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D. 56,738 SUN. 61,641

APR 1 1979

By Keller

Spirit of survival keeps first novel above water

LITHIUM FOR MEDEA, by Kate Braverman, Harper and Row, New York, 251 pages, \$9.95.

Her father was a gambler, fighting cancer for the second time.

Her mother, when plucked off the streets by her father, was something close to a prostitute.

Her husband, a Star Trekker, hoped that Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock could lead him through the black holes in space.

Her lover, a painter, sought escape from emotion by shooting up cocaine.

The setting, naturally, has to be California of the late 1960s. It's Kate Braverman's first novel, and it's narrated by a girl named Rose.

Rose is an emotional creampuff. When crises come, real or imagined, she reels off to the bathroom to vomit. Later, the dull pain of a sharp needle does the job for her.

As we see Rose, she's no match for any of the other characters around her. Her mother grew up bouncing from foster home to foster home, living in one in which the ceiling caved in and mice danced on her body. She became tough and resilient, her daughter weak and submissive.

The evidence of her failure is "all there, polished and labeled under glass. I failed to graduate from college. I failed in my marriage. I failed with Jason (the lover) repeatedly. I failed to find a man who wanted me, permanently and legally. A man to install me like a sparkling new appliance in the center of some streamlined kitchen

with built-in self-cleaning oven. A man to give me children and Saks charge accounts, security and a future."

When the burden of failure is too much, Rose tries to obliterate it with Jason and his needles.

"We were in Jason's house then . . . he was studying a new batch of needles. His movements were slow and precise, almost tender. I already realized that he kept his world small and manageable. Within the walls of his studio, he was absolute master. Within his rooms Jason controlled chaos. This was his oasis."

Slowly, perhaps through the guidance of her much-traveled father who shadowboxes with the specter of cancer, Rose turns the tables on Jason. She comes to understand that he is a destructive force in her life, unable to give of himself in time of crisis. A fascination with sex holds them together for awhile, but Rose is in command and learns that she doesn't need Jason for survival. As she opens a new relationship with her father, the gambler, she seems to understand more clearly her need to cut off old ties and continue to overcome the terror that has dominated her life.

This novel starts slowly, but there is a strength in this novel by author Braverman that is highly appealing. At first, Rose is a helpless, defeated figure. Living a desperate existence in Los Angeles and Berkeley in the 1960s, she finally overcomes the forces that have held her down for so long.

This book has a substantial number of depress-



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ing moments, but there is a strong spirit of survival that helps turn it into an effective statement on an individual and her struggle with the game of life.

It is scheduled for publication April 11.

—Lee Torliatt