

# BOOKS

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM

## INSECURITIES

**T**his is not the book we expected from Eric Kraft. Is it?

We are in urban Boston, among those coming up on midlife with the cash, credit and expectations to cope, thanks. Matthew Barber, our divorced hero, occupies a black-and-white penthouse — Fred & Ginger-inspired — and tones up his body as he tricks out his wardrobe. By day he designs sensible toys to sustain his lost ideals and by night, under the *nom de bouche* B.W. Beath, writes killer restaurant reviews to nourish his new persona. B.W. knows a Bolognese from a bouillabaisse stir-fry, but he knows best what *Boston Biweekly* stands for: the material art of condescension.

There are cracks in Matthew's life that becoming B.W. — snazzy socks, classic martini straight up — help him hold together. There is the untraceable bad smell in his apartment. There are the dead-end sexual relationship with divorced Belinda and the dangerous sexual attraction to her budding daughter Leila. There are all the unfulfilled attractions to the many women he meets, from his old school buddy Effie (Is she unhappily married? Will he ever ask?) to the seductive schoolgirl who deserts him to amuse her friends. In this last episode B.W. intervenes, and the result is violence.

Violence? From Eric Kraft?

Eric Kraft is the humorist who published, in eight parts, *The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy*: a sunny memoir of a weirdo on the make. And then the saga of *Herb 'n Lorna*, Peter's grandparents, who during a long and loyal marriage unknowingly collaborated on pornographic jewelry. Kraft was our Mark Twain through the looking-glass, our Thurber of the off-color anecdote. Now we recall that Twain and Thurber were both unhappy men. And Matthew is Walter Mitty quite literally run mad.

*Reservations Recommended* is about the little man who isn't there. Those compulsive insecurities with which we at first sympathize — *People*

have been looking at us. Am I making a fool of myself? — soon reveal Matthew's self-image as that of an incompetent manipulator at the mercy of pros. Though coached by B.W. via interior monologue, he finds people mysteriously threatening, women in particular motivelessly malign.

He does, but the reader catches on. Others simply lose patience with the little man who cedes them every power of approval, while reserving the resentful will to disapprove of them. The marital desertion that tips Matthew toward breakdown is in retrospect clear as a classic martini: His wife didn't want to play arbiter, *raison d'être*, and deity to someone with a roving eye. *I'm no judge*, Matthew admits before signing over to B.W. Beath, who is. And B.W. solves the problem with schizophrenia.

The classy and funny Kraft gets some appeal in this decline of a sniveler. The restaurant reviews that mark each episode of Matthew's emotional regress are gems of thievery and pretension: They are real life thoroughly risen above.

Matthew, it gives us pause to realize, is talented though hopeless. When his desperation begins to shred B.W.'s prose aplomb it's like listening to *Ravel's Valse*.

And there is some nice literary highlighting. The fractured wall in Matthew's apartment (they're looking for the smell); the deliberately ruined decor of Ristorante Dolce Far Niente ("*l'esthétique du mal*"); the deserted cityscapes haunted by the Neat Graffitiist, Matthew's other *alter ego*: Is this urban and psychic decay we observe? My, yes.

Matthew, nasty little non-person that he is, is not particularly coherent as a character; his fat childhood is a sketch, his early idealism — "committed to improving the quality of public education" — a laugh. But as a type, he's dead on, done forever. This is someone you see every day, sometimes in the mirror. Look at him carefully, if you can stand it.

Peter Leroy took eight volumes to solidify his eccentricity, just to be not like him. He is the cypher at the bottom of the vortex, and maybe only an unhappy funny man could be driven to drag him clear and shake him in our faces.

Edna Stumpf reviews new fiction for the *Star-Telegram*.

## Classy and funny Kraft creates a little, big man

### Reservations Recommended

By Eric Kraft

Fiction

Crown, \$18.95

