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Dining-out hero feels hunger down deep

Reservations Recommended

By Eric Kraft
Crown, \$18.95

By Fredric Koepfel
The Commercial Appeal

Looking like Ray Walston as the devil in *Damn Yankees*, Eric Kraft peers sardonically from the dust jacket, saying "OK, buddy, I've got your number."

In this hilarious but ultimately depressing novel, he's got just about everybody's number.

The premise is unique and beautifully realized. The hero (is it possible to use that word without a smirk today?) is Matthew Barber, a 43-year-old vice president for new product development at a toy company. Known only to a few, however, is his position as a restaurant reviewer for a Boston magazine, an avocation he pursues under the name B. W. Beath.

Each chapter of *Reservations Recommended* involves the reparations for getting to one restaurant and the meal (or lack of one). Included are glimpses of Matthew's life and work, his relationships with his girlfriend and former wife, his fears and insecurities. Following these adventures (more often misadventures)

dards of behavior and quality. There's the chic northern Italian restaurant designed to look like an industrial ruin; the "Old Boston" style establishment packing in the tourists and kids on first dates; the expensive, ostentatious Continental restaurant whose supercilious waiters pop the champagne corks loudly so customers will know they're getting real champagne.

Poor Matthew wanders in this disjointed world like a postmodern Holden Caulfield looking for love. Every move he makes, every breath he takes is freighted with doubt and ambiguity, and though he doesn't phrase the problem so succinctly to himself, his whole concern in life is "Am I doing the right thing?" The sad, inevitable answer is "No."

As the book jolts along and Matthew becomes more confused, the restaurant reviews grow less concerned with meals and service and focus more on Matthew's unsatisfying relationships and his increasing inability to cope with his longing for

love, romance and innocence. Increasingly the cynical voice of B. W. intrudes, and the last two chapters contain a great deal of interior dialog between Matthew and his alter ego. Acting under B. W.'s tutelage, Matthew attempts to get chummy with a group of young people (especially a girl in a black skirt) in a bar, but he is, of course, tricked and humiliated, and violence leaves him not exhilarated but defeated.

Earlier in the novel, B. W. says to Matthew, "I think it's your greatest weakness, this need to be loved." A few pages later, B. W. calls Matthew a dreamer and Matthew replies, "But, you know, I feel wonderful. I feel good."

But feelings of dreams and wonder are to no avail, and the failure to find love on any terms destroys Matthew's compassion and humanity, portrayed in this novel as hopelessly unhip in the cool 1990s.



tures) is a review of the restaurant, and it's in these sections that we see the gulf between the reality of being Matthew Barber and the suave sophisticated persona of B. W. Beath.

Boy, does Kraft have the tone of contemporary urban American life and concerns down perfectly. The restaurants serve as mirrors for the pretensions of a society that no longer has stan-