

Novel about a food reviewer doesn't lack bite and insight

Matthew Barber is an unhappy man.

He is 43 years old, divorced, and getting along indifferently as vice president for new product development at the Manning & Rafter Toy Co. in Boston.

Yes, some might call it a mid-life crisis, but most of us would just hope for the best and leave it at that.

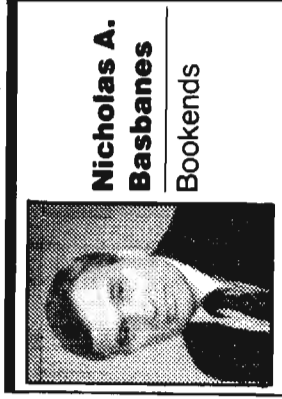
Matthew, on the other hand, has a way to vent his frustration, a way that lets him express his hostile feelings while retaining a veil of anonymity.

At night, you see, he becomes another man, another man with another name that allows him to speak his mind and placate his demons without disclosing his true identity.

Every so often, for a few brief hours, Matthew Barber becomes B.W. Beath, and as B.W. Beath, he reviews Boston's restaurants.

Those who have entered the remarkable world of Eric Kraft may remember Matthew Barber as a chubby third-grade classmate of Peter Leroy in "The Fox and the Clam." Though just a pessimistically sad secondary character in that 1983 novella — he was a foil, actually, for Peter's unbridled optimism — Matthew remained a presence in Eric Kraft's consciousness.

Two years ago, Kraft's breakthrough novel, "Herb 'n Lorna,"



Nicholas A. Basbanes
Bookends

focused on Peter Leroy's maternal grandparents, Herb and Lorna Piper. In a front-page review, The New York Times described this delightful novel as a "historical farce, a comedy of four generations of happy errors."

Despite its rich humor, "Herb 'n Lorna" was a gentle book. With "Reservations Recommended" — a great title, by the way — Kraft continues his exploration of Peter Leroy's world with humor, but also with a little more bite, if you'll excuse the pun.

Peter Leroy, as we have noted in the past, is a continuing character who gets his energy from Eric Kraft's own recollections and experiences. While he is a product of the imagination, he does represent something of a self-examination for the former writer from Boston who last year returned to his native Long Island. That is what makes the mid-life emergence of sour-spirited Matthew Barber particularly interesting.

"I admit this is the closest I have come in my books to dealing with immediate reality," Kraft ac-

knowledgeed in an interview in Boston last week.

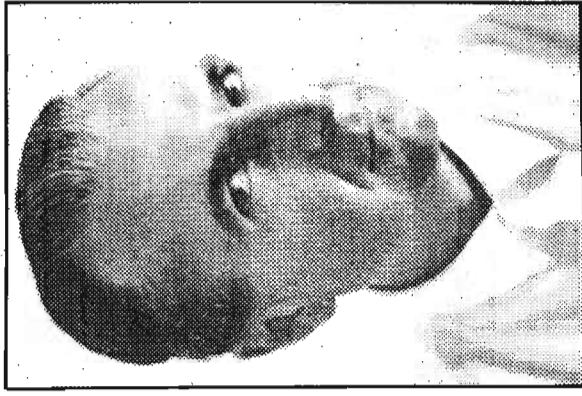
"I began to wonder what had happened to Matthew Barber, and when I began to wonder what had happened to him, I began to wonder what had happened to me. Or, to be more specific, I began to wonder what might have become of me if all the things that had gone so well had gone badly."

The result, he admits, is something of a flip-side look at Eric Kraft, a man quite clearly content with the way his life has turned out, pleased and satisfied with his work and with his family.

"I think I was asking a question," Kraft continued. "How deep does a person's character run, specifically my own? Am I the lovable guy you see because of a deep-seated character trait, or is it just because I've been so lucky? Suppose all my good fortune had been bad, what kind of man would I have become? That's what led me into Matthew's character, I'm afraid."

When asked to cite one example of where he went right and Matthew went wrong, Kraft immediately pointed to his wife, Madeline, sitting next to him in Davio's restaurant on Newbury Street, where the three of us were having lunch.

By becoming a pseudonymous restaurant critic for Boston Biweekly — his column is titled "The Epicurean in the Hub of the



Eric Kraft

Universe" — Matthew is able to pontificate and grouse, and hide behind a shield at the same time.

One reason Kraft selected restaurant reviews as a way to express Matthew's anger is that he and his wife wrote a number of them in the early '80s for a publication called Dining In and Out, and later for New England Monthly.

"B.W. Beath is a monster. He writes the kind of review, the true aim of which is to elevate the reviewer at the expense of the restaurant. I believe Matthew thinks he needs that shield because the man he really is wouldn't succeed in contemporary life."

"Reservations Recommended" is published by Crown, \$18.95. Formal attire not required. Available at all bookstores. Credit cards accepted. Four stars.