

PASSIONATE SPECTATOR

ERIC KRAFT. *St. Martin's*, \$23.95 (256p)

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In his 10th novel featuring the irrepressible Peter Leroy, Kraft steers his engaging protagonist into the thickets of freelance writing as Leroy attempts to fund a series of unusual adventures by helping others write their memoirs. Leroy lives in New York City, where he and his pianist wife, Albertine, maintain a precarious existence short on money but long on compassionate understanding. As the novel begins, Leroy is itching to slip again into one (or several) of his elaborate fantasies ("I am a crowd... one of the people one passes on a New York street who hear inner voices"). Albertine ("I have heard her referred to as my long-suffering wife") acts as his enabler, gently encouraging him to indulge his flights of fancy and experiment with alter egos. The scene switches from New York to Boston and then to Miami as Leroy assumes the imaginary identities of Matthew Barber, a heart patient, and Bertram Beath, a lothario who makes a habit of sleeping with total strangers. Meanwhile, Leroy's memoir-writing business languishes, though he expands it to include pets. It's not always clear what Leroy remembers from previous forays as Barber and Beach, and what triggers his transformations, but the reader is distracted from any minor inconsistencies by Leroy's endearing frankness and Albertine's wry, tolerant wit.

Agent, Noah Lukeman. (July)