

## Dark novel juxtaposes hip '60s and cynical '90s.

by JEFFREY ANN GOUDIE  
Contributing Reviewer

Kate Braverman's *Wonders of the West* gives the phrase "nuclear family" new meaning.

A post-atomic elegy to America, Braverman's novel is filled with images, metaphors and references to the military and medical uses of nuclear energy.

Although it's set in West Los Angeles in 1965, Braverman brings a '90s awareness, cynicism and tension to the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. She even imports some '90s vocabulary, such as "Go figure" and "patriarchy." Mostly her contemporary lens sharpens content, but occasionally the reader senses the '60s are appearing in drag.

Braverman's third novel is set in Palm Courts West, subsidized housing for patients at Palms Memorial Hospital, and narrated by 17-year-old Jordan Lerner. Jordan walks around intoning the names of the local women's prison and the state mental hospital, places for which she figures she's destined.

Indeed, Jordan's family background seems a blueprint for future institutional life. Jordan has landed in California because her mother left husband and home behind in New Jersey along with her pink quilted robe, rollers and perpetual cramps.

At the time Jordan is almost 11. Her mother dumps all vestiges of their past life. She even makes Jordan throw away her international doll collection, with this admonition: "Girls your age are having babies. And you're worried about dolls. Shame on you."

By the time they reach Los Angeles, Jordan's mother has transmogrified herself into a woman named Roxanne and she discovers that her brother Louie, the rich bookmaker, is now a seriously ill cancer patient.

Her response is to leave Jordan with her brother and sister-in-law while she takes off with various fat, balding men to places where she can sunbathe year-round. Jordan puts it this way: "My mother has been juxtaposed. She is living in reverse and we are becoming siblings."

Domestic life at Palm Courts West could push anybody over the

*Wonders of the West*, by Kate Braverman (280 pages; Fawcett Columbine; \$20)

talks over her as though she were a piece of furniture.

When Doris speaks of her mostly absent sister-in-law, her insults know no bounds: "You know low? You know the lowest? Look under that. You'll find her. She's the layer under the scum. She's where the maggots breed."

Conventional meals are not served at Doris and Louie's apartment home, where a card table is set up for ongoing rounds of bridge and table-top grazing. "I was shocked when we studied nutrition in health ed," Jordan says. "I thought the five food groups were three kinds of crackers and Cheddar and Swiss cheese on a paper plate."

Jordan and her best friend in California, Jimmy Nakamura, share a loaded awareness of World War II. Jimmy's father's aunts and uncles died of radiation poisoning at Hiroshima. His cousin, born after the blast, has leukemia. Jordan's Jewish family has gone to great lengths to assimilate. Their real religion is trying to appear hip.

But Jordan's mother is prone to offering her daughter, when distressed, this sort of ice-cold comfort: "Dachau is a problem. They pull the gold fillings out of your mouth and make a lampshade out of your infant's skin, then you got a problem."

Braverman etches Jordan's gradual decision to leave high school and her family. The revolution has arrived, in a van with a rainbow painted on the side, just in time for Jordan to climb aboard.

*Wonders of the West* is uneven. Braverman burdens the book's on-the-road sequences with a self-conscious straining for meaning. Also, Jordan's metamorphosis from borderline-psychotic to hippie-prophet is unconvincing. But the sections of the book set in Doris and Louie's claustrophobic apartment are darkly brilliant.

In aphoristic, chiseled prose — bullets from the brink — *Wonders of the West* tells a set of compelling, partial truths (are there any other kind?) about post-World War II America.

At one point Jordan says she and Jimmy are "in mourning for the 20th century." After reading this book where an awareness of

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