

BOOKS

By Roger H.

Yuppies served up for dinner in new novel

RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED
by Eric Kraft. Crown. \$18.95

The yuppie, that symbol of the 1980s, has invaded our fiction. This is not surprising, because yuppies are among the major consumers of fiction and people often like to read about others like themselves. And so there has been a stream of yuppie characters, usually sketched quite acidly. There is very little sympathy for yuppies among our writers.

Much of the attention given to yuppie fiction has concentrated on Jay McInerney and his admirers. The yuppies in "Bright Lights, Big City" and similar books are very troubled, but are they really very typical? Surely there must be yuppies out there who don't overdose on drugs or become alcoholics or attend parties that are only a degree or so removed from orgies or approach suicide or go back to Kansas, where it's supposed to be nice and quiet.

The people in this very funny novel by Eric Kraft are yuppies of a more settled kind. They're older, in their early forties, so probably they shouldn't be called yuppies at all. Call them muppies—the "m" stands for middle-aged.

What do these middle-aged city dwellers do for entertainment? They go to restaurants, of course. The rise of the restaurant is also a phenomenon of the 1980s. It is the first choice of the affluent when they go out. There used to be bars and night clubs and movies and shows and private clubs and, of course, there still are. But now the restaurant is king.

That makes the restaurant reviewer a very special person in this new yuppie culture. Matthew Barber, the protagonist of this novel, is a successful Boston toy company executive who also writes restaurant reviews for a local slick magazine under the name B. W. Beath, short for Bertram W. Beath, which is an anagram of his own name. Matthew is 43 and divorced. His former wife, Liz, is a successful executive, as is his girlfriend, Belinda, who used to be known as Linda and who remains a good friend of Liz. Liz is still interested in Matthew, sort of, and Belinda is not sure if she is interested and, if so, how much. A further complicating factor is that Belinda's teenage daughter, Leila, also has a crush on Matthew—or perhaps something a little stronger.

With all this going on, it might be expected that emotions would run high. And so they do. The forum for all this pathos is a number of Boston restaurants, each one reviewed by Matthew. Each chapter in the book is an account of what happens at a restaurant, and the chapter is ended each time with Matthew's restaurant review, which often strikes a personal note.

While the restaurants are much more sophisticated today than in the past, the people who work there do not always match this sophistication. Kraft gives us a conversation between Matthew and the waiter in a restaurant called "The Alley View Grill," and restaurant patrons in the United States will find it all too typical:

"We have some specials tonight," the waiter says. "As an appetizer, we have a salad of grilled wild duck and papaya on a bed of braised endive, and that's served with a mustard vinaigrette." Matthew winces at this mangling of *vinaigrette*. "For an entree, we have a grilled pork tenderloin, and that's served with an onion relish and a kind of garlicky mayonnaise—"

"Aioli?" Matthew asks.

"Excuse me?"

"Is it aioli? The garlicky mayonnaise?"

