Bookpage

A snapshot of suburbia

By Amy Scribner

So it's 1979. Ronald Reagan is about to take over the presidency. Hostages are being held at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. Rod Stewart rules the airwaves. It's a strange, strange time to be growing up, and Adam Langer captures it pitch-perfectly in his epic first novel, Crossing California.

In West Rogers Park, a largely Jewish enclave of Chicago, we meet Jill and Michelle Wasserstrom, teenage sisters cared for by their widowed father. We also meet Muley Scott Wills, a brainy black kid who scavenges the alleyways for things he can recycle for money. These are the kids who live on the wrong side of California Avenue, the dividing line between proper and less-than-proper in West Rogers Park. On the other side, we find high school senior Larry Rovner, a wannabe "Jerusarock" star who writes pro-Israel lyrics and whose only other discernable interest is getting a date with a girl. Any girl.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg in Langer's sprawling, deeply funny and unforgettable take on the peculiarities of suburbia. Crossing California follows the lives of nearly a dozen West Rogers Park residents from November 1979 to January 1981 without ever dropping a stitch. Langer is at his best when he focuses on the potent brew of lust, confusion and hope that swirls through the teenaged bloodstream. Michelle Wasserstrom, in particular, is a revelation: a teen who has sex and uses drugs yet still aces her PSATs and scores the leading role in every high school production.

The novel loses steam briefly when Langer turns to Muley's long-lost father, a record producer in Los Angeles. While the storyline is compelling enough, it is jolting to be taken from the richly comic confines of the Chicago neighborhood Langer has created, where we've come to feel so at home.

With CROSSING CALIFORNIA Langer delivers both a snapshot of American history and a timeless examination of longing and ambition. It's hard to imagine a more satisfying combination.

Charleston Post and Courier
Characters matter in Langer's debut novel

"Crossing California," Adam Langer's smart, crowded and often funny debut novel, centers on the intersecting lives of three Chicago families from Nov. 4, 1979 to Jan. 20, 1981, the exact dates of the hostage crisis in Iran.

While the hostage crisis background might suggest certain automatic themes -- entrapment and helplessness, for instance -- Langer doesn't really go there. Instead, he gives us a medley of perspectives and a range of dependencies. If 1980 is a standard dividing line between the world of the Sixties -- John Lennon died that year -- and the "morning in America" that followed with Ronald Reagan's election, Langer is at least as interested in the divide between innocence and experience that frames this coming-of-age novel.

The California of the title is California Avenue in Chicago's West Rogers Park neighborhood. West of California live affluent Jews, like the Rovners, whose home turns out to be a nest of dysfunction. Ellen Rovner, therapist and mother, has come to see all humans, including those in her own family, as "sexually frustrated, self-deluded liars." Over the course of the novel, she breaks away from Michael Rovner, doctor, father and "rabid pornophile." Their children are Larry, the self-absorbed "Jerusarock jock," who will enter Brandeis unless his band makes it big with hits such as "(My Loving Ain't) Always Orthodox" and "Your Gelt Makes Me Guilty," and Lana, a kleptomaniac eighth-grader with an eating disorder.

East of California are the Wasserstroms and Wills. Charlie Wasserstrom is the hapless, job-hopping father of Michele and Jill, wise daughters who are mostly raising themselves since their mother's death. Michele is a cynical comedian and school drama queen who spends most of her time smoking pot and dodging classwork until she scores in the 98th percentile on the PSAT. Jill is sharp and moody, a quietly rebellious eighth-grader who closes her bat mitzvah speech with a cry of "Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh."

Still further east are Deirdre Wills, who cleans house for the Rovners and her son, Muley Scott Wills, dearest of all the children. Muley is an enterprising, resilient dreamer who makes gadgets and films, enters contests, and schemes to win the love of Jill Wasserstrom.

On this packed stage, as characters intersect and diverge, we come to see how much one person can mean to another. Langer's achievement is to make them matter to us.

Chicago Tribune

North Side story; Chicago's West Rogers Park is the setting for a vivid novel that captures the pathos of life

By James Atlas

“Crossing California" is the most vivid novel about Chicago since Saul Bellow's "Herzog" and the most ambitious debut set in Chicago since Philip Roth's "Letting Go."

Is this too generous, too blurb-prone, too much the excited response of a reader who recognizes in a book so many details from his own life, portrayed with such exactitude, that the experience of reading it feels at times like daydreaming? The Lunt Avenue Beach: My Grandma Rae's house was next door. Sheridan Road: I lived on it. Full disclosure: Adam Langer went to my high school, grew up in the neighborhood adjacent to mine, indulged (or anyway, his characters did) in the same adolescent excesses and rituals. His postage stamp -- as Faulkner called Yoknapatawpha, the geographic territory that circumscribed his novels -- is my postage stamp. Anything I have to say about it, any verdict I deliver, is inevitably colored by this fact. Which doesn't mean it's not a terrific book.

The title, let it be noted at once, is slyly misleading: "Crossing California" has nothing to do with the state of California. Rather, it refers to a main thoroughfare in Chicago that bifurcates two zones distinct in their sociology. West of California is middle class, "pristine and white-collar and Jewish, or Indian, Italian, Filipino, or Korean, all of which amounted to essentially the same thing," Langer writes. Its dwellings consist of single-family homes with Astroturf-carpeted steps. East of California is where the lower middle class lives: "Here, the red-brick apartment buildings and smoke-gray bungalows soaked up the sun, and the streets seemed just a bit narrower."

The members of the novel's large cast occupy rotating chapters in

turn, either alone or in pairings: Jill Wasserstrom, Lana Rovner, Ellen Leventhal, Michael Rovner. They are not exclusively Jewish: Muley Wills is a lonely, talented black kid whose mother, Deirdre, is raising him alone. Not a great deal happens in the novel. Jill and Michelle Wasserstrom's widowed father gets married; Lana and Larry Rovner's parents divorce. It's the portraits that leap off the page. Jill is a radical, reading Saul Alinsky; Michelle, her wayward sister, squanders her acting talent getting stoned in the parking lot of the local liquor store. Larry Rovner, who wears a yarmulke even when he's playing with his rock band, Rovner!, lives in the family basement -- "Larry Rovner's Space-Age Bachelor Pad," as a sign on the door declares; above his bed are posters of Bo Derek and Cheryl Tiegs.

The sex scenes -- adolescent and adult -- are wonderfully graphic. Playing spin the bottle, getting to first base, feeling up a girl, all of it -- and more -- is here, in hilarious and heart-breaking anatomical detail. As for the parents, Michael Rovner haunts the Oak Park All-Nude Revue. His soon-to-be-estranged wife masturbates in the tub.

