

# The Man Who Went To Dinner

## RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED

By Eric Kraft  
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By Thomas Mallon

**I**N RECENT years the novelist Eric Kraft has been giving readers a good time by putting the *New Journalists'* vehicle into reverse. Whereas they appropriated the techniques of fiction to vitalize their nonfiction, Kraft has taken to parodying various forms of nonfiction in order to accomplish his novels. The popular *Herb 'n' Lorna* (1988) masqueraded as a biography, and now, in *Reservations Recommended*, Kraft observes our yuppified times by making frequent use of one of its essential genres: the restaurant review.

At 43, Matthew Barber has been abandoned by his wife and is leading the kind of homebound life that invites one to ponder the modern conundrum: Am I programming the VCR, or is it programming me? Matthew is a Harvard alumnus, a toy-company vice-president whose new product designs are sometimes too sensible to be hits. His teeth are yellowing and he is still enough in thrall to certain humiliating childhood memories that he can't ever bear to be very far from clean underwear.

What Matthew really needs is an aggressive alter ego, a Doppelgänger able to meet life with sarcasm instead of submission. So he's invented one. Moonlighting as a restaurant reviewer for Boston Biweekly, Mat-

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ILLUSTRATION BY THORCIA ROSE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Matthew Barber writes as the acerbic, anagrammatic Bjertram] W. Beath: "Dining is like going to the theater. Cooking for the public is like acting. The show must go on. If the chef's mother dies, we should not taste tears in the bearnaise."

In ordinary life Matthew lets out the "B.W." side of himself in sparing, strategic doses, but like a cartoon devil bent on subduing the bland goodness of the mortal in whom he resides, B.W. becomes more and more insistent as the novel goes on. Eventually Matthew isn't so much reviewing food as serving his readers a steady diet of autobiographical spleen, even though his troubles seem more commonplace than catastrophic.

Liz, his ex-wife, is making ambiguous signals about returning. In the 14 months since she's left, Matthew has been "essentially faithful" to her—i.e., not really over it. In-

essentially, he's taken to dating their old friend Belinda. He has the occupationally hazardous bad luck to take her with him while he's reviewing an Italian restaurant with an especially attractive waiter named Massimo, and to make matters a little worse, Matthew is developing a case of mid-life Humbert-Humbert hots for Belinda's gorgeous 15-year-old daughter, Leila. B.W. is of course happy to torment him toward this particular temptation: "What adorable expressions she'll make when you possess her, Matthew." B.W. can be so funny that a reader is likely to wish he'd win early and full possession of Matthew. Whenever he seizes the vocal initiative, the book is at its most entertaining.

Like a waiter telling a patron more than he needs to know about the specials, Kraft sometimes nudges the reader more than clarity requires. After one perfectly well-

dramatized episode, for example, the narrator has to insist: "The whole scene strikes [Matthew] as funny, these people in various stages of coming unglued." But this occasional thematic underlining is more than made up for by Kraft's terrifically good eye and ear. The conversation of Matthew's for-tysomething friends at Flynn's Olde Boston Eating & Drinking Establishment (recognizable as Durgin-Park to anyone who's ever been there) may not push the plot very far along, but it's done to an aural turn. Satisfying exact similes rise up from realms like Matthew's day job ("Her head swivels, like an action figure's"), and Kraft has enough spring and freshness in his repertoire to do one of the things a novelist almost never manages—keeping a reader awake during sex: "She moves as if she doesn't have full control of her muscles, all twitches and tics and shudders, with no rhythm that Matthew recognizes, like a piece of modern music."

**T**HERE ARE some unsettlingly weird motifs throughout the novel. Matthew's new apartment has a foul smell that no amount of probing can locate, and he is unduly fascinated by the Neat Graffitiist, whose writings around Boston combine "elements of a personal philosophy, pronouncements exhortatory and cautionary, snapshots of contemporary life, and bits of autobiography." For example: NEVER FEAR PAIN. TIME DIMINISHES IT. BUT AVOID BOSTON CITY HOSPITAL. NURSES THERE WEAR USED UNIFORMS PURCHASED FROM BURGER KING. TREAT PATIENTS WITH FATALISTIC DETACHMENT.

There are enough of these ominous signs to make this largely comic novel's late lurch toward urban nightmare not wholly surprising. But in the latter stages of any novel there's always a fine line between shifting the mood and pulling the rug. It's a risky thing for a writer to attempt, but Kraft is good enough that most readers will be happy to let him get away with it. *Reservations Recommended* is recommended with reservations almost too few to mention.