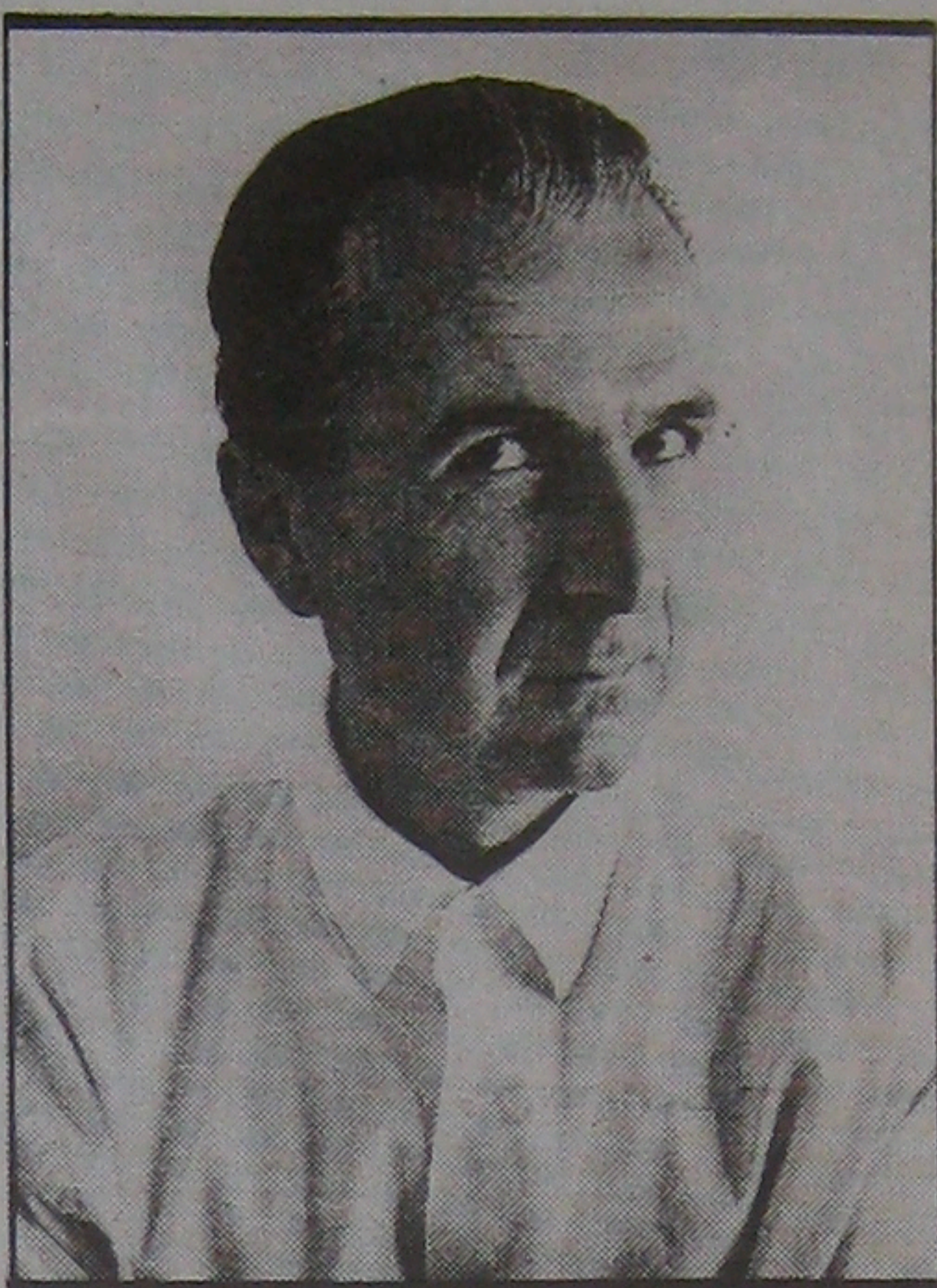
"I'm not certain. I'll have to ask. That's also served with a melahng of sauteed vegetables."

Another wince.

"Are you all set for cocktails?"

"Do you want another drink, Belinda?" Matthew asks.

"Not as strong as a martini," she says. "Do you have sherry?" she asks the waiter.



Eric Kraft, whose new novel describes the heartaches and heartburn of a restaurant reviewer

"Just Amantadillo," he says. Uh-mon-tuh-dill-oh.

"Ah-mahn-tee-ah-doh," Matthew says, slowly, sighing.

"No," the waiter says with a smile. "Just Amantadillo."

To restaurant-goers, all this will sound very familiar. But few have as exciting meals as Matthew and his friends do. In "The Alley View Grill," Matthew successfully woos Belinda. At "Flynn's Olde Boston Eating & Drinking Establishment," the food is pretty bad but no one notices, as Matthew, Belinda and some friends wait for hours at the bar and get pie-eyed drunk. At "Dolce Far Niente," the food is good but it's all wasted on Matthew and Belinda, who are cornered by some enormously boring friends.

The restaurants improve, but not necessarily the quality of Matthew's life. At "Superior Indian Cookery," he finds himself dining with both Belinda and Liz, with unsettling results. At "Cafe Zurich," Belinda deserts him, but Leila takes her place for the evening. At "Two-Two-Two," Matthew is dropped by Liz once and for all and at "Ike's," we find Matthew abandoned and embarrassed among the nachos.

Eric Kraft is a new name to most readers, although he has been writing for some time. The stories about a character named Peter Leroy won coterie approval, and his good novel, "Herb 'n' Lorna," enlarged his audience. He has now written a moving urban fable that contains all the ingredients, comic and tragic, of our flawed design for living.