

Books and authors

Kate Braverman fiction writer with a cau

**ARLENE
CORSELLO**

*Turning
Pages*



"Women who write stories about women having lunch together should have their kneecaps shot off," said Kate Braverman when she spoke to me on the phone about her latest novel, "Wonders of the West."

Kate Braverman is a poet and fiction writer with a cause, equality for women in the pages of literature. "Until they (women in fiction) can lead lives that mirror the lives of contemporary women, we'll be second class."

"A man who doesn't fit into the system, who is an outlaw or leaves his family behind, is romanticized," said Braverman. "He is a warrior seeking his identity, but a woman outlaw is just bad. When men kill themselves, no one asks how many children have they left behind. Women who destroy themselves are seen as pejorative."

Braverman's new novel, "Wonders of the West," is a "coming of age" story. What's unusual is the Southern California setting with the focus on a young girl who is dubbed The Poet, an emerging artist, a saboteur of the system,

Braverman pointed out that Jewish families are rarely portrayed as dysfunctional. In "Wonders of the West" when Jordan Lerner, age 17, wants to know about being Jewish, she is told: "Synagogues are not for people like us. You got to know the rules to get in." For Jordan, there is no chicken soup, nurturing or religion.

The setting is the '60s. Jordan and her mother left New Jersey to find the wonders of the west in L.A. when Jordan was about 11 years old. As they traveled across country, Jordan's mother sold their belongings for survival money, chose a new name, Roxanne, and never again allowed Jordan to call her Mother.

In L.A., they move in with Uncle Louie and Aunt Doris in Palm Courts West, a subsidized housing project filled with dying patients and their families. All the patients are receiving treatment at the adjacent hospital. When the patient dies, the family has 90 days to move.

It is Uncle Louie, Roxanne's once-glamorous older brother, a successful bookie, who has cancer. Aunt Doris is a "speed freak," lost to diet pills. Their lives between treatments pass at a card table while they play bridge, Hollywood gin, or whatever.

Jordan's mother, Roxanne, spends her time at home in front of the mirror, totally absorbed with beauty products or packing

for her next disappearance. Jordan's mother is no more than a reflection in the mirror. Even when Jordan is raped, Roxanne's response is, "You were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Neighbors in the Courts have no identity; they have been reduced to their disease and treatments. The "intacts," the kids whose parents are well, have nothing to do with the kids in the Courts. Jordan dislikes the girls at school like Michelle Cohen because someone cares enough about Michelle to color coordinate her clothes.

The pain in Braverman's novel is so unrelenting that when a character succeeds, it leaves little impression because the reader is too overwhelmed. Also, success for a Braverman character may not coincide with the middle-class reader's definition of success.

Kate Braverman is a poet who also writes short stories and novels. "Milk Run," her first book of poetry, was published in 1977. Her first novel was "Lithium For Medea," the story of an L.A. woman kicking a cocaine habit. Her next novel, "Palm Latitudes," is the story of three single

Latinas in the barrio. Her first collection of short stories, "Squandering the Blue," included "Tall Tales From the Mekong Delta," winner of the 1992 O. Henry Award.

Kate Braverman's writing is not easy to read. She is a writer's

writer, a poet's writer. She belongs to the world of people for whom words are music and imagery. Using lyrical language, she focuses on the ugliness in contemporary life.

In "Wonders of the West," her themes are contempt, terminal illness and drugs - unpleasant realities.

On the phone, Braverman said that she had moved from poetry to fiction because poetry is outside the mainstream of American thought. I wanted to say, "Mainstream is Stephen King, Danielle Steele, John Grisham. Mainstream is pleasurable diversions. Thought is not an issue." Kate Braverman will never be mainstream. She is challenging, subversive and poetic, exactly what I'm sure she wants to be.