All this is recounted with exuberant verve and an ethnic humor unmatched since "Portnoy's Complaint." Rabbi Shmulevits, delivering a long-winded sermon at Jill Wasserstrom's bat mitzvah, mourns the death of Jimmy Durante: " '[T]he only thing bigger than his nose was his heart.' " Larry Rovner writes inane songs: "My Milk, Your Honey," "Stain on my Tallis," "Ain't God a Trip." The scene in which Michael Rovner lies in bed waiting to seduce the black maid (Langer is unnervingly candid about race and allows his characters to inveigh against "schwarzers") rivals Portnoy's employing chopped liver as a sexual aid.

"Crossing California" is far more than a coming-of-age novel. The older generation, too, gets its say. It's not often that you read about parents who are impatient with their children, annoyed at their responsibilities and eager to get on with their own lives. Ellen Rovner, a psychologist with an office in the Old Orchard Shopping Center, experiences her anorexic daughter "as a great weight pressing down upon her, an eternal cloud hovering just above her head." Michael Rovner, a physician, would rather pursue his largely

doomed efforts to get laid than tend to his children. Every family is dysfunctional in its own way.

The novel's time frame is doggedly specific: November 1979 to New Year's 1981. To ensure historical verisimilitude, Langer prefaces each section of the novel with quotations from significant figures of the period: Jimmy Carter; Ronald Reagan; Mike Eruzione, captain of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team. Jane Byrne, the flaky mayor of Chicago during that era, weighs in with an illuminating quote:

"Grave problems confront us. The challenges they present are of sobering magnitude."

The historical detail is flawless: People drive Oldsmobiles, listen to Lynyrd Skynyrd, watch "M*A*S*H" on TV. For native Chicagoans there are sly references that awaken long-dormant memories. What a pleasure it was to see a reference to former Blackhawks radio announcer Lloyd Pettit. The name tolls like a bell. There's even a glossary at the back of the book to refresh our memories of that long-ago time (Falstaff: "A popular Chicago beer, advertised by legendary radio and TV announcer Harry Caray." Ronald Reagan: "Former governor of California and 1980 Republican candidate for President." Thanks, Adam.).

One of the most remarkable features of this novel is the way it visualizes the physical landscape its characters occupy. Langer is a tireless chronicler of Rogers Park Jews, an anthropologist of their eating habits ("On the table, there were slabs of ribs, still in the cardboard box, a quartered barbecued chicken in an aluminum tray, Styrofoam containers of coleslaw and barbecue sauce, dinner rolls and pads of butter in wax bags"); their religious rituals (" 'The [bar mitzvah] service was long, they served sheet cake and Canadian Club. The band was fine, they played "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown." ' "); the furnishings in their homes ("Photos dominated the small apartment. They were on a side table in the front hallway, on an end table between the couch and the far wall, on the low, brass-rimmed glass table in front of the couch, on the top of the TV, and on the walls"). One can almost see the author in a pith helmet and khaki shorts, notebook in hand, observing adolescents dancing the hora to "Hava Nagilah," or used-car-salesmen uncles discussing how to

roll back the odometer.

At times, Langer is too detailed. Faced with still another discourse on Rogers Park geography ("East of Western were grimy grocery stores, five-and-ten shops, liquor stores, restaurants with their neon signs flickering, bars with Old Milwaukee signs in their windows"), I had the impulse to cry out, "Enough already!" But the rich, place-laden portraiture is part of the story.

Toward the end, thinking the novel needs a plot, Langer loses his otherwise firm grip. It's not a book where anything needs to happen. The events he contrives--Deirdre Wills trying to find out why she's no longer hired as a substitute teacher by raiding school files; Lana Rovner stealing a chess set from a friend's house--are awkward and unnecessary. His determination to tie things up feels hurried and breaks the novel's spell. Randall Jarrell once defined the novel as "a long prose narrative that has something wrong with it." Langer's is true to form.

There is a modest literary subgenre--still insufficiently robust to affiliate with the city's great lineage of Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Richard Wright and, of course, Bellow--that might be labeled Chicago post-1960s fiction. I would list the Hyde Park novels "Endless Love," by Scott Spencer, and "Family Pictures," by Sue Miller; the stories of Stuart Dybek, Alexander Hemon and Maxine Chernoff; Rich Cohen's "Lake Effect," an account of growing up on the North Shore in the 1980s (a memoir, but let's include it anyway).

To this slowly growing shelf should now be added "Crossing California." Adam Langer has achieved the considerable feat of writing a novel that's at once comic and bleak, and that captures, in the stalled careers and thwarted longings and failed relationships of its characters, the pathos and sadness of life.

James Atlas is the author of "Bellow," a biography of writer Saul Bellow, and the president of Atlas Books

Christian Science Monitor

The road from innocence to experience

No one escapes the wit or wrath of Adam Langer's satire of Chicago families in the late 1970s

By Ron Charles

Adam Langer’s debut novel, "Crossing California," should come with a warning label: "Abandon all nostalgia, ye who enter here." His story about three Chicago families during the waning years of Jimmy Carter's presidency is brutally funny. But any fondness the fashion industry may be tempting you to feel for that goofy period is stripped away by Langer's acerbic re-creation of the era when America withered under the Iran hostage crisis, high school drug use spiked, and teenage sexual experience began to accelerate dramatically.

The "California" in his title refers to California Avenue, which runs through Chicago's West Rogers Park neighborhood, separating upper-middle-class Jewish families from working-class Jewish families. The novel's immersion in this enclave makes it particularly appealing to Jewish readers, but others will feel no more excluded than non-Greeks watching "My Big Fat Greek Wedding." Langer drives so deeply into the silly and profound qualities of this group that he strikes the bedrock beneath all quarters of American culture.

What might exclude some readers, however, is the novel's sexual content. The libidinous teen antics that Tom Wolfe chronicled in "Hooking Up" (2000) and Catherine Hardwicke showed in "Thirteen" (2003) are described in "Crossing California" with relentless attention. Presumably, Wolfe and Hardwicke were raising the alarm for an adult audience happily in the dark about these goings-on, but in such a consistently funny novel as "Crossing California," this graphic material is difficult to interpret.

You're thinking, it's difficult to interpret only for someone writing in

a stodgy newspaper, but Langer's comic treatment of these characters belies a surprisingly harsh moral outrage. It's the same complicated attitude on display in Jonathan Franzen's "The Corrections" or Tom Perrotta's "Little Children." These aggressive satirists employ a laser that incinerates their amoral characters even as it illuminates them with a glare that's sometimes hard to watch.

