

Wit by the forkful

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A cutup lays into what's eating him

RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED. By Eric Kraft. Crown, 277 pp., \$18.95.

Eric Kraft can pack more wit into a sentence about grilled pork tenderloin than a lot of authors can fit into an entire book, which is just one of the things that makes "Reservations Recommended" fun.

Told partly through a series of restaurant reviews spliced into its narrative, it's the most entertaining novel about food that I've read since Nora Ephron's "Heartburn."

Of course, Kraft's 10th book isn't ultimately about upscale pork entrees any more than Ephron's was about Key Lime Pie and Potatoes Anna, both of which had walk-on roles in that tragicomic tale about a Washington cookbook writer.

"Reservations Recommended" is instead a merciless sendup of contemporary American pretensions, which aims to show the disastrous effects of many kinds of human disguises. Among its targets are pen names, pseudo-imported beers, faked orgasms, post-structuralist literary jargon, inauthentic nostalgia for the '50s and *faux* decor, including the likes of "faux-tiger upholstery" and "faux-leopard carpeting."

How and why do children and adults learn to adopt their protective coloration? When does a disguise take on a life of its own that displaces the identity it once concealed?

Kraft explores such questions through a series of scenes from the life of 43-year-old Matthew Barber, a decent but dull Boston toy executive. He's a quintessential Dukakis-era protagonist: His idea of a walk on the wild side is buying a snazzier pair of socks.

None of Barber's co-workers know that by night he writes poison-pen restaurant reviews under the pseudonym of Bertram (B.W.) Beath, an anagram of his real name, for a publication called Boston Biweekly. Nevertheless, he maintained his equipoise in the dual role until his wife of 14 years left him.

RESERVATIONS

RECOMMENDED



A novel by
the author of
Herb 'n' Lorna

ERIC KRAFT

Illustration from the cover of "Reservations Recommended," a novel told partly through restaurant reviews.