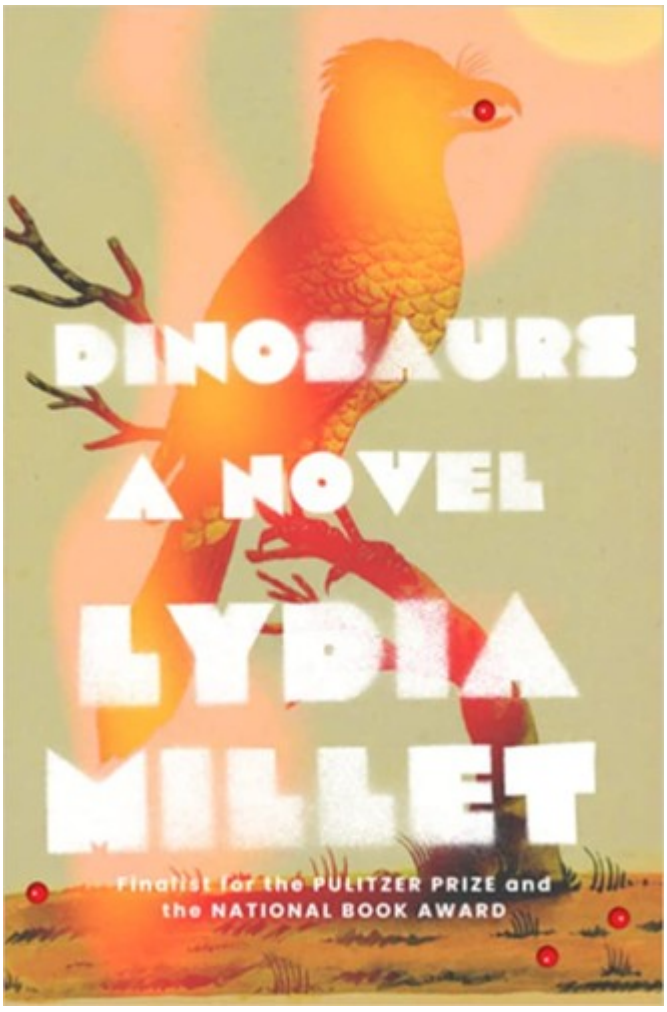
Meet Gil, the protector

The protagonist of Lydia Millet’s new novel is like a mother hen, both to his neighbors and to the birds.

by Allison Backous Troy in the May 2023 issue

In Review



Dinosaurs

A Novel

By Lydia Millet
W. W. Norton
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“Birds were the descendants of the dinosaurs,” Gil thinks during the walk that takes him from his expensive New York apartment to a new home in Arizona. It’s more than a walk; it’s a pilgrimage, a journey with a finite beginning and end, a closed loop of travel and migration. It takes him five months to make it to the home he’s bought sight unseen. On his way through the desert, he begins to see birds and the natural world they inhabit with a hard-bought clarity. “Without the last of the dinosaurs,” he thinks—without the creatures that survived an apocalypse—“the sky would be empty.”

Gil is the protagonist in Lydia Millet’s *Dinosaurs*, and as he settles into his new home, we learn about his own encounters with what feels like an apocalypse. The early loss of his parents, combined with the recent wreckage of a brutally unkind romantic relationship, leaves Gil feeling adrift in the world, unsure of how and where he belongs. Gil is also incredibly wealthy, the inheritor of family riches from his oil baron grandfather. “When you have a lot of money,” he says, “you never pay for anything. You never feel the cost. . . . Never a choice or a sacrifice, unless you give up your time.”

And that is precisely what Gil gives: his time as a volunteer, as a neighbor, and as a friend with a listening ear. He signs up as a “friendly man” escort at a local domestic violence shelter, where he takes single moms grocery shopping and keeps an eye out for their unhinged spouses. He opens his door to his neighbors, a family whose son, Tom, becomes a kind of son to Gil himself, confiding in him about schoolyard bullies and skateboarding adventures. He is without pretense, more comfortable eating in diners on his trek to Arizona than in the swanky hotels of New York. He helps others because he feels guilty about his wealth, but he also does it instinctively, like the mother hawk he watches from his window, caring for her young. Gil is the opposite of toxic masculinity—aware of his privilege, but also aware of how important it is for people to feel cared for, even if he struggles with being cared for himself.

Gil’s eagle eye catches everything in his vision, from changes in ecological habitats to the emotional status of his friends. He seems to genuinely befriend people everywhere he goes, including Jason, a fellow volunteer (and aspiring birder) who teaches Gil about symbiosis, about how blackbirds and mistletoe berries rely on each other in their mutual loop of provision and seed scattering. Jason is stuck in his own loop of sibling abuse, and Gil helps him. When Gil gets set up with Sarah, a friend of Tom’s mother, his own questions about how he can rely on another—and how his former partner was more parasite than mutual partner—become clearer and, surprisingly, easier to answer.

What makes those questions easier to answer is that Gil, in the desert, finds sanctuary. In the washes of the Southwest, under the “feathery shade of the mesquite trees,” he can trace his own journey with a growing compassion for himself, one that he usually reserves for strangers, past personal offenders, and anyone but himself. When Sarah tells him that he’s usually willing to fight for others but not himself, he accepts it plainly. He notes that his former partner’s cruel competitiveness clashed with what she called “weakness” in him. But “he didn’t want to win. He only wanted to be worthy.”

As Gil’s sense of worth grows, so too does his protective nature. He leaves a gutter untouched so that a mourning dove can build her nest; he tracks the movements of the mother hawk, the quail, and the rude HOA board members who yell at Tom for skateboarding in his own driveway. Gil’s ability to watch out for predators becomes keener in their newly post-Trump world. At a house party, he watches a drunk male houseguest refuse to leave a woman alone, swinging his arms at the empty air. Dead quails begin piling up in the streambed, and as the death count increases, so do other worrisome signs: crude graffiti spray-painted on neighborhood signs, White supremacist crosses on bumper stickers around town. Tom’s martial arts instructor sports a swastika tattoo, and when questioned, the receptionist shirks responsibility: “I don’t like, do the hiring. Or whatever.”

Gil becomes an even keener observer from his “castle” of a home. Tom’s family lives next door in a house with glass walls, and as Gil watches for the fugitive bird killer, he sees Tom’s parents making their own very human decisions about how to love each other, how to be faithful, and how to hold on. Gil observes his neighbors with the same protective gaze he gives the birds; he is unassuming and open, but fierce in his love for the friends (both animal and human) that have become *his*. Not because he wants to own something, or to win, but because he “gives a shit.”

Because he cares for them and, finally, for himself.