

'Reservations' close to being Kraft's satirical masterpiece

RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED

By Eric Kraft
Crown
277 pages, \$18.95

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News Book Reviewer

PERHAPS WE could enlist our leading male authors in a voluntary moratorium on novels documenting — in fiction — their own midlife misadventures and crises as if they were somehow consequential or even emblematic of a larger malaise in society.

In the meantime, we'll have to sort the artful from the merely self-indulgent, without regard to the mounting heap of pop sociology that threatens to obscure our view.

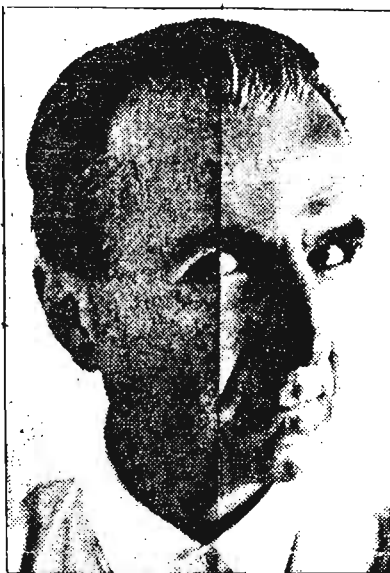
Eric Kraft's "Reservations Recommended" is not only a cut above its genre, but also pokes fun at midlife detritus.

Set against the trendy, relentlessly upscale backdrop of Boston nightlife in the pre-recession 1980s, the novel also adopts as its subtext a critique of contemporary manners, the seriousness of which is difficult to gauge owing to its broadly satirical tone.

Kraft may be one of our most underrated comedic writers. His 1988 novel "Herb 'n' Lorna," a deliciously high-spirited paean to a family dynasty in the jewelry industry, is a cult classic. From a thematic standpoint, "Reservations Recommended" is decidedly darker, but no less graceful and clever.

Kraft's protagonist here is Matthew Barber, in his mid-40s, a vice president for new product development (sometimes referred to as the vice president for Sensible Toys) at a major New England toy manufacturer. Recently divorced after 14 years of marriage, he now lives in a condominium penthouse and moonlights as B.W. Beath, a celebrated pseudonymous restaurant reviewer for Boston Biweekly magazine.

Barber "suffers from the least noticed but most widespread of modern emotional affliction of men his age — an adequacy complex." He is "not unattractive, not unintelligent, not unsuccessful, not unhealthy, not even . . . terribly unhappy. He thinks of himself as adequate, but only adequate,



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stuck at the adequacy level, and sometimes the bitter taste of his adequacy rises in his throat like heartburn."

His alter ego Beath ("whose tastes are so sophisticated that he can find the shortcoming in any experience"), on the other hand, is a master of Boston Biweekly's mixture of "backhanded praise and acerbic wit," written with an attitude of superiority that is intended as an antidote to the "adequacy complexes" of its middle-brow readers.

In an inspired narrative move, Kraft juxtaposes conventional novelistic accounts of Matthew Barber's dinner dates (and his postprandial psycho-erotic adventures as well) with B.W. Beath's dyspeptic published "reviews" of "dining experiences." Were it not for Kraft's deft touch, this tactic might seem heavy-handed. But in the context of the growing psychological tension between Barber's sedate lifestyle and the epicurean impulses of Beath — a split that becomes openly schizoid — this device drives a comic narrative to its violent and unsettling conclusion.

While Barber's attitude towards the many paradoxes and indignities of contemporary urban life (i.e., elevators that refuse to work properly, mysterious pungent

odors emanating from penthouse walls, and even the blight of poverty, crime and homelessness that obscures the affluent sheen of the postmodern American city) is one of benign desperation, B.W. Beath is about as much of an urban guerrilla as a restaurant reviewer can be.

Beath's reviews — which incorporate such disparate material as churlish remarks about the decor and ambience, odd speculations about the literacy of the staff and clientele, and embittered asides about his failed marriage and middle age in general — are not without genuine insight or a certain worldly charm.

He is an expert on the subtleties of "nouvelle Mom" cuisine, the refinements of "l'esthetique du mal" in design, and the credo that "every restaurant is a theater, and every meal a performance," although clearly some more closely resemble theme parks than performing arts centers.

While restaurant reviewing might not seem the best venue for writing about the finer distinctions of taste, status and class in America, Beath's dining columns are a mere pretext for a hospitality-based brand of social commentary.

If a good novel can be faulted for not being better, then perhaps "Reservations Recommended" will be remembered as the novel which revealed Kraft's talent as a satirist, but which might have been even stronger had he dispensed with the familiar midlife crisis theme and simply unleashed the voice of B.W. Beath upon an unsuspecting world.

That surely would be a different book than the one Kraft has written. But in view of the excesses of style, taste and professional conduct that have characterized city life over the past decade (Tom Wolfe's novel "The Bonfire of Vanities" and Oliver Stone's film "Wall Street" are two points of reference), such a book would have been entirely warranted.

As it stands, "Reservations Recommended" is another example of Kraft's elegant wit and inventiveness as a novelist. Lurking behind it, however, is a darker vision of contemporary society that may herald a major shift in his career.