

A Caustic Restaurant Tour Driven by Fear

By MICHAEL J. CARROLL.

Reservations Recommended" is comedy and satire. It is the story of a battle for personal survival. It is a caustic vision of dining and diners.

In each of seven parts of this novel, we are told about Matthew, a middle-aged toy company executive. We accompany him to a restaurant where he dines in the company of some female—sometimes his lover, Belinda, who is a friend of his ex-wife, Liz, and sometimes Liz herself, for Matthew still wants her, fantasizes her return to him. We share his experiences at the restaurant, then follow him and his companion when they leave. At the end of each part is a review of the restaurant, written by B. W. Beath, reviewer for the Boston Biweekly.

Matthew is a misfit, an outsider who, while an acute observer of the practice of social conventions, has no natural instinct himself for following those conventions. Since childhood, Matthew has found it difficult to get along with others.

Unlike some outsiders who make a virtue of their alienation, Matthew denies it. Like a convert, he embraces the conventions of a society of which he has not felt part; he goes through the motions of belonging. But underneath he is driven by fear—fear of being alone, of being rejected.

Alley View Diner. He notices that Belinda is looking over his shoulder at two attractive men sitting behind him.

"[Matthew] finds it easy to imagine that one is a genius sculptor, the other runs an international famine-relief organization, and they've met here . . . to discuss a benefit to relieve famine . . . while Matthew is here to collect information for a review that will damn the place and its patrons with backhanded praise and acerbic wit, demonstrating thereby that B. W. Beath, Boston Biweekly, and all its free-ranging critics are superior not only to the ground-veal-and-pancetta hamburger but to the people who come here to eat it, including, of course, the two guys behind Matthew, who are not only a genius and a saint, but gorgeous."

Matthew the misfit is endearing. He is ineffectual and weak, but no more so than most of us are at times. He is understandable. We trust him.

But something is happening to Matthew. The rewards that he expects for his good behavior somehow never appear. Worse, it is as though the world is against him.

Even BW is critical. BW despises Matthew for being needful, and even more for being unable to fulfill his needs. A battle is inevitable. When it comes, it is witty, deadly, frightening. With each vis-

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Matthew believes—desperately—that if he is a good person, if he follows all the rules, he will be rewarded. Perhaps noble young women will throw themselves into bed with him. Perhaps colleagues will give his ideas the respect they deserve. Perhaps Liz will realize her errors and come back to him. Perhaps something nice will happen.

But nothing quite goes the way it should. Belinda seems less than satisfied with Matthew; young waiters attract her attention. Matthew's ex-wife doesn't seem to really miss him.

One of his neighbors is making strange unsettling noises that awaken Matthew in the middle of the night. And now Matthew is smelling an unpleasant odor in his apartment.

What makes it possible for Matthew to survive these tribulations is his alter ego, his secret anagrammatic identity as Bertram W. Beath, restaurant reviewer.

BW is respected. He has a wide readership. He speaks his mind as Matthew never could, is listened to as Matthew never has been. As Beath, Matthew finds strength.

Matthew takes Belinda out to the

it to another restaurant, another two weeks of subtle change occurs. Sometimes Matthew has the upper hand, sometimes BW. But it is BW who is writing the reviews; and it is through these that the increasing disparity between reality and perception becomes evident.

Author Eric Kraft is expert in his characterizations. The changes that take place in Matthew are subtle, creating an undercurrent of tension. More and more, the reader finds himself on edge, uncertain whether to laugh or wince. Will this book end in comedy or tragedy?

As with most good books, this one will affect the reader on many levels. You will want to stop and quote parts to friends, but will probably be too engrossed to do so. The restaurants will be familiar. (If you've been in Boston, you might even be able to name them.) And without a doubt the situations will be all too familiar.

I am not sure whether it is Matthew or BW that inspires me, but I must be excused for saying that I recommend this novel without reservations.

An erstwhile restaurant reviewer who once lived in Boston, Carroll now teaches in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Next: Elaine Kendall reviews "Catching the Light" by Susan L. Pope (Viking).