Though packed with the social and political upheaval of the era, "California Crossing" stays closely focused on the lives of a small group of teenagers blundering toward maturity while most of their parents regress to adolescence. Langer's ability to create such dead-on characters is matched only by his ingenuity in tying them together so cleverly.

Michelle Wasserstrom may be one of the most memorable high school characters ever. Smart, foul-mouthed, and histrionic, she storms through like the survivor of a lost dynasty, mocking everything but her own ridiculousness. Her biggest disappointment is that the culture has broken down so completely that "it seemed nearly impossible to rebel in any way that wasn't somehow secondhand."

For blinding vanity, she's matched by hypersexed Larry Rovner, who plots on graph paper the likelihood of sleeping with his various fantasy girlfriends. He's a high school senior destined for Brandeis if his Jewish rock band doesn't take off. (Songs like "Your Gelt Makes Me Guilty" suggest success won't come quickly.)

His parents are a catalog of parental ills. Mr. Rovner is still trying to pin down his sexual orientation; Mrs. Rovner is a psychologist who hates her patients and thinks the best way to raise independent children is to withhold all affection. Not surprisingly, their seventh-grade daughter is a craven perfectionist, perpetually shocked by others' transgressions, and addicted to shoplifting.

These young people race along with no direction except a firm sense of entitlement and a dread of embarrassment. More than the alcohol and drugs, the most damaging influence coursing through their veins is a highly distilled mixture of cynicism and narcissism. These kids take nothing their parents say seriously (for good reason); their schools are towers of irrelevancy; the world they're about to inherit teeters between the inanity of "Three's Company"

and the terror of Mutually Assured Destruction.

In the middle of this mess is Michelle's sister, Jill Wasserstrom, an eerily precocious seventh-grader, stunned into despair by her mother's death. She's clearly the spiritual and emotional center of the novel, burdened with enough irony and intelligence to make school unbearable. She keeps herself awake by shocking her dull-witted teachers with essays like "Ayatollah Khomeini, My Hero." In darker moments, she struggles to be an atheist, all the while haunted by her sense of the awesome permanence of God.

Her only friend is an equally brilliant black boy who has no use for school. He spends his days manufacturing items from alley junk to raise money for his mom. Eventually, he starts making short animated films, wildly creative allegories he hopes will make Jill fall in love with him. (Terrified of romance by the disasters all around her, she responds to him through the mail with cool, critical analysis of his films' thematic inconsistencies.)

They make a strange, heartbreaking couple, a locus of angst and spiritual persistence, made all the more poignant by their age and helplessness. I wish they weren't so often crowded off stage by the host of ignoble characters that Langer is determined to eviscerate in this wickedly witty novel. He's so good at social satire that it draws him away from what he does even better: the tender portrayal of smart, lonely people struggling to cobble together some meaning. But if the fireworks in this debut drown each other out now and then, they're launched from a storehouse of creative energy that's sure to keep dazzling us for a long time.

GQ

To my great surprise, Crossing California made me want to go back to Hebrew School-and I hated Hebrew school, ineffably. Yet Langer's prose is so transporting and restorative, it makes adolescence-Jewish or otherwise-seem like an experience to be coveted. Set between 1979 and 1981, a period of political and cultural flux portrayed by Langer with anthropological exactitude, California tells the story of three disparate Chicago-area families. There's the Wasserstroms, who are starting anew; the Willses, who are redefining themselves; and the Rovners, who are falling apart in the most amusing ways: Their daughter, Lana, is a mean girl for the ages, and their son, Larry, the frontman for the "Jerusarock" outfit Rovner!, is calculating enough to seem heartless, passionate enough to seem green, and antic enough to make Hebrew School seem like a good thing. He's Langer's cleverest creation and the comic anchor of a beautifully executed book.

-- Howie Kahn

Kirkus Reviews

Two years, 1979-81, in the lives of two Chicago families--but so much more.

In a reversal from the standard geographic/economic measuring stick in the Windy City--the closer you are to Lake Michigan, the richer you are--the North Side neighborhood of Rogers Park starts looking a whole lot nicer once you cross west over California Avenue. Fortunately, though, journalist/playwright Langer is less interested in mining the neighborhood's socioeconomic strata (primarily Jewish, with divisions still quite sharp between those who are just middle-class and those who are professionals, living across California) than he is in telling the story of the maturer-than-usual teenagers and strangely childlike adults of Roger Park's Wasserstrom, Wills, and Rovner clans....Although the gloom of the time period is signaled by events like the Hostage Crisis and the 1980 presidential election--in a metronomic rhythm throughout--they never overwhelm the characters. Langer's gift is for layering each page with an almost obsessive level of detail--the Rogers Park streets are described with a near-geographic intensity, and the cultural references fly thick-without ever subsuming the characters, who shine brightly as they rocket into the 1980s. Of epic scope, yet intimate in its accomplishments.

Los Angeles Times
FIRST FICTION
By Mark Rozzo

Crossing California by Adam LangerAdam LangerToward the back end of Adam Langer's extraordinary first novel, Muley Scott Wills - a multiethnic and multi-tasking Chicago teenager who is, in some ways, the soul of the book - is busy cooking up yet another movie project, "one for which he was trying to film every inch of West Rogers Park." In Muley's precociously fecund mind, his homemade opus (peopled with his assorted friends) "would create a new animated world, one that would illustrate all the invisible borders that existed between them."

Langer's project is no less audacious, pursuing, as it does with nearly adolescent zeal, the project of re-creating West Rogers Park, a far-north Chicago neighborhood, in the years 1979 to 1981. "Crossing California," whose title alludes to the north-south thoroughfare that divides West Rogers Park's comfortable bourgeoisie from its striving middle-middle class, is panoramic in its scope and snapshot-like in its detail. It is the Midwestern cousin of Jonathan Lethem's stirring bestseller "The Fortress of Solitude," and Langer's Chicago is no less full of intelligent mischief than Lethem's Brooklyn.

Of course, "Crossing California" isn't just a geography course, it's the branching and twining story - too multifaceted to outline here - of various Rogers Park kids and their generally miserable parents. On the east side of California, there's Muley, writer, filmmaker and radio commentator, born of a black substitute teacher and a Jewish record-industry mogul; Jill Wasserstrom, Laura to Muley's Petrarch, a rabble-rouser who threatens to quote Antonio Gramsci at her bat mitzvah; Michelle Wasserstrom, Jill's older sister, a hottie with a lush headful of curls (an "Isro") who loves the theater, swear words, pot, sex and embodying Peachy Moskowitz, a fictional Russian émigré invented by Muley Wills. Over on the posh west side, you have Lana Rovner, part Nellie Oleson and part Nancy Reagan, a Jewish princess and kleptomaniac; and her older brother, Larry, lead singer and drummer in Rovner!, the "Jerusarock" outfit known for such fist-pumping anthems as "(My Love Ain't) Always Orthodox."

