

### ARTHUR PRAGER

What can you say about an author who uses pretentious restaurants as a metaphor for the outstanding events of a man's life? Clever? Innovative maybe, but only if he does it in a skillful and amusing way. In "Reservations Recommended," Eric Kraft, who recently took up year-round residence on Three Mile Harbor, East Hampton, is skillful indeed, and very funny too.

Mr. Kraft's Leopold Bloom is a waspish neurotic toy company executive named "Matthew Barber, who moonlights as a restaurant reviewer (a reviewer, not a critic, he is careful to inform us). He disguises his identity behind the anagrammatic byline "Bertram W. Beath" or simply "B. W. Beath." Rationalizing his concealment, he says, "We spend much of our time not as our true selves but disguised — or to suit our occupations, or to appear to be the people our friends or relatives or spouses or lovers expect us to be, or to appear to be what we *wish* we were. This last is the important one, because when we disguise ourselves as what we *want* to be, we're doing it to hide what we think we are."

Needless to say, Matthew has a glib rationalization for everything he does that he is ashamed of or worried about. His philosophy bends like the proverbial bamboo which survives when the sturdy oak is uprooted by the typhoon. A fat boy who grew up

**RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED**

*Duke Star Monte*

**ERIC CRAFT**

A novel by the author of Herb 'n' Loree

to be tall, slim, and intelligently attractive, he still retains most of his childhood insecurities and defenses.

At first meeting Matthew seems to have everything going for him. He is firmly established in two excellent jobs. Three beautiful women are after his body. He can enjoy unlimited free dinners with a companion of his choice at any restaurant in the greater Boston area. He has celebrity status (although his articles are anonymous and he is the only one who knows who he is). He has, in short, everything that the average middle-aged dreamer longs for but rarely achieves. Everyone has probably guessed by now that none of it brings him happiness, or what's a novel for? On the contrary, his apparent surfeit of blessings has soured his personality.

**Little Things Irritate**

Matthew is suspicious, paranoid, a mass of quivering nerve ends. He longs for the things he hasn't got and will probably never have: a restaurant, perhaps, with flawless service and exquisite food whose chef never has a bad night. He sees slow, inept waiters who garble the French pronunciation of menu dishes as personal insults, the agents of a conspiracy against him and the small group of friends he considers his intellectual equals. Little things irritate him, for example waiters (or waitresses) who interrupt a diner's conversa-

tion by suddenly appearing and asking "Is everything all right?" He has a ready answer for this.

Well, no. My wife is leaving me because, after 14 years of marriage, she claims to have discovered that she has never loved me. What do you think of that? She said, "I just don't love you. I feel sorry for you. I know you're going through a rough time." That was certainly an understatement. My mother had just died. That was the time my wife chose to leave me. How do you like that? . . . But heck, that's my problem. How's everything with you?

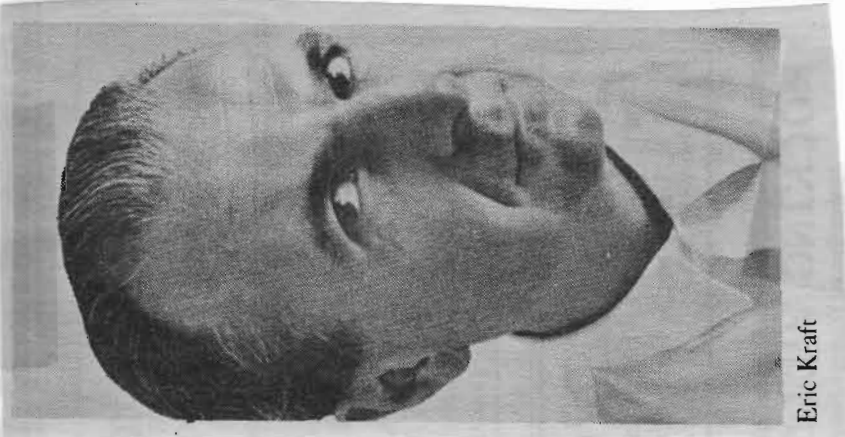
**He Wants More**

What Matthew wants is a simple four-letter word — *more*, or perhaps *less*, which shows him to be not much different from any other single male of his age and economic status. His long-legged, blonde, computer-whiz mistress, who enjoys his love-making and laughs at his jokes, isn't enough for him. He wants them all. He lusts after her splendidly budding teenage daughter, who turns out to have an adolescent crush on him and contrives to get him alone, but he hasn't the courage to make his move and ends up in an agony of bitter regret combined with sanctimonious self-congratulation at what a really wonderful person he is not to have succumbed to temptation.

In fact, what he is is an intellectual snob who is in some cases, but not all, perfectly right about what he is snubbing. He is one of those dyspeptic curmudgeons who abound in Kingsley Amis novels and is, in my opinion, just as funny as any of them. He serves as one of those fictional mirror characters in which we can recognize

**Eric Kraft**  
**"Reservations  
 Recommended"**

**Crown**  
**\$18.95**



Eric Kraft

ourselves about 90 percent of the time and feel superior the other 10 percent. We can see in Matthew (or "B.W.") our own propensities for making fools of ourselves. I confess that I squirmed a couple of times when the embarrassment got too acute.

**Affection For The Martini**

Here is Matthew agonizing about whether or not he will tarnish his image by ordering a martini in a restaurant where most of the clientele is younger than he is.

When he was young, Matthew developed an affection for the martini well before he ever drank one, an affection that

came in part from watching William Powell and Myrna Loy down them in the Thin Man movies and in part from his careful study of Esquire, the text from which he hoped to learn sophistication. The martini seemed to be an essential item among the equipment of a sophisticated adult. When Matthew began drinking them . . . he was still only an *aspirant* to adulthood, and by the time he had actually *attained* adulthood, the martini had become something of an anachronism. For quite a while the young didn't drink them, didn't even aspire to drink them, as, perhaps, they no longer aspired to sophistication or adulthood. Matthew began to wonder whether, if the martini was an anachronism, sophistication was also an anachronism, adulthood wasn't, too, and Matthew as well.

Nevertheless, he has read that the martini is making a comeback, but as a kind of joke. People order martinis with a cornichon or a jalapeno pepper or three olives instead of one. Does his gray hair, he wonders, mark him as "a member of an earlier generation of martini drinkers, a humorless bunch?"

**Fighting Back**

Matthew, of course, unlike the rest of us, has a weapon with which he can fight back and even win against the insults, the pomposities, and the ineptitudes. That devastating arm is his biweekly review, with which he can disembowel, decapitate, or simply fence with his enemies. He can also (and frequently does) take out his

aggressions, his wistful complaints, his unsatisfactory love life, the odd smell in his apartment, his longings and his disappointments, on an invisible captive audience that can't answer back.

Inevitably things began to go wrong, and by the end of the book his smug superior existence has started to come apart at the seams. . . . But you'll have to read about that for yourselves. I won't spoil it for you. At the finale, in which Matthew finally bursts out of his carapace of self-doubt and loses his temper, we are led to believe that a new and improved B.W. Beath and/or Matthew Barber will emerge, but will he? We may never know, unless the author brings him back for another go around.

---

Arthur Prager is a Sag Harbor resident and the author of "Rascals at Large" and "The Mahogany Tree."