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Pages A review of Passionate Spectator by Eric Kraft



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Reviewed by Bob Williams

Passionate Spectator
by Eric Kraft
St. Martin's Press 2004, ISBN 0-312-31882-0, \$23.95, 245 pages

Matthew Barber's existence has always posed a problem for Eric Kraft's literary persona, Peter Leroy. Although he appears in Little Follies as Peter's childhood playmate, Peter admits that he and Matthew never met until they were in high school. *Reservations Recommended* is the most loosely attached book in the Peter Leroy saga. Peter concedes that the life he gives Matthew in this novel is entirely imaginary but, when Matthew appears briefly in *Leaving Small's Hotel*, he validates the closing scene of *Reservations*. In *Leaving Small's Hotel* he claims that in this last scene he died and came back to life. Of this claim, somewhat curiously, we hear nothing in *Passionate Spectator*.

This novel takes up Matthew's story at the point where he had, after suffering a heart attack, fallen through the hospital's automatic doors. Readers of *Reservations* will remember that just before Matthew loses consciousness – or dies – he catches a glimpse of Bertram W. Beath, his alter ego, getting into a taxi. In any world except that of Peter Leroy such an occurrence would be impossible since, of course, an alter ego is not a real person.

But, complicated as all this is, there is more. Peter and Albertine now live in Manhattan and thrive as little there as they did on Small's Island. Peter is still searching for a way to make his memoirs-while-you-wait project a profitable business when he receives a summons to serve as a juror. In his thus distracted mind enter Matthew Barber and Bertram W. Beath. Peter assumes the identity of first the one and then the other. He experiences Matthew's stay in the hospital and Beath's philosophizing and philandering in Miami as the *Passionate Spectator*, a designation that he gives himself on the business cards that he bought at a quick-print shop. Each of the young women that he beds has a special intellectual or artistic preoccupation that, along with her body, she shares with Beath.

Matthew has a similar experience – but without overt sex – with a hospital nurse who collects abstruse philosophical theories on the subject of time. But he has more relevant concerns than the lovely intellectual nurse. Convinced now that he must make the most of his remaining life, he renews his attempted conquest of Effie (from *Reservations*.) Beath has returned from Miami to help Matthew with this. Peter, tired of the way that they have taken over his life, takes them to Madeleine's, a nightclub where Albertine plays the piano. Here he gives them both sound advice, sound enough to banish them from his life – at least temporarily.

He has an absurd idea for the promotion of memoirs-while-you-wait. The idea works and the novel ends happily.

If you assume that the novel is riotous fun, you would be right but my account merely skims the surface and takes no notice of the wonderful minor characters or the many small details that enrich the book. In the hospital there is the Solace Lady who is in an insistent way a total pest, a grandmother from hell. The club where Albertine (a name with Proustian overtones) plays the piano is called Madeleine's. Madeleine is also Proustian (remember that damned cake?) but it is also the name of Kraft's wife.

Here, in short, is another perfect book by an author with few faults and whose works are almost completely unknown. It would seem that there is no appetite for books that are, among other qualities, great intellectual fun. But those readers who enjoy stretching their minds and admire dazzling craftsmanship and virtuosity from an author who writes like no other will find this and the other books by Kraft a welcome and essential addition to their libraries.



About the Reviewer: Bob Williams is retired and lives in a small town with his wife, dogs and a cat. He has been collecting books all his life, and has done freelance writing, mostly on classical music. His principal interests are James Joyce, Jane Austen and Homer. His book *Joyce Country*, a guide to persons and places, can be accessed at: http://www.grand-teton.com/service/Persons_Places

[Passionate Spectator](#)

Eric Kraft
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