

Unger Memorial Library

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'Reservations Recommended' reveals reviewers real world

Reservations Recommended by Eric Kraft (Crown Publishers)
Reviewed by John Sigwald

Several movies revolving around dining "experiences" — "The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie, Eating Raoul," and the current, notorious "The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover" come readily to mind — have made quite an impression on me and my nervous stomach. A recent novel by Eric Kraft, "Reservations Recommended," takes a unique approach to analyzing the world through a restaurant reviewer's eyes. The metonymy of restaurants, with their exclusive participants and complex processes, serves as a narrow and conclusive view of our society in this highly introspective, intellectual novel. Just like life, chaotic variables control the review.

I suppose the weird, usually barely perceptible odor emanating from Matthew Barber's apartment wall is a metaphor for something or other. Working his way into his 50s, a little over a year divorced, Matthew has the workmen's exploratory hole in his wall to visually emphasize this olfactory irritation. A toy company executive by profession, his avocation for the past couple of years has been pseudonymously reviewing restaurants for the "Boston Biweekly," a forum for "free-ranging critics." B.W. Beath writes "reviews," using dining establishments as the excuse for writing witty, worldly essays drawing attention to himself at the expense of the criticized.

A FEW RECENT WEEKS in Matthew's life are chronicled in this poignant novel, which I have been picking at for over a year now. At once a commentary both on male aging and the critical process, it is also a bit of a culinary education for us indiscriminate gourmards. Kraft puts Matthew in a mid-life crisis which becomes severely complicated by the inner voice of the pseudo-Matthew, the debonair *je ne sais quoi* voice free of scruples. Ethics were what got Matthew into this mess of a disillusioned wife leaving him, a trauma exacerbated by the anxiety of maybe doing something really useful with his life.

Psychoanalysis abounds here but it's much more enjoyable (and poignant) to let Matthew think out loud for two pages before his inevitably conservative comments and actions are executed. The refreshing honesty in Kraft's ruminations is humorous, pathetic, incisive, and, well, accurate from my point of view. Moving right along into my 40s (quite nicely, thank you), I appreciate Kraft's illumination of the future surprises life may hold and the chances one might take to discover them. Like Belinda, Matthew's sometimes dining companion and occasionally passionate lover, who is a computer game designer. She is currently deeply involved in a special project called "Picture Frame" in which the participant nouses his way through someone's apartment inquisitively unveiling someone else's life. Belinda, too, is an intellectual and seethes with the sexuality Matthew hopelessly sees everywhere.

EACH CHAPTER IN "Reservations Recommended" revolves around a restaurant and culminates in an our-story-thus-far review. The autobiographical reviews reflect our hero's picaresque adventures in trying to find love through the vehicle of variable dining. Darting in and out of the story is the aside of the enigmatic Neat Graffitiist, a homeless philosopher who inscribes in careful block letters obscure bits of wisdom on available, graffiti-free surfaces. That Matthew transcribes these sayings to the wall near the hole for odor identification in his apartment adds a pleasant irony to Matthew's dangerously introspective world view.

So Matthew's search for the wholesome combination of love and lust proves just as elusive as a comfortable dining experience. In the short run he should have listened to rational, opportunistic B.W., who knows what he wants. Instead, Matthew is that romantic in love with the notion that a perfect evening can be repeated, that the chef is always up and that, in spite of fantasies inevitably succumbing to the helpless reality of caution, he can always hope: hope his wife will come back to him, hope Belinda really loves him, hope the girl in the bar lusts after his *savoir-faire*. In the long run, though, Matthew's own convictions leave him hurt and disillusioned, angry but sane from the effort. He'll probably take a few more chances.

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