

Jim Kobak's

KIRKUS REVIEWS

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Kraft, Eric
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Kraft (*Herb n' Loma*, 1988) brings comic flair, compassion, and rare skill to a modern-day morality tale about a Jekyll-and-Hyde restaurant reviewer.

At age 43, Matthew Barber hasn't forgotten his tormented childhood. A model of male sensitivity, he develops socially constructive children's toys, admires the work of a deranged graffitist concerned with evil, and worries about the odor emanating from the walls of his new luxury apartment in Boston overlooking the ghetto. Dumped by his wife, Barber has begun an affair with her friend Belinda, but his major gratification comes from his secret role as B.W. Beath, the worldly-wise, contemptuous restaurant reviewer for *Boston Biweekly*. As frustrations mount in Barber's life, he begins to hear—and at times obey—the amoral voice of his creation: the struggle between conscience and selfish impulse is both touching and chilling in the pivotal chapter when Barber takes Belinda's sexually teasing yet innocent daughter out on the town. Beath's ascendancy ultimately leads to violence. Kraft constructs each chapter around a visit to a restaurant and ends each with Beath's review. This could be gimmicky; instead, the reviews are entertaining in their own right while illuminating some of Barber's unspoken feelings and providing proof of the clever, seductive quality of Beath's voice.

Sometimes scary satire about the unraveling of the urban social fabric and one man's moral fiber; Kraft hits his themes hard, but he's funny and skillful enough to avoid a heavy hand.