Larry loves the Mishna as much as he does Led Zeppelin. Langer, too, approaches West Rogers Park with a mixture of Talmudic thoroughness and arena-rock swagger, perfectly evoking a lost era of burnt-orange beanbag chairs, "do bongs" graffiti, rowdy sex-ed classes and "Disco Sucks" T-shirts. There's an achy undercurrent of loss here: After all, it's morning in America, and those beanbag chairs and bongs are about to be swept away. In Langer's hands, the divide between decades is as indelible as California Avenue's class demarcations. "Crossing California" is all about cusps, those "invisible borders" that Muley is so determined to capture on film: the divides of age, race, sexual orientation, marital status, class, geography, politics and time. The period that Langer conjures up, straddling the addled idealism of the 1970s and the winner-takes-all 1980s, was, arguably, the last major turning point in American life. In this rich saga worthy of Philip Roth and Anthony Trollope, Langer has finally given us its definitive document.

Newsday

The kids are alright

By Claire Dederer

First things first: "Crossing California" is about Chicago, not California. Adam Langer has given us a teeming, hilarious, ambitious and almost blindingly vivid portrait of a very particular Chicago at a very particular time: the predominantly Jewish neighborhood of West Rogers Park during the period of the Iran hostage crisis.

The California in question is a thoroughfare: "the first of two east-west dividing lines in West Rogers Park." The street provides a class line for the neighborhood: "or the most part, everything west of California was pristine and white-collar and Jewish, or Indian, Italian, Filipino or Korean, all of which amounted to essentially the same thing. ... East of California, there was a discernible change in the light. Here, the Redbrick apartment buildings and smoke-gray bungalows soaked up the sun, and the streets seemed just a bit narrower."

"Crossing California" tells the story of three West Rogers Park families, hovering on either side of this dividing line. The Wasserstroms live on the down-and-out east side. Their mother is dead, and their dad works as a counterman at a deli called It's in the Pot! Preteen Jill is a crotchety brainiac; her sister, Michelle, is the kind of 16-year-old girl who smokes pot, has sex, doesn't study and seems doomed for either early pregnancy or jail. Also living on the east side is Muley Wills, an ingenious, charming and intensely private black kid who is in love with Jill. He and his equally charming mother, Deirdre, barely get by on the money she makes cleaning houses and working at the library; Muley is determined that they will better themselves.

On the other side of California, the Rovners seem to have it made. Michael is a doctor, Ellen is a therapist, and their son, Larry, has just been offered early-decision acceptance at Brandeis.

("It's kind of the Jewish Harvard," he explains to a date.) Michael and Ellen's anorexic 12-year-old daughter, Lana, is sort of a pill, but you can't have everything.

While the parents get plenty of page time, "Crossing California" belongs to the kids. The writing is fine when Langer describes the couplings and uncouplings and professional starts and stops that plague the grown-ups. But the book is really about what it's like to survive a couple of years of adolescence. Langer gets just right the constant awareness of social station that marks this horrible period of life, as when cool Michelle allows geeky Larry to hang out with her and her friend: "Larry just sat there enjoying his hot dog, in part happy to be in the company of two cool, experienced girls; in part chagrined by how inconsequential his presence seemed."

While that experience has a ring of universality to it, Langer is just as good at nabbing the specific cultural arcana of the time, such as Michelle's pile of "unlistenable" records, where she keeps Billy Joel's "The Stranger." When he writes about Michelle and Larry and Muley, Langer verges on riffing. He leaves absolutely nothing out.

I can think of no other book that so captures the experience of being young just as Reaganism dawned. The only cultural document that rivals it is the wonderful short-lived TV series "Freaks and Geeks," which recently came out on DVD. "Freaks and Geeks" and "Crossing California" deal with kids at the same moment in history, but, even more than that, they share a sensibility: an acerbic, eye-rolling accept- ance of the perfect hell of being a teenager.

There's also a strong parallel between the book's Michelle and the show's surly, ski-parka-wearing blond bombshell, Kim. These are girls who are much smarter than they look. In fact, one of the great pleasures of Langer's book is seeing the development of Michelle as a character. Her bitter, hilarious worldview is utterly addictive -- like Larry, we feel as if we're getting to hang out with the coolest girl in school. A classic Michelle observation: "Part of being smart in school, it seemed to her, was being stupid in almost everything else."

The emergence of Michelle as a character points to the resounding

strength of "Crossing California." Here is a novel that has all the outward trappings of the autobiographical, if we presume that Langer grew up in this time and this place. (His author bio for some reason sidesteps his provenance.) Instead of sinking into himself, instead of illuminating only his own experience, Langer has taken his astonishing wealth of memory and research and used it to create a whole roster of comic, heartbreaking, convincing characters. Each one is generously coated in details, like an ice cream cone coated in sprinkles. The details seem almost infinite and encompass Judaism, high school drama clubs, rock and roll, public radio, sexy preteen party games, Mikhail Baryshnikov and cigarette brands, always beginning and ending with Langer's inexhaustible infatuation with Chicago geography. In West Rogers Park, on either side of California, Langer has created an entire world.

Claire Dederer is a writer in Seattle.

(Close Window)

The Oregonian

Rockin' yeshiva boy takes a stroll down memory lane
An extraordinary cast of vivid characters fills an audacious novel
By Steve Duin

was bad enough, Larry Rovner thought, that he'd agreed to spend New Year's Eve at Latkafest with Missy Eisenstaedt and her little sister. It was even worse that his rock band -- Rovner! -- broke up and he had to contemplate going solo in that upcoming gig at the Purim carnival.

But what finally sent him over the edge was when he snuck into the JCC pool just before midnight and, through the haze of chlorine and marijuana, glimpsed Myra Tuchbaum dancing naked on the diving board with her high-school music teacher.

Convinced everyone he knew in Chicago was having sex to ring in 1980, Rovner fled, rushing up to the top of Mount Warren, determined to belt out his signature anthem, "Soar," then write his name in the snow. He had just finished the song and was tugging at his zipper when out of the darkness and the fog came the amused voice of Michelle Wasserstrom:
"Sing it, Yeshiva boy," she said.

Sing it, indeed. If that scene captures the raw energy, entertaining variety and Jewish texture of Adam Langer's "Crossing California," it is little more than a cheese roll in the bat mitzvah buffet of the book. This is a novel of such heartfelt audacity that this reviewer feels lucky to sing its praises.

