

RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED**By Eric Kraft**

Crown, \$18.95

Hup ho, a new Eric Kraft novel. Is it literary hot-bath time or what? Infused with Proustian nostalgia and smart erotic sentiment, Kraft's (serialized) *Peter Leroy* and *Herb 'n' Lorna* (in which Peter recounts his grandparents' sexy love story) were sweet, upbeat, and full of wist. But members of the Kraft cult may recall an existential black hole near the center of *Peter Leroy*, in the volume titled *The Fox and the Clam*. Here Peter recounts a fictional childhood friendship with a character he claims to have imported from later life, a melancholy little boy named Matthew Barber.

Peter isn't back . . . yet. But until he returns it's easy to make do with *Reservations Recommended*, which concerns 14 unhappy weeks during Matthew's adulthood when he wants to change his personality but can't, with tragic results. In *Peter Leroy*, Matthew functions as the cheerless anti-Peter, and *Reservations Recommended*, whose title obliquely sums up Matthew's weary weltanschauung, examines the dark side of the erotic wonderland Kraft conceived in *Herb 'n' Lorna*. It is also a deft anthropological study of the complex imaginary relationships that might develop between reviewers (as opposed to critics) and reviewed.

During the day, stodgy Matthew, 43, develops "Sensible Toys" for the Manning & Rafter Toy Company. Recently and painfully divorced, he takes psychic refuge in his more sophisticated and self-assured alter ego, Bertram W. ("BW") Beath, the eloquent, condescending, and pseudonymous restaurant reviewer for a slick life-style periodical—you know the type—called *Boston Biweekly* ("Home of the Free-Ranging Critics"). Although he tries mightily to convince himself otherwise, Matthew has not found much reason to alter his sardonic childhood outlook. He lusts constantly for unattainable younger women, and rues the newfound hairs sprouting on his back and penis; Belinda, the friend with whom he dines and has sex twice a week, is tiring of his timidity; a mysterious odor, which only he can smell, spoils his chrome-and-glass bachelor pad; taxi drivers intimidate him; he's drinking too much and hearing voices; and his ex-wife, whom he still thinks he loves, is returning to town. In a nutshell, Matthew is going middle-aged bonkers.

Kraft writes honestly and sympathetically about Matthew's emotional vicissitudes and disentangling relationships. But, like all Kraft's work, *Reservations* rejoices in games, frames, masks, and artifice. Each chapter concludes with BW's published assessment of the restaurant Matthew visited during that time, providing an ever more skewed revision of what occurred around dinner. Gradually, the reviews become increasingly allegorical representations of Matthew's breakdown. His BW persona takes over, the distance between toy design-

er and bon vivant decreases, and the meal's psychodrama soon overwhelms discussions of food. Dining and theater become interchangeable, with fascinating ramifications, as when BW's review satirizes Matthew's sexually supercharged evening with Belinda's 15-year-old daughter: "Watching them—surreptitiously, in a mirror—we were touched, we really were. When he bought her a souvenir menu, we under-



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stood, at last, the point of Café Zurich: it isn't the evening that counts, but the memory of it."

Kraft mercilessly picks away at the vanities of food writing, and Matthew himself has less than a full regard for the activity: "Matthew once complained to Belinda that the magazine didn't have a serious attitude toward food. He stopped and asked, 'What am I saying! . . . Can a thinking, feeling person have a serious attitude toward food? Other than, say, working for famine relief?'" Kraft takes a swipe at the liberal Meals on Wheels mentality, too. When members of an ethnic yuppie potpourri feed a homeless man, they do so with defiled food.

Matthew's obsession with one such unfortunate, whom he calls the Neat Graffiti, is the book's weakest link and leads to its somewhat unsatisfying conclusion. Nevertheless, *Reservations Recommended* is a wonderfully readable novel about an intelligent man's capitulation to the anger and fear endemic to middle-aged, middle-class white American men. At times an extremely uncomfortable read, it's never less than touching and intelligent. And if nothing else, Matthew Barber's breakdown whets our appetites for the next Peter Leroy installment. Which is to say, now that I've eaten my vegetables, I'm ready for desert.

—Richard Gehr