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Tropical millennium

Kate Braverman evolves the 21st century novel

WHAT WILL THE millennial novel look like? To the visionary among us, nothing is more inconceivable than the impending future. The best the current critical establishment has to offer us is Tom Wolfe's neo-Dickensian social history, the 19th-century novel tricked up in computer-age drag.

Naturally, once the future makes its appearance, we cry, "But set! How could it have been anything else?" Such sentiments are common among

servicing their roles as traditional stereotypes: whore, housewife and the old lady who lives down the lane. In fact, they embark on spiritual expeditions to some wholly unsuspected core of consciousness; tropical, magical, and seething with vitality and corruption. As Braverman says, it seems to be based on a world view entirely alien to that of any previous fiction.

"It's a book that explores the possibility that non-Western, non-linear, non-rational, so-called intuitive, cyclical, female thinking may be

literature. I used to look in the *N Yorker* to validate my experience, seemed that everything consisted of stories of boys on fishing or hunt trips or people going to play polo in Connecticut. Growing up poor as a female in the '50s and '60s in L.A. Angeles — before [the city] invented her new, trendy persona and was just sort of dull — I felt like an exile from the currents of thought in the country.

Braverman sees Los Angeles as the ideal setting for her attempts to break new ground. "The 20th century is suburb of Los Angeles . . . It is true the millennial city . . . The image and sound from the record and movie industry that are shaping people: Jakarta and Nairobi come out of L.A."

"Los Angeles is a feminine, tropical region . . . You can truly love L.A. when you perceive that you're not in America. Once you divest yourself of saying how it isn't like New York or San Francisco, you see you're in the Palm Latitudes . . . then you're free to love the beauty of Los Angeles."

As for her own complex feeling toward the city she's described as "bloated, diseased woman" and "a hallucination," Braverman explains: "Los Angeles and I, it's like a marriage. We are deeply committed to each other. We've been together a long time. We have moments of high communion. We have moments when we leave each other and slam the doors. We have moments of tedium and disgust. And we have our little erotic episodes. We are married . . . I've never loved a human being the way I love L.A. It's my laboratory, the place where I conduct my experiments in tropicalizing the language."

Yet Braverman is also an anomaly in the capital of popular culture — she and her daughter live without television, newspapers or magazines. "As a writer you need a certain quality of silence. Writers who are trying to work in the midst of this toxic culture with the constant barrage of information and technology are really sabotaging themselves. It's like the whales that are being beached now. They can't navigate because there's just so much junk in the water. You cannot write living in the midst of this culture; it's too toxic. There's too much junk in your personal waters."

"Recently I came to realize how different words sound when you have a quality of silence in your life. Even when T.S. Eliot was writing, in the 1920s, you didn't have the car radio, the stereo, the sound in the elevators, the constant swish of machines and technology. It's impossible to hear words the way Shakespeare heard them when you're living in this culture. The culture's always agitating us and never delivering. We live in an apocalyptic fervor."

Braverman is currently at work on a third novel, a full five years since she completed the last. "When I write a novel, it's the sum total of everything I know about the world to a certain point, just as it takes seven years to get a new lung, it takes about that amount of time to get a new novel. You have to become a new person on a cellular level." ■



In Love with L.A. Author and poet Kate Braverman navigates the jungles of L.A. and surfaces with some complex truths.

those lucky enough to stumble upon the work of Los Angeles poet and novelist Kate Braverman.

Braverman netted critical praise in 1978 for her first novel, *Litbium for Medea*, the story of bohemian cocaine addicts amidst the sunflowers and salt air of Venice, California. Ten years and a few poetry volumes later, her second novel — the stunning *Palm Latitudes* — saw print, and recently she visited San Francisco to promote her new short story anthology, *Squandering the Blues*.

Braverman describes *Palm Latitudes*, her most ambitious work to date, as "an outrage . . . I thought it was one of the most anti-American books ever written, a very anti-bourgeois, anti-Anglo, anti-conventional book . . . It's a book that looks as if it were written on another planet." Perhaps that's why it took four years to get published, collecting rejection slips from 22 publishers.

Nevertheless, it's difficult to see how anyone could mistake *Palm Latitudes* for anything less than a masterpiece. Against the background of L.A.'s barrio, Braverman's Latina heroines superficially appear to be

superior," explains Braverman. "It may not only be superior, it may work where the other [kinds of thinking] don't."

The stories in *Squandering the Blues* are set in yet another of the small towns that make up greater Los Angeles — Braverman calls them her "Beverly Hills horror stories." In each of the 12 stories, a fortyish woman emerges from a cocoon of addiction, madness, alcoholism and hellish marriage to face a world with which she may not be equipped to cope. In aggregate, the stories display Braverman's distinctive touch — the hypnotic repetition of key images, intoxicating metaphor, and a vision of the universe as brutal, chaotic and thrilling. Several themes persist as well: the crushing poverty facing single mothers and the primacy of the mother-daughter bond, which Braverman calls the "fundamental relationship of the world."

Another ongoing concern in Braverman's work is with the city of her birth. "I consider myself to be a latch-key child of the shabby streets of Los Angeles, a city that did not exist, in a region that did not exist in