Langer has framed his novel inside the 444-day window of the Iranian hostage crisis, November 1979 to January 1981, but the action is staged in the West Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago.
In 1979, California Avenue was the neighborhood's east-west divide: "West of California were the parks and the single-family houses, the houses with evergreen bushes, maple trees, and underground sprinklers out front, the houses with banisters, stoops, and steps carpeted with Astroturf . . . Doctors lived west of

California. Lawyers, too. . . .

"East of California, there was a discernible change in the light. . . . The streets seemed just a bit narrower. East of California, there was precious little greenery or open space. . . . The landscape changed once again at Western Avenue, a sprawling four-lane street that spanned the entire city of Chicago. . . . East of Western were the grimy grocery stores, five-and-ten shops, liquor stores, restaurants with their neon lights flickering, bars with Old Milwaukie signs in their windows."

The Wasserstroms live east of California in a one-bedroom apartment. Michelle, a high-school junior and actress, shares a room with her 12-year-old sister, Jill, and the ghost of their mother, desperate to ignore the sounds of their father, Charlie, wrestling nearby with her successor.

The Rovners live west of California. Michael and Ellen's marriage is falling apart, but their children, Larry and Lana, have more important things on their mind. Larry is a self-declared Jerusarock-jock whose playlist includes "Synagogue Girl" ("I like your button, now it's time to press it / Meet me in the back of the Beth Ha'knesset") and "(My Lovin' Ain't) Always Orthodox." Lana, 12, is planning her Couples-Only orgy, which will award plastic medals for "Best Frencher" and "Sexiest Slowdancer."

And, finally, there is Muley Wills, who is stranded with his mother, Deirdre, somewhere east of Western Avenue, and pouring his extraordinary creative gifts into imaginary characters and homemade films that attempt to express his love for Jill.

The clumsy, preceding paragraphs don't do the characters justice. Langer, however, does. His commitment to his cast, including the city of Chicago, is extraordinary. Three of his leads -- Jill, Lana and Muley -- are in eighth grade as the novel opens, but there is never a hint of snideness or condescension as Langer details the juvenile conflicts and timeless passions in their lives. His memory of that era, American and adolescent, is unnerving and his touch is unfailing. He provides these kids what their parents can not: unsparing attention and enduring compassion.

So it is that Michael Rovner chases his Korean American radiologist, and Ellen Rovner jets to Paris with Lana, hoping to ditch her

daughter long enough to have her own affair. So it is that Muley creates a Russian emigre named Peachy Moskowitz, and Jill sits quietly in the aftermath of one of his movies, listening to the fft-fft-fft of the film reel whipping around.

So it is that Larry and Michelle meet in the fog atop Mount Warren on New Year's Eve, and we follow them back down, sinking ever deeper into this book, pulled inexorably along by our fascination with the characters and our admiration for the novelist who trapped them in a crosswalk on California Avenue.

Steve Duin is The Oregonian's Metro columnist.

People Magazine
By Kyle Smith

There isn't much plot to this slice-of-life study, but what a heaping slice it is. Langer drills to the core of people-five gifted teens and their clueless elders in 1971-81 Chicago-as deeply as Jonathan Franzen did in The Corrections, and like Franzen, Langer is going to need a trophy case.

Langer deploys a photographic memory and a deadpan wit as he juggles the bat mitzvahs, feuds and hookups of ten major characters from either side of the class boundry of California Avenue during the Iran hostage crisis. He begins and ends with the halting romance of two awkward geniuses: Jill Wasserstrom, who lost her mom to cancer and takes refuge in extremist politics, and Muley Wills, a poor African-American kid who declares his love for Jill by making films. But it is Jill's sister, budding actress Michelle, who steals the show, ruling scene after hilarious scene (for a stretch she pretends to be a Russian defector named Peachy Moskowitz) with her acid tongue. Like the author, she will dazzle you with her smarts.

The Times Picayune
By Susan Larson

Crossing California is pure delight, recreating a mostly Jewish neighborhood in Chicago in the 1970s, bissected by a street called California, the dividing line between upper and middle class housing.

The plot centers on three very different families. Charlie Wasserstrom is an easygoing (perhaps too easygoing for his own good) widower and father of two girls, Michelle and Jill. Michelle wants to be an actress and has the girlish sophistication that such an aspiration requires -- she sees through the lecherous high school teacher, but finds herself oddly drawn to an awkward contemporary, Larry Rovner, who plays in a band called -- what else -- Rovner! Jill, Michelle's younger sister, is a brilliant kid who likes to take the side of the underdog.

During the Iran hostage crisis, which ticks in the background of this novel like a metronome, Jill takes the side of the Ayatollah Khomeini in a school debate. No path of least resistance for this kid.

Then there are the Rovners. Michael is a radiologist, who lusts at the hospital after Laura Kim, who's already having an affair with his best friend. Ellen is a therapist, who has a wicked tongue, and a strange distance from her children. Larry's den in the basement, where he thinks up songs for Rovner! is where his sister, Lana, goes when she needs moral support as she struggles to make a perfect grade on her Marie Curie project so her father will take the family to Paris.
"Dinner at the Rovners," Langer writes, "is the culinary equivalent of speed-reading, and the ritual had become even speedier ever since the stove had exploded and Michael and Ellen had decided to replace home-cooked meals with takeout food."
Then there's Muley Wills, Jill's best friend, who makes brilliant little films to show that he loves her. Muley's mother, Deirdre is a librarian who also cleans houses, trying to save enough money to go back to college; she refuses to accept any money from Muley's father, a Jewish record producer who's made his fortune by underpaying old bluesmen (including Deirdre's father) and

recording their music.

Langer knows the years of teenage angst and it shows, especially in Larry "Yehuda" Rovner, who insists on calling everyone by their Hebrew name. When the band disagrees about its name, Langer gets it just right: "You couldn't call a band Jacobs!, you couldn't call a band Levine!, and you certainly couldn't call one Weinstock! Arik said that Weinstock! would be funny, because everyone would think it was a joke about Woodstock. Yes, Larry said, it was a good joke, but this was a serious band." A band with a repertory of songs such as "(My Lovin' Ain't) Always Orthodox" or "No Sukkah Tonight" is a serious band indeed.

Langer's devastating humor and big heart catch the quality of daily life for these kids -- their dry intelligence in the face of their parents' losses and foibles, their impatience with teachers, their heartfelt longings. He taps out the rhythms of adolescent life perfectly; there are unforgettable "Couples-Only" New Year's Eve parties, Bat Mitzvah celebrations (where Jill agonizes over an unorthodox speech, to say the least), and trips to Paris. Then there are those Saturday nights on Mt. Warren, bong and beer at the ready, when the kids can look down on their surroundings for a change.

