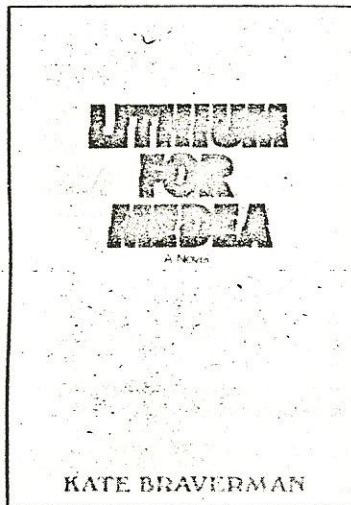


## FUCKBOOKS

By Michael Perkins

## SMB White Line Fever

✓ **Lithium for Medea.** By Kate Braverman. Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 10 E. 53rd St., New York, N.Y. 10022. \$9.95.



Open *Lithium for Medea* and listen to the voice of a storyteller. Kate Braverman's choice of words is quiet but precisely poetic, and she says the most interesting things.

*Lithium* is compelling reading because Braverman's quiet tone commands attention. Novelist John Rechy (*City of Night, The Sexual Outlaw*) calls this book "erotic and moving." I agree wholeheartedly, as I must with Joan Didion's description: "...a deeply felt piece of work by a very gifted young writer."

Popular fiction these days is strong on "storyline" and deficient in narrative tone. Television has won the argument with writers about quick-moving images. In fiction now, there's no time for the reflective voice, but it seems to me that if you don't care who's telling you a particular story, maybe you've got too much television between your ears.

Adjust to the more restrained narration of a good novelist. Trust her vision. Chances are, if you pick up *Lithium for Medea*, you're going to keep on reading. You'll want to hear more about Rose, our guide through a vision of hell which is not without its charms for the appreciative reader. Among them is the rich precision of Braverman's language. Few first-novelists write as well as she does.

Her territory is California. Rose lives in Venice West in a house owned by her lover, Jason. She has left her former husband, Gerald, a mad genius who taunts her sexually: "Why don't you admit it? I know you want it," he says, and then tells her to go out on the street and get it. So, she goes out and

picks up a sailor in San Francisco who's looking for a Chinese whore:

"You ain't Chinese." The man laughed. "Come to Frisco, I want a real Chinese whore." The man looked down at the water. "Or a real secretary. High-heeled shoes and all kinds of leg."

I flexed my ankle in the darkness. I was disappointing this man, this stranger. I was filled with a sense of failure.

"You shy?"

He was pulling me across the seat toward him. I let myself be pulled. My head rested on his lap. I felt him stir under me. Not certain what to do, I patted him gently, the way one does when reassuring a child.

The man arched himself toward me, toward my mouth. He had unbuttoned himself. He steered his hard cock toward my face. I opened my mouth. I could taste the man as I drove back across the bridge alone, could still feel his thick white fluid filling my tongue and lungs. It was like clams and sawdust, some kind of white glue. I shivered.

Rose is mad in typical California fashion: dislocated, alienated from her existence. Her mother, Francine, is a domineering, successful agent who won't let her daughter alone, and her gambler father is bitterly dying of cancer. Rose spends a lot of her time just watching the seasons pass:

I walked through the rooms of my house, the Woman's House, where I have lived six years watching the special seasons of the canals, the silver

and grease-yellow, the abundant and quick-tongued shadows, the gray fog and sullen thickening brown edging into ink. For six years I have witnessed the water in front of my house, now churning, now changing, completing some cycle meaningful only to itself.

Rose lives in reverie, awaiting Jason's bidding. Francine lives in Celebrity Land:

"I did this all by myself. You know who's lived here? Zsa Zsa Gabor. Elliot Gould. Howard Hughes used to keep his starlets here." Francine grabbed my wrist. She put her face very close to mine. Her eyes were amber, enormous and fixed.

"Why do I tell you this? I want you to be proud of me."

Rose uses cocaine to get her through the bad moments when Francine pressures her to reform her life. She uses cocaine when Jason tries to manipulate her. She uses it when she sees her dying father. She is a sexual being, but she is curiously disconnected from sex, drugs and the people close to her:

My life was a set of parallel worlds. Each world had distinct rules and personalities... The atmospheres were mutually lethal. There could be no collision course.

The narrator deals with her various worlds and reports to us their different smells, conversations and appurtenances. Rose is almost always calm, in a kind of cocaine trance, so what she has to say about her mother, father and lovers seems to come from a haunted, not quite worldly being—one who can be bitter.

When she has spent the better part of a week with another man, Rose can tell Jason about it with neutrality:

The other man meant nothing. He was irrelevant, a kind of driftwood. He didn't stop the pain that was Jason. Beneath the surface weren't men the same, encased in their separate sets of idiosyncrasies? I no longer had the ability to memorize a new set of boundaries. Jason had burned me out.

She is burned out by experience. She watches her father die and suffers through her mother's anxieties and criticisms, all the while enduring a man who treats her like dirt.

In *Lithium for Medea*, the storyline is not the point. Braverman's book is about nuances, the brief flashes that light up our lives. When Rose takes a woman lover, her description is as short and objective as her descriptions of being with her family, or with Jason, who is, of course, jealous that his mistress has taken a female lover:

I surprised myself. Something sparked electric, risky, raw. I stayed with her. I took off my clothing. I felt determined. She left a light on in the hallway. I sat down on the edge of her bed. I watched her light a candle and hoped it would be simple, painless, something I could wash down the drain, change clothing, stand in supermarket lines and no one would know. And I offered my face to the other. My lips were kissed, my chest pressed....

Not many publishers are willing to take a chance on a novel as special as *Lithium*. It should find (and touch) its readers.

