

Shadows on the land of sunshine

By Dennis Arp
The Orange County Register

It's midnight in America, and the darkness is so stark, so overwhelming, so indifferent, that we aren't sure the light will ever come again.

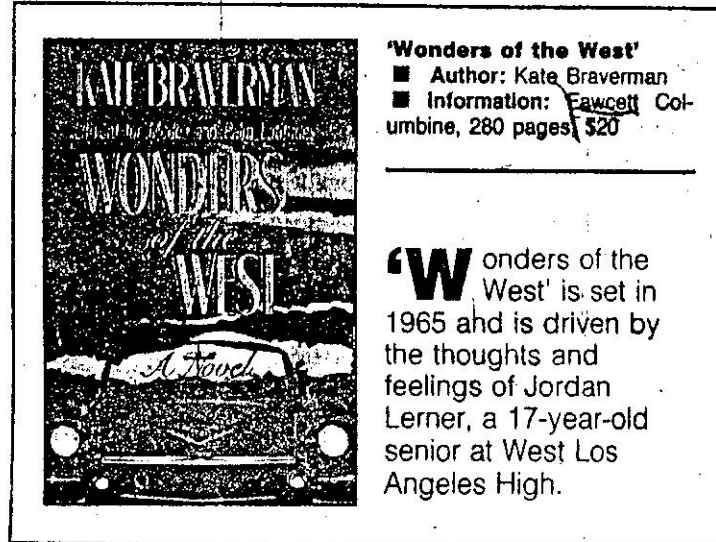
The fireball that melted into the Pacific may just take a detour on its way back to the horizon.

Such is the world of Kate Braverman's third and latest novel. "Wonders of the West" is about detours and indifference, surrender and escape. And it certainly is about darkness — dark humor and dark spirits in a land of relentless sunshine.

The nightmarish flip side of the California dream is familiar territory for Braverman, a native of Los Angeles whose writing vividly and poetically evokes images of contemporary heroes and horrors where others see tinsel and glitter.

"Wonders of the West" is set in 1965 and is driven by the thoughts and feelings of Jordan Lerner, a 17-year-old senior at West Los Angeles High imbued with too much intelligence and insight to accept the circumstances of her grim existence.

She shares a bedroom with her mother, Roxanne, who collects postcards, movie-industry boyfriends and tans while asking Jordan to call her Sis. They live with Jordan's Uncle Louie, a shell of a former bookie, and Aunt Doris, a diet-pill addict, in a two-bedroom apartment in a little slice of purgatory called the Palm Courts.



'Wonders of the West'
 ■ Author: Kate Braverman
 ■ Information: Fawcett Columbine, 280 pages, \$20

'Wonders of the West' is set in 1965 and is driven by the thoughts and feelings of Jordan Lerner, a 17-year-old senior at West Los Angeles High.

The Courts are housing for long-term patients of Palms Memorial Hospital and their families — those too poor to afford their own housing. Uncle Louie is dying of cancer.

At the Courts, everyone is dying. Many, including Louie and Doris, already have cashed in their spiritual and emotional chips.

It's a place where, as Jordan says, "the air is the texture of insomnia, obsessions and soiled bandages. This is where you can actually see suffocation. This is where you can watch the spread. This is the beach where you place a shell to your ear and you do not hear the sea."

And this is the place Jordan and Roxanne drove across the conti-

nent to reach. That's when they thought Uncle Louie was rich and healthy. Who knew there was illness and poverty in California?

The trip begins after Roxanne's husband, Ernie, leaves her. That was when Roxanne was Ruth. She sheds her old name as she forces Jordan to discard her childhood with the doll collection that is banished from the journey.

And what a journey. The car is a wreck, and soon so are its occupants. Roxanne pawns jewelry to pay for gas, and Jordan wonders if she will be the next item left in an obscure, featureless town. They sleep in the car and grab food where they can. They are seared by the sun and the longing looks of



The nightmarish flip side of the California dream is familiar territory for novelist and Los Angeles native Kate Braverman.

housewives peering through kitchen windows.

Neither Roxanne nor Jordan seem surprised when at the end of their trip they discover Louie's plight. Their slide has taken on a momentum of its own, like the river Jordan was named for.

Roxanne finds refuge from bleak circumstances by dating rich boyfriends, Jordan by reading Baudelaire and Kafka and writing in her journal. Louie and Doris chidingly call her the Poet.

And it's the poetry and strength of Braverman's words that make "Wonders of the West" a trip worth taking. A description of Santa Ana winds reads like a vision:

"It's a wind from another dimension. It knows about bobcats and owls and the glare of deserts and

how after seventeen hours between plateaus the dawn can seem red-Egyptian, how you might want to kneel down and marry it. This wind can tell you stories about bridges and acts of insolence and supplication. But you must know how to listen."

Listening to Braverman's words is a joy even though everywhere there is sorrow. It is unsettling to follow Jordan as she gropes for the bridge that will take her away from the darkness, to watch as she is neglected by family, sexually abused by a stranger and misdirected by teachers.

It is tempting to root for a ray of hope. But in the end, you know the author is right not to betray her vision.

It's sunset in Los Angeles. And the dusk is invincible.