But "Crossing California" is filled with tenderness and wisdom as it surveys the '70s: "As the great ball dropped in Times Square, Muley wondered if he's lived through his most creative years in the 1970s. For him, that decade had been about ingenious solutions to insurmountable problems.

The 1980s beckoned, and judging from the great progress he had made in such a short time, they seemed to represent a period of ease and boredom, of domesticity and routine, of financial reward at the expense of creativity -- above all, a period of that until-now-unfamiliar feeling of discontent, where you got everything you desired and it turned out you really didn't want it at all."

One wishes Jill and Muley, Michelle and Larry and Lana, all the love and luck in the world as they grow up. That's the great trick of fiction, to make characters live on in our hearts, and Langer has proven himself a master magician.

Pittsburgh Post Gazette

Teens' tale transports readers to late 1970s

A focus on families

By Sharon Dilworth

"Champagne Snowball": a partner-switching dance involving smooching. Popular at bar and bat mitzvahs.
"Zeppelin, Led": influential rock band that had the good taste to disband after the death of drummer John Bonham; penned anthems for entire generations of pot smokers.
"Astroturf": a form of synthetic grass popular on the front porches of Chicago houses in the 1970s.
Acting as anthropologist, Langer transports the reader back to the late 1970s. Jimmy Carter is president, the Iran hostage crisis occupies the nation, and the deaths of Lynyrd Skynyrd's three band members prove that musicians and small airplanes once again are a fatal combination.
Langer focuses on two families, the Rovners and the Wasserstroms, who live on opposite sides of California Avenue, a neighborhood divide that demarcates the haves from the have-nots.
On the ritzier west side lives Larry Rovner, 17, founder and most devoted member of the band ROVNER!
Their only scheduled gig is at his synagogue's Purim Carnival, where they will compete against a rabbi who hogs the stage with his rendition of "Runaround Sue."
Larry wears sweaty T-shirts that spell out Coca-Cola in Hebrew and writes songs that criticize Bob Dylan's conversion to Christianity and simultaneously give tribute to the soldiers who fought in the Six-Day War.
But when he is approached at the local hot dog shop by Michelle Wasserstrom, a girl he knows from Hebrew school, he's incapable of being anything but awkwardly uncool.
Savvy Michelle barely registers Larry's attitude and informs him, "You're buying us beer."
Also 17, Michelle has been recently booted from the school musical for refusing to flirt with the new director. This merely proves her mantra that everyone disappoints her in the end.
Jill, Michelle's precocious, miserable 13-year old sister, supports

the followers of the Ayatollah Khomeini against the Shah of Iran in a school debate because a good argument is just that.

She is obsessed by the recent death of her mother and worries incessantly about how the world will end. Jill is finally afraid that her best friend, Muley Wills, is in love with her.

Muley, who also lives on the downside of California, has a mother who cleans houses for a living and uses books as an excuse for doing nothing else with her own life.

From his mother, Muley learns of the power of artistic achievements and is staking his life that one of his projects will propel him out of his neighborhood.

In order to get on a local radio program, Muley creates Peachy Moskowitz, a Russian emigre who defects alongside Mikhail Baryshnikov, not that anybody but Muley notices.

When actually forced to produce Peachy, Muley gets Michelle Wasserstrom to impersonate her in a tour de force they actually pull off.

Reminiscent of the J.D. Salinger's Glass kids, Franny and Zooey, who performed on the radio program "It's a Wise Child," the adolescents presented here are brilliantly self-aware of their own shifting status but hopeful enough to believe that they can somehow save themselves.

Like Salinger, Langer captures the sensations and speech of adolescents with consummate skill and does so without nostalgia or sentimentality.

Langer's prose soars as he nails down his characters' concerns with a precision that simply stuns. Like Salinger, he doesn't make adulthood the solution to his characters' problems but celebrates their unsteady navigation with real poignancy.

This novel is a colossal story, a moving tapestry of rituals, rites of passages, boundaries and borders.

Langer, a senior editor at Book magazine, is a newcomer to fiction. His dazzling talents are perfectly balanced between humor and heart.

"Crossing California" is unforgettable. All this and Thousand Island defined: a pink mayonnaise-based salad dressing.

(Sharon Dilworth is a writer and teacher of writing at Carnegie-Mellon University.)

Publishers Weekly -- Starred Review

In Chicago's West Rogers Park neighborhood in 1979, California Avenue divides the prosperous west side from the struggling east. Langer's brilliant debut uses that divide as a metaphor for the changes that occur in the lives of three neighborhood families: the Rovners, the Wasserstroms and the Wills. There are two macro-stories-the courtship of Charlie Wasserstrom and Gail Shiffler-Bass, and the alienation of Jill Wasserstrom from her best friend, Muley Wills-but what really counts here is the exuberance of overlapping subplots. One pole of the book is represented by Ellen Rovner, a therapist whose marriage to Michael dissolves over the course of the book (much to Ellen's relief: she's so distrustful of Michael that she fakes not having an orgasm when they make love). If Ellen embodies cool, intelligent disenchantment, her son, Larry, represents the opposite pole of pure self-centeredness. As Larry sees it, his choice is between becoming a rock star with his band, Rovner!, and getting a lot of sex-or going to Brandeis, becoming successful and getting a lot of sex. The east side Wasserstrom girls exist between these poles: Michelle, the eldest, is rather slutty, flighty and egotistical, but somehow raises her schemes (remaining the high school drama club queen, for instance) to a higher level, while Jill, a seventh-grade contrarian who shocks her Hebrew School teachers with defenses of Ayatollah Khomeini and quotes Nkrumah at her bat mitvah, is still emotionally dazed from her mother's death. Muley, who woos Jill with his little films, wins the heart of the reader, if not of his intended. Chicago produces a mix of intellectualism and naturalism like no other city, and Langer has obviously fed on that. His steely humanism balances the corruptions of ego against an appreciation of the energies of its schemes, putting him firmly in the tradition of such Chicago writers as Bellow and Dybek. Agent, Marly Rusoff. (June)

Forecast: Langer, a former senior editor at Book magazine, paints on a big canvas, making local dramas mirror national shifts, from the rise of the Reagan Republicans to the last bloom of a vital youth culture; fans of literate, ambitious fiction will love this novel.

