

At Your Disposal

In this novel, Jonathan Miles explores varieties of waste and decay in a consumer world.

By DAVE EGGERS

WELL, I LOVED this book. I don't know if it helps you or anyone to delay that assessment, so I won't. Jonathan Miles can write, and here he's written a wonderful book, and there's no one I would not urge to read it.

I didn't read Miles's first novel, "Dear American Airlines." I probably should have. But Richard Russo said a good deal of complimentary things about it in these pages, and he knows a lot more about life and writing than I do, so that should suf-

WANT NOT

By Jonathan Miles

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fice. My guess, given that "Dear American Airlines" was Miles's first book and "Want Not" is his second, is that he has gotten better. This is the work of a fluid, confident and profoundly talented writer who gets more fluid, more confident and seemingly more talented even within the book itself. As it progresses, "Want Not" so assuredly accumulates power and profundity and momentum that I read the last 200 pages without pause.

But I'll admit I wasn't sure at first. For a while I wondered if I was reading about people who did not and could not exist. Because "Want Not" has a message — it is about waste, decay and a world where most things are thrown away soon after they're made — there was a danger the characters would be *types* instead of *people*.

Take Talmadge Bertrand, who initially seems to be the hero and whom we first see sifting through garbage on a snowy day in Manhattan. Talmadge comes from money, attended Ole Miss, joined a fraternity, listened to Widespread Panic and smoked a lot of pot. Now he wears his hair like Jesus, has a purple star tattoo on his temple (which "the tattoo artist . . . told him signified celestial longing") and spends his days Dumpster-diving for life's essentials. On this particular day, searching for edible food, he accidentally retrieves a used condom. And though a nearby homeless man mocks him, Talmadge sees it as emblematic, evidence "that we were gnawing the planet alive, all of us, that the entire mass-produce, mass-dispose system was like some terrible, endgame buffalo hunt, a horror show of unpicked carcasses, and that *this* — this tube of driveled semen, flicked mindlessly onto food enough to feed a family — was Exhibit A, an ideal example of our blindness, of our pampered disregard and twisted self-indulgence, of the great un-

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Jonathan Miles

considered *flush* that defined civilization."

Talmadge returns with his findings to his girlfriend, Micah, in the abandoned building where they've squatted for six months. Like Talmadge, Micah at first seems an easy caricature. She wears dreads, has copious tattoos, wears a tank top and a flowy white skirt. But unlike Talmadge, she did not grow up with privilege. She was raised in Appalachia, with nothing at all, and the more we know about her, the more we realize she's the real purist, the stronger mind, the force behind their ideology and lifestyle. And we realize Talmadge wants to be near Micah — near the strength of her personality and the certainty of her ideals — more than he wants to eat thrown-away vegetables. Though they have nothing, Talmadge and Micah are happy. They eat free and pay no rent, their life's soundtrack "a song of New York City you can hear only once, and only as young lovers." But soon Talmadge's college buddy Matty enters the frame, squatting indefinitely in their squat, stirring up trouble — the serpent in their end-of-the-world Eden.

The next chapter introduces Elwin Cross Jr., a professor of linguistics at Marasmus State College — *applied* linguistics, he might note, for he wants his field to be useful. He's in his 50s, directionless, nearing a point in his life when "what is becomes what *was* and all the other verbs defining your existence go slumping into the preterite, crusted with apophonic alternations (I *sing* calcifying into I *sang*)." He's also morbidly obese, and despondent that his wife has recently left him for a professional chef.

One night, driving through New Jersey, Elwin hits a deer. Surprising himself, he

decides to take the body home. A sometime hunter in his youth, Elwin thinks he can make something of this senseless death. His neighbor's 22-year-old son — an abused kid in desperate need of mercy — helps cut the deer into steaks and roasts, and amid the gore of this road-kill, the two create food and some kind of bond, the thrown-away son finding validation with the thrown-away husband.

THEN THERE'S THE FAMILY of Sara, Dave and Alexis. Sara, who once harbored dreams of acting, lost her bond broker husband in the World Trade Center attacks when their daughter, Alexis, was 11, and has since married Dave — a thugish debt collector who bullies people into paying ancient credit card bills. It's a scavenger's life, sure, but a step up from his father's work: how could it be, Dave wonders, that the son of a turnpike toll collector "acquires and assetizes, acquires and assetizes, marries a hot widowed actress who knows the correct way to pronounce 'Bulgari,' then sets her up in a 4,400-square-foot house with a three-car garage and a swimming pool and the builder's top-of-the-line 'Brazilian hardwood' option"?

Dave and Sara are super-consumers, seemingly hopeless in their superficiality — Dave of course happy to pay for Sara's breast implants — and Alexis, now a surly teenager, wants none of it. She pines for her dead father, deeming him a hero and a saint, thinking her life would be far better with him than with her current bourgeois situation. But her father was more complicated than she knows, and so, she soon learns, are her mother and even her stepdad.

O.K., but how does Miles tie together all

these disparate stories? An abandoned professor of dead languages, his neighbor's wayward son, a young couple living off the grid and off the detritus of super-consumers like Sara and Dave? And then Alexis. And Elwin's dying father. And Matty. It seems too much, too many, and for a long while Miles does little to unite them. He alternates among the various stories and back stories for what seems a perilously long time, until we begin to wonder if we're heading for some tidy and unconvincing *deus ex machina* in the last few pages.

But somewhere in the middle of the book Miles does something extraordinary. He goes deep, very deep, with each of them, especially Micah, and the novel comes alive. We follow Micah back to a revelatory trip to India, to her strange and idyllic upbringing in Appalachia, and Micah emerges as the most fascinating person — not type, not character — in the book. In a similar vein, Sara and Dave are made fully real without undergoing any fundamental lifestyle change, and Alexis grapples with a personal apocalypse we hope she can turn into some kind of salvation. Even sad-sack Elwin is given hope in the present tense.

That hope, oddly enough, comes from an assignment that makes his interest in dying languages grimly useful. He's brought to the New Mexican desert, to a terrifying underground crypt where the country's most radioactive waste will be stored, and told that he and a team of engineers and artists are to come up with a way to warn future generations (or interplanetary settlers) of the untouchable danger beneath. This is the Waste Isolation Project Markers, and it gives Miles a way of talking about deep time, the end of time, the future and history and purpose of humankind, why we throw away or destroy just about everything we love — and whether we can or should be saved. Miles seamlessly covers all this with an admirably deft touch, and in a book that also features frat guys, Dumpster-diving and a Yankees game. How does he do it? As I said, the man can write.

This is a novel that could have been buried under the weight of its various themes and archetypes, and reading it could have been a chore. But it's a joyous book, a very funny book and an unpredictable book, and that's because everyone in it is allowed to be fully human. By the end, we get Miles's message very clearly, and it's not about recycling. It's that no one can be thrown away. Not the bond trader. Not the collection agency guy. Not the habitual shopper. Not the squatters, the environmental sinners or any baby brought into such a crowded and flawed world. As terrible as we can be, we belong here and we matter and we might even do some good. This, in the end — and by that I mean the planetary end — might be the most inconvenient truth of all. □