

A comedy that serves up a semi-schizoid restaurant critic — *en brochette*

Reservations Recommended

By Eric Kraft

Crown, 277 pages, \$18.95

Reviewed by Greg Johnson

An author whose short-story collection "Distant Friends" will be published this fall

Eric Kraft's first novel, "Herb 'n' Lorna," was widely praised for its ebullient humor and its lively preoccupation with romance and sex. His new book, "Reservations Recommended," may bear a family resemblance to the earlier work in its comic investigation of sexual matters, but its bitter satire and misanthropic world-view clearly mark a new departure.

By day, Matthew Barber is a middle-aged vice president for a Boston toy manufacturer; by night, he is "B. W. Beath," the maliciously witty restaurant critic for Boston Biweekly magazine. But his bifurcated identity relates to more than a reviewer's need for anonymity during restaurant visits.

Whereas Matthew is generally hapless, anxious and sexually insecure, his alter-ego B. W. is the epitome of chic urbanity and self-possession. The reader soon learns that Matthew uses B. W. and his infamous reviewing style

both to get revenge and to impose order on his own increasingly chaotic and unhappy life.

The novel is divided into seven longish chapters, each detailing one of Matthew's visits to a Boston restaurant; at each chapter's end, B. W.'s review is printed entire. There is much high comedy in Matthew's observations of the pretentious decor, indifferent service and drunken patrons all around him, and in the verbal skewering administered by B. W., who uses the "royal we" in all his reviews.

Of The Alley View Grill, for instance, B. W. writes:

"Our heart is warmed by the sight of waiters and waitresses enjoying themselves, and here they certainly do. On some evenings our heart has been so warmed by their happy chatting and chortling that we have scarcely noticed that they have scarcely noticed us."

And of a tourist trap called Flynn's: "To fulfill the expectations of the tourist, the place must look old, and Flynn's has accomplished this supremely well, through the simple expedient of, apparently, not cleaning the place for the last hundred-fifty-or-so years."

Although "Reservations Recommended" adroitly portrays the absurdity of contemporary life as reflected in its trendy restaurants, its true subject is Matthew's midlife crisis.

Far from having the sophisticated élan of B. W. Beath, Matthew "thinks of himself as adequate, but only adequate, stuck at the adequacy level, and sometimes the bitter taste of his adequacy rises in his throat like heartburn."

Divorced from his wife Liz, he still longs for her; dating a woman named Belinda, he lusts for her teenaged daughter, Leila (who might as well have been named Lolita). His life has become an angst-ridden sexual odyssey and, more basically, a desperate quest to regain his vanishing confidence and self-esteem.

At times, this desperation assumes near-metaphysical proportions. For instance, Matthew is emotionally undone by a mysterious smell in his apartment, whose source workmen cannot find even after tearing up the carpet and knocking a huge hole in his wall.

Similarly, he is discomfited by the enigmatic (and hilarious) messages left all around Boston by a graffiti artist called "the Neat Graffitiist," who uses careful block lettering. One example: "DRIVE OUT THE BAD HABITS THAT HAVE BEEN DOING YOU HARM. EVEN IF YOU ARE A DRUG ADDICT, YOU CAN BE TRAINED TO GROW PAPRIKA IN MINES. NOBODY WHO SEES EVIL

WOULD DELIBERATELY CHOOSE IT."

Though Matthew's quest provides thematic unity, individual chapters tend to lose focus. Kraft might have been more selective in reporting the endless chitchat between Matthew and his dining companions; and he describes each restaurant and its patrons in relentless, often wearing detail. The novel is also hampered by Kraft's absorption in Matthew's crisis at the expense of the other characters; Liz, Belinda, and Leila are mere types.

Yet for all its flaws and excesses, "Reservations" rewards the reader's patience with its inventive comedy and technical polish. In the later chapters, an ongoing duel between the voices of Matthew and B. W.—presented as a version of everyman being tempted by the devil—propels the book toward its surprising but effective conclusion.

Both the novel's structure and the numerous epigraphs Kraft has affixed to it—from Dante, Lucretius and Epicurus, among others—suggest that it is intended as a serio-comic exploration of a man's soul, adrift in the cultural wasteland of the late 20th Century. But if the book is too limited in scope and, finally, too superficial and facetious to sustain such a vision, it does succeed as an inventive, often witty entertainment and as a deft satire on the excesses of contemporary America.



Illustration from the book jacket