San Francisco Chronicle

'Crossing California' to sweet home Chicago
Novelist offers an engaging portrait of the '70s from both sides of the tracks
By Victoria Zackheim

Adam Langer's first novel, "Crossing California," will undoubtedly be promoted and praised as one of the better recent coming-of-age works of fiction, but to slip it into a neat little category is a disservice. The characters who live this story are doctors, cleaning women, teachers, therapists and their children; a mix of neighborhood folk occasionally sharing, but more often avoiding, the emotional, political and familial demands of a tumultuous and transitional time in American history. That would be the 400- plus days of 1979-80 when Americans were being held hostage in Iran, Jimmy Carter was being voted out and Ronald Reagan voted in.

The California in this title refers not to the state but to Chicago's California Avenue, a sort of Maginot Line demarcating west side affluence from east side middle class. At the heart of the story are three Chicago families - - five teenagers and their parents -- who, despite diverse lifestyles, are brought together to interact and entangle in matters of school, sex, marriage, politics, religion and culture. We follow them as they live their lives, pursue their dreams and try to move beyond the limited expectations taught them.

The Rovners (Michael, Ellen, children Larry and Lana) live west of California Avenue, meaning they live very well. They have a lovely home in the city and a summer house at Lake Geneva. With the exception of daughter Lana, the family shares an obsession with sex: how to get it or how to avoid it. Michael, a doctor who leans toward pornography and live-sex clubs, struggles with self-doubt and middle age, while dreaming of infidelity with a woman who assists him at the hospital. His wife, Ellen, is convinced that his primary interest is Steve, his best friend and medical partner. Ellen is a therapist who harbors an intense dislike for her patients and their problems. She prefers to keep her emotional distance from everyone -- how better to protect herself? -- as she plots her

escape from marriage and family.

Their son, Larry, is focused on holding to the strictest traditions of Judaism, making his name in the world of rock music and trying to get laid. A passionate composer, he is the lead singer in Rovner! and thinks of college as a fall-back plan (in case his first album doesn't go platinum). To date, his greatest hits, including "(My Lovin' Ain't) Always Orthodox," have been played at Purim carnivals and occasional Jewish Community Center gigs. His younger sister, Lana, a well-mannered kleptomaniac, considers her family inappropriate and warped, and uses her eating disorder to keep her mother both near at hand and distanced. The psychology of this family alone could be a 10-part saga.

Life is more complicated for bumbling widower Charlie Wasserstrom and his daughters, Michelle and Jill. They live in a one-bedroom apartment east of California Avenue. Charlie is accustomed to thankless jobs in tacky restaurants, yet he continues to hope. His older daughter, Michelle, who has played every lead in her high school's drama productions, nearly succeeds in the real-life role of neighborhood tramp. When she surprises everyone (herself, above all) with outstanding scores on her SATs, life begins to change. After all, it is Jill, her younger sister, who is the family scholar. Where Michelle loses herself in sex and drugs, Jill avoids human contact. She pursues complex research for the most basic essay and takes the unpopular side of every debate. In class, she defends the Ayatollah Khomeini and Fidel Castro; in her bat mitzvah speech she lambastes Judaism and all forms of organized religion as hypocritical.

Muley Scott Wills (whom Langer describes as "the strange, brainy black kid") and his mother, Deirdre, live hand to mouth. Deirdre cleans houses (the Rovners', for one) and dreams of returning to college to complete the last credits toward a teaching certificate. Muley supplements her income by rebuilding movie projectors, editing film and winning writing contests. He runs into problems when he fabricates in an essay "The Person I Most Admire" and is chosen to be a regular on a kids' radio show -- where that Person is to be interviewed. Muley is wise beyond his years, passionately in love with Jill Wasserstrom. He is the accidental son of a record

producer whose absence Deirdre demands and whose existence is her curse. Adam Langer achieves so much in this book. Perhaps his greatest achievement is his gift for presenting characters so vividly that we hear their distinct and wonderful voices, feel deeply their heartaches and desires. We grieve for their disappointments and celebrate their successes.
In the course of the story, each character discovers something about self, spouse, child or lover that makes it possible to go on.

"Crossing California" is serious and heartfelt; it is also laugh-out-loud funny. Langer has created a tender blend of compassion, amusement and devotion.

Chicago Sun Times

The masque of W. Rogers Park
by Roger Gathman

In Elizabethan times, a holiday or the nuptials of the nobility were often crowned with a small play, called a masque, that mixed the antic hijinks of rubes and nubile lovers, folkloric references, and a few cosmic symbols. Some commentators have speculated that Shakespeare's "Midsummer Night's Dream" was written for one such wedding.

Chicago's West Rogers Park neighborhood in 1979 is a considerable geographic and cultural remove from the London of Elizabeth I. But Adam Langer's delightful novel of the entangled fates of three West Rogers Park families during the 444 days from the taking of the hostages at the American Embassy in Tehran on Nov. 4, 1989, to their release Jan. 20, 1981, is like a contemporary masque in novel form.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" has been called a bit of plotless fluff, but it actually is about the ritual transition from one order to another, seen through the intricate interactions and misapprehensions of its lovers during a holiday when the everyday rules of normal life are suspended. Crossing California is another such tale.

Its author, a journalist, playwright and filmmaker, has been a Chicago Reader theater critic and was a senior editor at the old Book Magazine. He knows his Chicago; he grew up in West Rogers Park.

Instead of spending one night in a woods outside Athens, his characters swarm through high school plays, a synagogue carnival, a bat mitvah, a pot smoker's spot in a park, and other local habitations in search of the objects of their desires. Instead of an aristocratic order being threatened and restored, as it is in Shakespeare's play, we have an American order being undermined under Jimmy Carter and then, ambiguously, restored under Ronald Reagan. Just as Shakespearean holidays were considered times when the normal order of things were suspended, the hostage period, as anybody who lived through it can testify, seemed to be a period in which the normal rules of American order were being

systematically and mysteriously levitated.

In fact, the time capped the whole strange decade that couldn't seem to shake its '60s hangover. Langer's instinct for getting things right is never so accurate as in the way he understands how to make the period's atmosphere play like movie music behind the densely plotted actions of his characters.
The three families here are the Wasserstroms, the Rovners and the Wills. The first two are Jewish; the last is black. California Avenue operates as a scale of status to sort them -- the further west you live from California Avenue, the higher your class.
According to this scale, the Rovners are on top. Ellen Rovner is a therapist and her husband, Michael, is a doctor. The Wasserstroms are in the middle. Charlie is a widower who finds jobs in the lower middle class end of the spectrum -- restaurant manager, newspaper ad salesman, etc. The Wills are on the low end -- Deidre Wills is a single mother who, as the book begins, has been hibernating in a more than decade-long depression. All the families, in the course of the novel, move west. This is, after all, America, where social mobility is upward.

