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Love trouble on the menu for lonely restaurant critic

RESERVATIONS RECOMMEND-ED. By Eric Kraft. Crown. \$18.95.

> By PAT MACENULTY Special to the Sun-Sentinel

Eric Kraft cannot be accused of writing the same novel over and over. His new novel, Reservations Recommended, differs enormously from his previous work, Herb 'n' Lorna.



The one thing that the two do have in common is

Kraft's dry and delicious sense of humor.

Matthew Barber may seem like an ordinary man to many (less than ordinary to his ex-wife and his girlfriend) but like a superhero stepping into a phone booth, when Matthew Barber goes to a restaurant, he assumes another identity — that of restaurant critic and witty gourmand, B.W. Beath.

In each chapter of the novel, Matthew visits a different restaurant and somehow complicates his personal life. This is then followed by a review of the restaurant complete with subtextual commentary on Matthew's life by B.W. Beath. Of the two halves of the character, B.W. is surely the more fascinating both to the reader and to Matthew. By the end of the book, B.W.'s reviews have almost nothing to do with the food or the service at the restaurant, but instead explicate the problems of middle age in a post-modern society.

Matthew's problem is the age-old "sex and love" problem — or, if you will, the problem of being unloved and considering himself unlovable. Part of

what makes him unlovable is his obsessiveness. And one of his obsessions involves certain strange graffiti found on the buildings around Boston, obviously the work of just one person. Matthew collects these sayings and puts them on the wall of his new apartment.

"Several themes run through the Graffitist's oeuvre: the paranoiac fretting of someone who feels he's being watched, criticized, harassed; loneliness and a desire for friendship; and the everyday indignities visited on the vulnerable."

As Matthew, our hero is vulnerable, but as B.W. Beath, critic at large, he becomes the man of steel.

At the beginning of the book, the divorced Matthew is dating a woman named Belinda with whom he has a satisfactory, but not passionate, sexual arrangement. Matthew, 43, also has a giddy fascination for Belinda's 16-year-old daughter, and in one of his restaurant visits takes her instead of Belinda. For a brief while, it seems as if Matthew is not as dull to women as he supposes himself to be, but his ex-wife re-enters the picture and makes short work of any such illusion.

B.W.'s discourse on the re-opening of a restaurant called Two-Two-Two—where Matthew and his ex-wife go for a date that turns sour—begins with a story about a marriage that doesn't work and ends this way: "He understands how foolish it would be to try to get back together. You can't raise the dead, he knows now. You can't undo what time has done... How did he learn all this? It happened in a single evening spent in the dining room here, observing this ridiculous attempt to revivify the stinking corpse of Two-Two-Two."

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