

By MICHAEL HARRIS

## SQUANDERING THE BLUE

By Kate Braverman  
(Ballantine: \$17.95; 241 pp.)

The women in Kate Braverman's first collection of short stories seem to have stepped from the works of Joan Didion into another color scheme. The "hard white empty core of the world" in "Play It as It Lays" has given way to the green of money, the red of tropical flowers and sunsets, and, above all, blue. Blue is the sea and the sky and the swimming pools of Beverly Hills. Blue also is the blues, the flames of the gas with which poets commit suicide, even the fallout from Chernobyl tinkling down on California as "a kind of blue ice."

Still, we recognize these women. They aren't the Latinas of Braverman's most recent novel, "Palm Latitudes." They are Didion women: WASPy and skinny and neurotic, prone to nervous breakdowns and chemical dependencies, so overwhelmed with sensibility that they fumble at life's ordinary tasks. They go to AA meetings, wreck cars, agonize over Christmas shopping, write in the Hawaiian jungle, picket a nuclear installation in Nevada, tour Eastern Europe with an alienated daughter, dread cancer and AIDS and being exiled by divorce to live in some shabby

apartment. (The men in their lives are creeps who bully and manipulate, deal drugs and take them for rides on the wild side, but don't truly matter.)

Still, color schemes count. There are differences. Didion came to fiction from journalism, Braverman from poetry. Didion's prose has the poise of exhaustion. Her Los Angeles is where the American journey ended; her women draw what strength they have from fading memories of frontier grit. Braverman's Los Angeles is where something corrupt but vital, no longer exclusively American, is being born: "not an absence but a seizure of competing postures and rituals." Her women, despite all their problems, are on the trail of that something; her prose makes sudden jumps into the florid and the visionary.

In fact, Braverman's voice in these 12 stories is quite distinct from Didion's: more inward, less political, symbolically rather than explicitly sexual. What makes them comparable is their authority. As a book, "Squandering the Blue" is uneven, and also too much of the same thing. It has too many creative-writing teachers, too much vodka and cocaine, too much *Angst* about turning 40. The color imagery wears on the nerves. Some of the dialogue is impossible. The best

stories are those the Braverman woman has to share with someone else: another woman, or one of the creeps, or a child, or her own childhood. But all of them have the Braverman voice, which has become one of L.A.'s most compelling, even when it goes overboard, into the blue.

## SPIDER

By Patrick McGrath  
(Poseidon Press: \$18.95; 204 pp.)

"Spider" may be a novel about mental illness that masquerades as a thriller. Or it may be a thriller whose impact is blurred by the derangement of its narrator. Either way, it's a suspenseful and evocative piece of mood writing that disappoints a little at the end.

The narrator, Dennis (Spider) Clegg, grows up terrified of his father, a plumber and weekend gardener in the East End slums of London. In 1957, released from an insane asylum to a boarding house in his old neighborhood, he broods over scenes of fog, grime and desolation that revive 20-year-old memories of how his father killed his mother, buried her in a potato patch and took up with a prostitute whose last name matches that of Spider's current landlady.

Spider himself has a near-name-sake: the kidnaper Clegg in John Fowles' "The Collector." Both keep voluminous journals. But whereas Fowles' language reflects the twists and limitations of Clegg's mind, Patrick McGrath (whose previous works include "The Grotesque" and



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