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WONDERS OF THE WEST

By Kate Braverman

Ballantine/Fawcett Columbine. 283 pp. \$20.

Examining in a New Jersey museum a plaster cast of a Chinese woman's tiny, bound foot, broken so she can never leave her husband/master, Ruth Lerner suddenly wept. Then she began saving money to buy a red convertible and leave her drab housewife life. Soon, she takes her 10 year-old daughter Jordan and heads west. They detour only to view a tourist attraction called Wonders of the West before eventually reaching Ruth's brother Louie's home in Los Angeles.

Ruth, who has reinvented herself as "Roxanne," went in quest of fame and a sugar daddy but finds only meager jobs and no sugar. The brother she'd believed was thriving is actually a resident in a bleak medical housing project for terminal outpatients. It is from Louie's apartment in 1965 that Jordan, now 17, with a 157 IQ but failing five subjects because her teachers "are trying to give me radiation sickness of the soul," narrates the story and becomes its focus. An anguished rebel with "a sense of destiny and recognition" Jordan refuses to let society mold her. Her classes "would be a bridge to a place I never want to go."

The power of this vibrant novel lies in Braverman's elegiac depiction of how Jordan grows alienated. As she drives west with a mother who no longer wants to be a mother, Jordan finds America's archetypal journey of hope, the voyage into the frontier, a heartbreaking lie. Edging westward, she sees countless faces of women staring forlornly out of windows onto barrenness. Having pawned her possessions before reaching Wonders of the West, Jordan discovers this "attraction" to be relics of hardship and death and broken dreams. Her trek ends beneath a hovering sky that looks "like something that has had its intestines ripped out." It is sunset in Los Angeles. The once rosy frontier has made Jordan's life "a history of divestiture." Los Angeles is "the great American game show in reverse," about what's gone, what you had to leave behind.

Disillusioned yet undefeated, dawning flower child Jordan determines to paint her own frontier and step in. Thus, Braverman does not simply demolish the vestigial American myth of rediscovered Eden. She reshapes it to a more transcendent, if potentially sentimental, paradise within. The urgency of Braverman's vision leads to some repetitiveness, but her lyrical voice and haunting imagery lend almost every page color, invention and often brilliance.