

# Novel provides masterful comment on times

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By ALICIA MILLER

Eric Kraft became an overnight success two years ago when his first novel, "Herb 'n' Lorna," was enthusiastically praised on the front page of "The New York Times Book Review," among other places.

As with most meteoric rises, Kraft's really wasn't; for years, he had been circulating xeroxed copies of parts of a serialized work eventually called "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy" among admirers in Boston. But it was only after Peter Leroy gained a devoted following that Kraft caught the eye of an established publisher. "Herb 'n' Lorna" followed, and Kraft was launched.

"Herb 'n' Lorna" is the funny, off-beat story of Peter Leroy's grandparents and Peter's discovery, after their deaths, of the startling truth about Gumma and Guppa, as he fondly calls them. And this truth is that, for years, the two had conducted a flourishing business in animated erotic jewelry.

This simple fact overflows with possibilities, and Kraft mines them like a demon as Peter grapples with the rude shock that his grandparents and, maybe even his parents not only knew about sex, but also had a compelling interest in it that earned them a small fortune.

As delightful and larky as "Herb 'n' Lorna" is, Kraft's new novel, "Reservations Recommended" (Crown, \$18.95), is a far more accomplished and satisfying work. Its dark side is indeed dark, but its humor — much of it in ongoing jokes that skewer cur-

rent manners and morals from urban woes to middle-aged lust — is side-splitting and delicious. You get the bitter with the sweet here, no-holds-barred existential slapstick. For my money, Kraft's eye is shrewder (and smarter) than Tom Wolfe's.

"Reservations Recommended" is the story of Matthew Barber, an apparently mild-mannered toy company executive who, after his recent divorce, abandons life in the suburbs for a new high-rise in downtown Boston. Matthew's specialty at work is sensible toys, and he views himself as a rather drab person, though lately he has taken to wearing expensive ties and flashy socks with his conservative suits. Matthew isn't sure whether this combination makes him look unusual or "even less remarkable than before."

As it turns out, Matthew is not sure of many things, though this can hardly be said for his wise-up alter ego, B.W. Beath, the pseudonym under which Matthew secretly writes restaurant reviews for a Boston magazine. These are scathing, sharp-witted, aggressively (and wonderfully) nasty reviews in which food takes a backseat to social commentary. (Incidentally, all these restaurants will be easily recognizable to anyone familiar with Boston as thinly disguised versions of actual restaurants.)

In a series of seven chapters, each ending with one of Beath's wicked reviews, Matthew's life is revealed. Gradually it becomes clear that he is not the affable man he would have us think, but rather an angry cynic, a loner who drinks too much. By the

novel's end, B.W. Beath's evil persona subsumes Matthew's bland goodness, and if we have not witnessed a slide into madness, we have been through a surprisingly gripping emotional crisis.

The surface of the novel, lavish with side-splitting wit and insights into our age, is extraordinarily at odds with the dark metamorphosis of Matthew into Beath. Yet this contrast establishes a high-pitched tension that keeps the reader captivated.

Kraft underscores this tension in the graffiti Matthew collects, sayings neatly printed around Boston by an unknown person whom Matthew has dubbed "the Neat Graffitist." Here the tug-of-war between sanity and madness, humor and pathos, weirdly flourishes in shorthand: 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. Or: NEVER FEAR PAIN. TIME DIMINISHES IT. BUT AVOID BOSTON CITY HOSPITAL. NURSES THERE WEAR USED UNIFORMS PURCHASED FROM BURGER KING. TREAT PATIENTS WITH FATALISTIC DETACHMENT.

If the words of the Neat Graffitist are intriguingly zany, they are no zanier than other things in the novel such as Matthew's expensive high-rise where the elevators seldom work, and — at least to Matthew's nose — a mysterious odor emanates from behind the walls.

Many things stink beneath the surface in "Reservations Recommended," and no one is quite as she or he appears: not Belinda, Matthew's boring weekend dinner date; not Belinda's Lolita-esque daughter Leila; not his ex-wife Liz; not even Matthew's older friends.

In fact, to accommodate themselves to the age of glitz and glut, to new-money luxury and its often accompanying absence of taste, everyone in the novel has squeezed into some mold which refuses to contain them. When Matthew finally bursts violently out of his mold, we're not completely surprised. Something had to give.

Except for a curious flub here and there in point-of-view and an ending which, however inevitable, feels jarring, "Reservations Recommended" is an immensely energetic, eye-popping guide through today's urban streets, where the homeless wander alongside their upscale contemporaries, neither suspecting how much they have in common.

A funnier, more masterful comment on our time we may not see.