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An acid-tongued food critic

RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED

By Eric Kraft

Crown: 277 pp., \$18.95.

Reviewed by Tim Connolly

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By day he is the mild-mannered toy designer, Matthew Barber. By night he is the acid-tongued restaurant critic, B.W. Beath.

Barber, dumped by his wife after she told him she didn't love him, has never loved him and will never love him, is approaching a mid-life crisis. He fantasizes about young women constantly.

Now that he is a free agent in a

new condominium with a spectacular view of Boston, he expects a wild sex life. But something is not right. The condo has a strange odor that cannot be traced and what he sees out his window is really a ghetto.

As for Barber, he is revealed gradually in Beath's reviews at the end of each chapter.

Never far from the surface in this novel of eating and drinking is the plight of the homeless. Barber is obsessed with a homeless man, a graffitist of the first rank. The man leaves cryptic messages all over the city and Barber memorizes them and collects them.

In one scene, a group of aging yuppies are drinking themselves into oblivion and poking fun at what some wealthy folks are doing for the poor.

A young lawyer, imitating a wealthy matron, explains that she and her husband always leave a couple of rolls in the basket when dining out because the leftovers are given to the poor. Then she passes on her husband's clever idea to further the cause: "Every morning, on his way to the office, he drops our empty cans and bot-

ties into the trash can on the corner so that these people can root them out and cash them in.

"These people can gather those cans and feel almost as if they were actually working for their money instead of just begging on the street. I'm sure it gives them a sense of personal dignity."

But this is an undercurrent. The meat of the book is the Jekyll-and-Hyde tale, which Kraft plays out neatly. Always, he keeps his readers laughing.

In a review of a restaurant where Beath was unhappy with the waiter, he writes, "They've already mastered indolence, indifference and ignorance, the three essentials of contemporary sophisticated service." In another restaurant where everything is overdone, he writes, "Cafe Zurich is — let's get this straight at the start — a dinner theater. These people aren't really in the restaurant business; they're running a theme park."

Kraft has written a fine, darkly entertaining novel with some ideas to chew on.

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