. It felt like she was trying far too hard -- the prose was often tedious, with an overuse of words that 99% of the general population would need to look up in a dictionary. It often felt like these little additions were added to make the author look smarter, but it had the opposite effect on me. In addition to her perplexing use of adjectives, she repeats herself far too much - often to the point of annoyance. I am not sure what her motive is for writing in this strange manner, but it made me dislike the book before I even delved into the main storyline.

Once in the main storyline, I noticed that the last part of the book felt extremely rushed and completely unsatisfactory. I think that my review might be better if I had read the first two books in the series - perhaps then I would be more fulfilled by the plot that was presented here and understand more about the characters back-story. That being said, I am not interested in reading the other books in the series since I detested this one so much.

Now to be fair, there were a few moments scattered throughout the book where I stopped and thought to myself, "that was really profound." Little snippets of wisdom portrayed as Susan's thoughts made me stop and think that Millet might actually have some potential behind all of her embellishments and ramblings. That being said, I think that Millet's writing style is a love-it or hate-it type of deal, and I did not love it.

Pam says

I don't know how I missed Lydia Millet up until now, but she is just so damn smart. The narrator of this book is not familiar to me, not 100% comprehensible, and yet I was so dazzled by her sensibility, in other words, the sentences used to create her. Wow

Heather says

I didn't love this book. It was bizarre. And I found none of the characters either likable or relatable.

Deborah says

SO annoying, so self-indulgent.

Long, boring discourses (supposed to sound "off-the-cuff," but clearly arduously-researched) and on ridiculous subjects that no sane person has a genuine interest in.

The book jacket says "funny and heartbreaking." I guess that is code for melodramatic and depressing.

Tuck says

i liked her run-up [ghost lights] to this novel better as the adventures, confusions, and ultimate death of hal, susan;s husband seemed more driving, weirder, but also more likely. in this followup, susan, who fucked her way though her 20's, 30's and 40's and eventually getting caught by her husband hal, pretty much leading to his death, makes susan reel and question her guilt. she was already feeling down as her daughter is a

paraplegic due to a car accident, and is a difficult daughter most of the time. and while not the most rounded character in fiction history, is refreshing to read about people who use chairs.

susan lucks out and inherits her uncles big ass mansion full of stuffed big game (and small) and just in time too, as she was pretty much paralyzed with grief and guilt for fucking her hubby dead.

lydia millet is the real thing and is a cozy way to get your literature and look over the shoulder of modern californians too. highly recommend lydia millet i do. Ghost Lights

Jodi says

Intriguing, engrossing, and extremely beautifully written. I will be thinking about this book for a long time...I may just need to read it again.

Rachel says

The thing that I love most about Lydia Millet is that she not only captures the moment where one's brain goes off the rails into crazy talk born of desperate unhappiness in a way that's familiar, she takes it perhaps even a step *further* than you'd expect.

There is a scene in *Magnificence* where its protagonist, Susan -- late to an important appointment, a serial adulterer with a now-dead husband, heiress to a dusty mansion of taxidermied animals -- starts thinking about how she "loves pornography, loves gangsta rap, loves war video games" all of the simulated violence that "stops insane men from committing actual murder." It is hysterical to me, the way Millet dashes off these hyperbolic opinions with nonchalance. (She does so in *Ghost Lights* too, which you **must** read before reading this.)

Judy says

Now I have come to the end of the trilogy: *How the Dead Dream*, *Ghost Lights*, *Magnificence*. I see why she calls it a trilogy (or at least the publisher calls it that.) Characters from the previous books inhabit the latter in a sequence where the time is a bit later than when the former book ended. Each book features a different character as the protagonist. Very David Mitchell.

Because I don't like to put spoilers in my reviews, I can't say much about the plot in *Magnificence* because I would spoil the end of *Ghost Lights*. Of course if you read the summary of this book here on Goodreads, it will be spoiled. Can't help that, but I don't think they should have done it.

I can say that this volume features Susan, the unfaithful wife of Hal and secretary to T. You learn about the marriage of Hal and Susan from her point of view as well as her reasons for sleeping around.

I can also say that the story is extremely woman-centered. I liked that. It is also slower or less plot centered, a bit more meandering and for that reason was overall not as impressive as the first two.

But the last chapter in which Susan stops being foggy-headed, indecisive, vague, and has her ah hah moment

is so magnificent that I suddenly saw where the author was heading through the entire three book cycle. So much so that I feel the titles of the books could be interchangeable.

The dead are always dreaming, the ghosts are always shining lights, and the magnificence of life underlies all.

Mary Beth says

The biggest flaw I found in this book was the lack of backstory on several main characters. At times, I felt as if I had stumbled into the middle of the narrative. I realized, two-thirds through, that "Magnificence" was written as the concluding book in a three book "cycle." Having not read the first two books, I'm not sure now I would go back to read them, since this book was very conclusive. Also, honestly, I'm afraid they would not be as good.

I loved this book, although some may find it murky. There is a lot going on inside Susan (the main character's) head, so it can be a bit talky. I found it lovely and profound. Susan behaved very badly, and suffered great loss, but somehow was able to redeem herself, in part by preserving her uncle's fantastic estate full of taxidermied beasts and discovering a better part of herself.