There are two separate worlds in this novel: the world of the adults and the world of the kids. The separation is not, however, a separation of wisdom or power -- the adults here often seem more powerless than, and certainly more naive than, the kids.
From the outside the Rovners seem a normal family. Inside, however, they are a hive of fantasies and neuroses. Ellen, the psychologist, is proud of her disenchanted vision: she "generally saw humans as sexually frustrated, self-deluded liars, they were jealous, competitive, petty, uncharitable, suspicious and rarely worthy of pity." And she is just as bleak about her children and husband. But her cynicism isn't always foolproof. She is convinced her husband is gay and her daughter anorexic, but her husband actually is a clumsy philanderer and her daughter a kleptomaniac. Her son, Larry, who has founded a band called "Rovner!" and writes songs with titles such as "My lovin' ain't always Orthodox," can't decide between being a rock star and a scholarship student at Brandeis. Finally, Ellen's daughter, Lana, has the soul of a Junior League back-stabber trapped in the body of a 13-year-old.

One of Larry's fantasies is to get to third base -- or even get a nice bunt to first -- with Michelle Wasserstrom. Michelle is a high school drama club queen, and she enlivens, with her dramatic responses to the perpetual outrages life throws against her egocentricity, every scene in which she is featured. She smokes pot and is not a just-say-no kind of gal when it comes to certain suggestions whispered by certain long-haired boys in the back seats of cars. Her sister, Jill, is a preternaturally wise seventh-grader who is the winter figure in this novel. She seems to have been so blasted by her mother's death as to be missing her youth while living it. Charlie, the girls' father, is a decent man who abhors confrontation.
Jill features as an object of baffled adoration for Muley Wills, who, if this was truly Shakespeare, would be Puck. Muley is a jack-of-all trades kid, a fixer of broken machines, a player in magazine contests, a cartoonist, and a weirdly self-sufficient boy. Muley is motivated by two large desires: to liberate his mother from depression and to win Jill's heart. By the end of the novel he attains one of his goals.

Langer's story is not shaped by one central event, but by the convergence of many intricately plotted little events, which fall together in the beautifully subdued ending, when all the characters are poised to move on. The book's hold on the reader is such, though, that we really don't want them to. Giving them up -- closing the book and breaking the spell -- is the worst part of this engrossing debut novel.

Entertainment Weekly

It's 1979. Jimmy Carter is president and some 70 Americans have been taken hostage in Iran. In a Chicago Jewish neighborhood, Ayatollah-defending Jill Wasserstrom is dreading the bar mitzvah her recently widowed father is forcing on her. She gets no sympathy from her stoner sister, Michelle, an aspiring actress who, as a prank, impersonates a made-up relative of Muley Wills, a gentle filmmaker with a crush on Jill who, by the way, can't stand her kleptomaniacal anorexic neighbor Lana Rovner and Lana's horny brother Larry, a yeshiva senior who, when not masturbating to pay-TV, dreams of making it with his Jerusarock band Rovner! And that's just the beginning, as residents on both side of social-strata-dividing California Avenue brilliantly loop and intersect.

In his ambitious, irresistible debut, Langer packs in more hilarious and agonizing moments than most writers manage in a lifetime.

Jessica Shaw

St. Louis Post Dispatch
by Thomas Crone

Characters in Adam Langer's "Crossing California" don't simply pull a box of cereal from the shelf in the morning. They ponder all the possible options first. They wonder about the designs on the box. They question whether the milk's bad and debate that possibility with a relative.

After a few pages of uncertainty and conversation, maybe then they actually start to eat breakfast.

This is a dense novel, given to a high amount of (seemingly) trivial detail, with layer after layer of backstory developed for a large cast of ensemble characters. What's most amazing about Langer's tendency to pack in the information is the fact that it so completely works. It may take you a few dozen pages to lock into the pace that Langer's establishing, but once that clicks, you're in for a remarkable read.

"Crossing California" is a coming-of-age tale, centered on a small group of Jewish teenagers in Chicago, with action taking place at the cusp of the 1980s. Although the kids are central to the story, Langer doesn't fall into the trap of setting up a teenage world minus any adults; here, the parents play a central role in the tale, alternating with the kids as each character takes turns moving along the story, which is told from nearly a dozen points of view.

Though all of them carry some of the narrative weight, several are closer to the novel's emotional center - Muley Scott Wills-Silverman, for example. An eighth-grader with a love of film, an uncanny ability to tinker and an abiding love for classmate Jill Wasserstrom, he gives the book a clear social conscience and an undeniable rooting interest. Whether poking through back alleys in search of broken radios, listening to Blackhawks games in his sparse room or endlessly editing films, Muley's constantly doing something just a little bit interesting and entertaining, and with creativity and integrity.

His opposite is Larry Rovner, a self-centered rock drummer and would-be Casanova who Langer uses as a proper foil, as he hunts for a music career and female conquests.

Though a jerk, Rovner isn't always on the losing end of things, showing that the author's not interested in creating fantasy here, but a real-life stable of kids doing real-life things. And, sometimes, the jerks come out ahead.

Like the short-lived, cult television show "Freaks and Geeks" (recently re-released to an avid DVD audience), Langer shows teenagers as vulnerable and flawed human beings. At times, they come through for one another and for their parents. They can be humorous and offhandedly kind like Michelle Wasserstrom, a comic actress and middle-of-the-pack student. And they can be clueless and petty like Larry Rovner's kid sister, Lana, a burgeoning shoplifter.

With his story taking place between November 1979 and January 1981, Langer would be forgiven if he went crazy with cultural references to the time period. And those do pop up, from Ronald Reagan's election defeat of Jimmy Carter to the kids' buying LPs for just $5.49. But he shows an admirable restraint in that respect, giving a sense of time and place without pouring on the kitsch. It should be noted that there's a heavy emphasis on Jewish traditions, foods and a celebrations; and some of those references, insights and gags might go past a non-Jewish reader. Somewhat tongue-in-cheek, there's a reference guide included in the back of the book.

Ultimately, Langer's debut novel doesn't need to rely on any type of gimmickry. Though there's an unbelievable amount of detail on the neighborhood these kids grew up in and the pressures that particular time brought to bear on the kids - easy access to drugs, for example - Langer's simply telling a story about teens and parents, who don't always see eye-to-eye, and about teens and their peers, who can be cruel.

Filled with comic elements, a deep sense of realism and a deft touch at character development, "Crossing California" signals Langer as a novelist well worth following.

Thomas Crone, St. Louis, is a freelance writer and adjunct professor at Webster University.

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