

Novel explores the 'Wonders of the West'

Title: "Wonders of the West"
 Author: Kate Braverman
 Data: Fawcett Columbine; \$20
 Our rating: ★★★

By William C. Brisick
Special to the Daily News

L.A. BYLINES

Books by Local Authors

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In reading Kate Braverman's new novel, it's hard not to think of Edvard Munch's famous painting, "The Scream," in which a young woman is seen with her hands clamped on her ears, trying desperately to block out the terrors of modern life.

Yet, as Braverman's 17-year-old narrator Jordan Lerner reveals herself, one notes a key difference between novel and painting: though Jordan might be tempted to seek shelter from the slings and arrows directed at her vulnerable self, she retreats not an inch.

Eyes and ears open, Jordan absorbs and responds, a displaced though highly sentient adolescent, seeing the West (and especially Los Angeles) for the first time, following the path that many others had taken before her as they searched for an El Dorado beyond the mountains. She has joined those who were willing to trade geography for the chance to start over.

The time is 1965. Jordan and her mother, Roxanne (she's in her early 30s) share an apartment with Roxanne's brother, Louie, who suffers from cancer, and her sister-in-law, Doris. They live in Palm Courts, a government-subsidized housing unit made available to patients being treated at nearby Palms Memorial Hospital.

Jordan attends West Los Angeles High School, where, despite her IQ of 157, she is failing every subject except English. She keeps a notebook, recording "personal reckonings and accounts receivable and all my acts of salvage and erasure, sabotage and insurrection."

Jordan has few friends and only the semblance of family life; Roxanne, who works for a while in the costume department of a film studio, is constantly on the move, making trips with men to far-off places. Her aunt and uncle's life

consists of endless card games, constant bickering, and left-over snacks from Doris' waitress job.

For Jordan, as for most of the characters in "Wonders of the West," life is a process of divestiture. Back in New Jersey, Roxanne had driven her husband, Jordan's father, out of the house. In a red convertible she set out across country with Jordan, after first discarding her possessions and then her daughter's too — a collection of dolls.

En route, Roxanne pawned her jewelry for gas money. All that stripping of self has its effect: Jordan can't help but wonder if she isn't expendable too.

The trip, an essential part of the novel, is told in flashbacks. Without saying so, it looks at the westward movement — the historical term — from a totally different angle of time, place and condition. Roxanne, and Jordan especially, see women standing behind windows, looking forlorn and lost, wondering at the huge gap between what their imaginations had conjured (and their husbands promised) and what reality offered.

Even the landscape — barren, desiccated physically and psychologically, has an abandoned look, victim of a dream that didn't, in



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Jordan's words, "pan out." They stop at a Fourth of July celebration that seems founded more on artifice than true feeling. They detour to Utah for the touristy Wonders of the West; it turns out to be something of a hoax. "I'm beginning to understand America," Roxanne says.

In Los Angeles, the process of divestiture continues as Roxanne, who had been born Ruth, tries out different names in search of another identity, going so far as to tell Jordan to call her "Sis" rather than Mom.

Jordan asks the new kids at Palms Court "what they've lost. (She wants) the details while they're still fresh" of what's gone, of "Little League and Brownies, gymnastic lessons, your rock and coin and seashell and stamp collections," of "a vegetable patch ... a swing on the

porch ... a dog or a cat ... even a donkey."

Jordan is molested by a stranger but her aunt and uncle, fearing that in the event of trouble they will be asked to move, do not report it. Jordan reads from her volume of Baudelaire's poems; it is "part of the bridge I must invent to save myself."

She searches out, tries to find responsibility for, the "continuum"; with a past left behind and an amorphous future drained of hope, there is only the present. She makes do with each moment.

Of the 22 blocks she walks from apartment to school she says: "I used to count each separate step. I felt compelled to assign a number to the movement of my feet. I had to create a sequence and a procedure. I dedicated each step to a deity I would invent and forget. I engraved each number with my

lips and offered it to a god, a spirit or demon. I would say, you, manifestation of fate, let me live on more stalled and aching after noon."

Jordan's world is permeated by a sense of contamination and infection: literal (she lives among cancer patients, imagines with the Japanese-American classmate the effects of the bomb at Hiroshima) and figurative — she feels, especially in the cloistered apartment "diseased psychic microorganism ... multiplying in the fabric of my skin and denting my molecular structure ... a king of psychological mutation."

Braverman is relentlessly unsparing in her portrayal of Jordan's world, pinched-in as it is cluttered with the emotional detritus of people who went as far west as they could. We see few glimpses of hope, though we also know that Jordan, able to see in ways that the adults around her cannot, will somehow survive.

Los Angeles-based Braverman known for her four volumes of poetry, two novels and a collection of short stories, infuses "Wonders of the West" with the power of mental imagery quietly stated. She pushes at the language, stretching its elasticity so as to take in words ideas and pictures pell-mell. She juxtaposes them; they form kaleidoscopes whose fresh colors will give the reader pause.

Yet such a strength can become a weakness too. Having established the rhythm of Jordan's consciousness and filled it to the brim with adolescent awakenings and her ruminations on the flip side of the American dream, Braverman holds doggedly to it for 280 pages.

"Wonders of the West" offers little relief, no peaks and valleys of narrative flow, no changes of pace wherein the reader can slow down or speed up. Jordan's story, like her mother's red convertible, moves at one speed through a uniformly bleak landscape. The reader has to learn, as Jordan has done, to be patient, to take things — to look at things — one at a time.

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