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## The Man Who Came to Dinner

*Reservations Recommended. By Eric Kraft.  
277 pages. Crown. \$18.95.*

**A**t first, this dark comic novel seems like no more than a deft satire of chic big-city restaurants, snooty places with names like Dolce Far Niente and Cafe Zurich, where the leather-bound wine list "resembles a photo album of the sort usually embossed with the words 'Our Wedding.'" Each chapter spotlights such an eatery, and each closes with a restaurant review by the pompous B. W. Beath. Just as Beath is only a pen name, masking the identity of one Matthew Barber, the true subject of the book—a society gone mad with self-absorption—isn't on the menu.

B.W. by night, Matthew by day is a middle-aged toy designer. He is unhappy, unloved and utterly unsure. Though no less snobbish than the devilish B.W., Matthew so lacks his alter ego's self-assurance that he gauges his teeth against a plastic card with color gradients running from white to yellow, the better to measure the effectiveness of his peroxide gargle.

Like Matthew's teeth, the novel gets darker as it goes along. From the outset, he is plainly a mite screwy: he has a whole wall of his trendy apartment demolished to locate an odor that only he can smell. By the end, having all but lost his soul to the Sybaritic B.W., he is clearly going mad. Matthew's journey from soup to nuts, though disquieting, is salutary, because Eric Kraft has a moral vision. His target is those who take nothing seriously but themselves, and his artful, bitter portrait of a man without compassion makes the best possible argument for that quality.

MALCOLM JONES JR.