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'Reservations Recommended' cuts to heart of the matter

Title: "Reservations Recommended"
Author: Eric Kraft
Data: Crown; \$18.95

By JULIA STEIN

Eric Kraft's "Reservations Recommended" is that rarity — a brilliant satire. Will it close on Saturday? It deserves a longer run.

Its hero, Matthew Barber, has two jobs: toy company executive and restaurant reviewer. Kraft is very funny as he captures the atmosphere, the decor and the clientele of the restaurants that Barber visits.

Dolce Far Niente, an expensive Italian restaurant, is carefully designed to look like a bombing ruin with a wall torn up to deliberately show the plumbing, wiring and heating ducts. Ike's, a re-creation of a '50s diner, sells complacency

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and great heaps of bad food.

Each chapter is elegantly structured around Barber taking a female companion to a restaurant in a quest for romance as well as the perfect meal, and ends with his restaurant review. We follow Barber in his gastronomic and erotic quest from restaurant to his apartment and back to another restaurant in Boston.

Kraft is also great at satirizing the mores of the urban gentry who move into some of the city's poorest neighborhoods.

As a newly divorced man, Barber left the suburbs and returned to the city to buy a penthouse condo with a gorgeous view of the charming red roofs of one of the

poorest ghettos in Boston. Though he knew nothing firsthand about his impoverished neighbors, Barber daily enjoyed the beautiful view.

He is exactly like the lawyers and doctors who live in the downtown Los Angeles lofts next door to all the homeless, or apartments in New York's Lower East Side. It is about time a novel satirized these people, and "Reservations Recommended" does the job brilliantly.

Like Jonathan Swift, Kraft creates a book that is both very funny yet asks serious questions.

Barber is obsessed with a mysterious street person who writes

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neat, philosophic graffiti. He writes the same kind of graffiti in his own apartment — it is a painfully hilarious obsession. Kraft can write with great comic gusto and a passionate concern for humanity at the same time — concern for both the mysterious graffiti writers as well as for the reviewers.

Kraft has created an amazing hero in Matthew Barber. He is more than a stereotype of the well-off executive. (His ex-wife says that he made toys to compensate for all the toys he never had in his own impoverished childhood.)

Barber is the orphan in all of us: As adults, we try to have all the toys and love and food we never got as children.

He is not merely a neurotic figure to laugh at, but an extremely intelligent man.

The novel is full of his erotic fantasies about women, including his guilt over fantasies that he, a middle-aged man, has about teenage girls. His neurosis propels him into comic adventures with women that always end with him alone.

As his romantic failures accumulate, he gains poignancy. At Ike's, the last restaurant Barber visits, he is desperate, lonely and getting drunk.

Kraft makes us sympathetic toward Barber's pain while, at the same time, we are amused by his folly.

"Reservations Recommended" is a gem that is both awfully funny and yet terribly serious, striking at the heart of our contemporary dilemmas.

Kraft is a Swift for the 1990s, and "Reservations Recommended" is a novel that shouldn't be missed.