

RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED

By Eric Kraft

Crown

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Reviewed for Minnesota Public Radio
by Leonard Lang

In *Reservations Recommended*, Eric Kraft shows what happens when an affluent thirty-something person wakes up one morning as a panicked forty-somethinger burdened by an overactive libido and middle-aged angst.

Perhaps it didn't happen overnight for Matthew Barber, a Boston executive for a toy company, and perhaps he is not the most representative of baby boomers with his martinis and high culture tastes. But at 43, he is in the right age group, and something has definitely turned rotten. For one thing his new, luxury apartment stinks though only he can detect the odor while workers tear open his walls in search of the elusive scent. And Matthew senses something deeper is at issue just as he feels something isn't quite right about the fact that his skyline view of the city makes even the slums look lovely. This may not be subtle as metaphor, but it's apt.

Unhappily and recently divorced, Matthew is often accompanied evenings by his girlfriend, Belinda, whose real name is simply Linda, and by fantasies about Belinda's voluptuous fifteen-year-old, Leila. Matthew clumsily tries to impress the girl while recognizing what an old fool he is

Lang

Kraft Review--2

becoming. Also joining Matthew in his nights out is his own personal Mr. Hyde, a snobbish and jaded alter ego that Matthew names BW. BW is Matthew's pseudonym as a magazine restaurant reviewer, Matthew's second occupation. But BW is also an inner voice, sniping at Matthew, mocking him for the pathetic nature of his lusts and then for his failure to act on these illicit desires.

At times, Matthew conceives of BW as the real person and himself as the made-up character. Other times, he imagines BW as a more worldly older brother, "whose tastes," Kraft writes, "are so sophisticated, he can find shortcomings in any experience."

Kraft has organized this satire of the good life around its easy pleasures--eating and sex. Each of the chapters is named after a different restaurant and describes an excursion to that restaurant followed by BW's newspaper review of the experience. The chapters becomes darker, more on the edge and more sexually obsessed as Matthew's life begins to unravel.

Besides BW, Matthew's only source of philosophical ideas is a street person's grafitti which Matthew records on the partially dismantled wall of his apartment. Here's a sample: TO HERBERT: YOU WERE BORN ONCE AND NOT TWICE AND WHEN YOU ARE DEAD YOU WILL BE DEAD FOREVER. GIVE ME BACK MY

Lang

Kraft Review--3

WATCHES. THEY WILL NOT MAKE YOU HAPPY. THEY ARE NO DEFENSE AGAINST DEATH.

Apparently, philosophy and mysticism have turned to muddle in the urban landscape along with everything else. The graffitist's weird words, though, seem at heart more in touch with real life concerns than the eat, drink and be merry philosophy of the beautiful people and the college kids that surround Matthew on his evenings out.

Everyone in this book is just floating along, heading for some sort of existential or spiritual crisis. Matthew's comes in the final chapter when his all-too-common frustrations and rage erupt in violence. Although this violence is minor and the message here is legitimate, this surprisingly mean-spirited section seems out of character with the humorous tone of the rest of the book like sticking a Rambo scene at the end of a Woody Allen film.

Actually, Kraft's sense of humor shares as much with Oscar Wilde as it does with Woody Allen as the author guides us on his tour of cosmopolitan life and the middle-aged male psyche. Kraft's books are all part of what he considers one extended piece of fiction, but this work--which deserves more attention than it's likely to receive--requires no knowledge of his other novels, only a willingness to look and laugh at our society and ourselves.