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Palm Latitudes

By Kate Braverman
Linden/Simon and Schuster,
\$18.95

In this lush, gorgeous novel, Kate Braverman has created an environment as magical and hypnotic as the mythical South American backwater kingdom painted in the fiction of Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

The kingdom in *Palm Latitudes*, however, is the barrio of Los Angeles, where the uncharted Hispanic presence lends a dark edge to the hallucinatory panorama of the City of Angels. It's a novel about women and their defeats and the methods they use to survive. The three parts of the book involve La Puta de la Luna, a prostitute; Gloria Hernandez, a housewife who murders a Caucasian social worker; and Marta Ortega, a neighborhood matriarch who wears the mantle of disillusioned earth mother.

Ms. Braverman describes the prostitute as "a corrupted madonna, not alabaster but wood, darker and more resonant. Her flesh is a layering of teaks, ebony, spice, a dense jungle mist, steaming, symmetrical and insistent. She wills herself to be radiant with heat and she is, creating a sphere of red like a beacon, a promise of an intangible and intimate connection with earth and clay."

She and the other women achieve their positions through the agencies of male betrayal, inevitable in the macho inheritance of Latin America. Marriage, decides Gloria Hernandez, "simply drained that which was unique from a woman. They were neither apathetic nor indolent. They were gutted shells that walked in dusty alleys or on the boulevards of capitals. They were the half-dead."

Their world is filled with violence and cunning, it is ripe and raw, and Ms. Braverman, in a display of virtuoso writing that sweeps the novel along at a fevered pace, reproduces the intensity of that world with all its rare and fervid perfume, its vivid blood-red moons and feuds, its deeply spiritual nature penetrating beyond catholicism to a religion encompassing equally the placid cycles of the seasons and the horror of Aztec hearts flung beating to the earth.

The three women do not make enough contact with each other to give the plot a seamless web, but that's this novel's only fault. The epic quality of its prose, its breath-taking supercharged lyricism and the creation of an impossible yet believable world give it several measures of greatness.

