



Times photo (2003) — JAMES BORCHUCK

Eric Kraft, at home in St. Petersburg.

# You're a part of this story

Reviewed by DAVID KIRBY

## PASSIONATE SPECTATOR

By Eric Kraft

St. Martin's, \$23.95, 256 pp

Smack in the middle of a novel that brims with magnificent set pieces is a description of the Limo Fountain, a monument to consumerism that depicts a limousine leaping from the water like a stallion, weighted though it is with a driver, a vomiting frat boy, a pop diva and a rapper, assorted athletes, developers, potentates, political candidates and judges, and, at the base, a likeness of the sculptor, her bronze hands shaping rough metal into the car's back bumper.

If you think this suggests *Passionate Spectator* is a send-up of contemporary narcissism, you're right. On the other hand, how many comic novels out there aren't a mockery of our silly present-day foibles? Readers who have gotten this far in the book will already know what the presence of the artist in her own art work suggests, which is that Eric Kraft's new novel is not only funny and smart but also as devious as a Möbius strip, turning in on itself, doubling back through events that have already occurred, and generally subverting our Newtonian world view.

That means it's not going to be every reader's cup of psychedelia. The book's first words are "I am a crowd," a statement that will have half of the potential readership clamoring "So am I!" while the rest head off to see *The Bourne Oligarchy* or whatever the name of that new Matt Damon movie is. I happen to be in the first group: I like an action film as much as the next armchair spy, but while I'm waiting for the ticket line to thin out, I'm happy to jump down the rabbit hole with the novel's narrator, Peter Leroy. I mean, Matthew Barber. Actually, Bertram W. Beath. Really, all three — "I am a crowd," indeed.

*Passionate Spectator* is the ninth in a series of novels by Kraft, who lives in St. Petersburg, that purport to be the memoirs of Peter Leroy, a brainy, good-natured fellow who drifts through these pages in a state of quasiemployment,

## MEET THE AUTHOR

Eric Kraft, author of *Passionate Spectator*, is scheduled to appear at 7 p.m. Friday at Sarasota News and Books, 1341 Main St., Sarasota.

accompanied by his adoring wife Albertine, or, as she is referred to more than once, "the long-suffering Albertine." Matthew Barber and Bertram W. Beath begin as inner voices but become actual characters as the novel progresses; if you've had a day recently when you haven't felt quite like yourself, you've got the general idea, though Peter Leroy's other selves are almost certainly a lot more active than yours.

Leroy is a jack of all writerly trades, and as the novel begins, he is ghosting letters to editors, chipping away at a monthly newsletter for protologists, and drafting a history of the transcontinental railroad that, because it is for young readers, can't use words over two syllables, which means he can't use "transcontinental" and instead has to say "a railroad that would go all the way across the country." Mainly, though, he's trying to promote his new service — *Memoirs While You Wait* — although so few people are interested in having him write their life stories that he's forced to concentrate on himself.

Make that "selves": falling asleep one night, Peter Leroy morphs into Matthew Barber, who is — let's see — undergoing emergency heart surgery, in the course of which he, Matthew, either remembers or dreams that he uses a length of rebar to go after a cab driver who has tried to humiliate him, which is the event that triggers his heart failure. Before long, though, Matthew Barber becomes Bertram W. Beath, who, in his version of the story, is out walking with Matthew one evening when the latter begins to wheeze and so takes him to the hospital (there's no bloodied cab driver in Beath's account) before hopping on a plane to Miami, where he'll participate in the unveiling of the Limo Fountain and have other adventures, many of them erotic, before becoming Matthew

Barber again, who'll go back to being Peter Leroy before the novel ends.

This three-layered account of one man's (or two or three men's) life is like a book that Peter Leroy admires called *Oysters and All About Them* by John R. Philpots, originally a slim but apparently deeply flawed volume. When his critics point out its many errors, Philpots reprints the first edition complete with a new preface describing his book's reception as well as extensive appendices which correct most, but not all, of his mistakes, because the critics pounce again, prompting Philpots to produce a third edition, and then a fourth, with even more prefaces and appendices, each like a layer of nacre added to the irritating grain of sand that is the original text, until the whole becomes a 1,300-page pearl of misinformation that its author seems powerless to correct.

So it is with *Passionate Spectator*, though the novel's subject is not bivalves but our contemporary obsession with self-exposure. Because he is a master of both bitter satire and narrative playfulness, I see Eric Kraft as the love child of Evelyn Waugh and John Barth. But since these two writers are, no doubt, too quirky to coexist peacefully for very long, I imagine them ramming their roadsters together and the newly orphaned Kraft then being raised by a third novelist, the underrated Peter De Vries, the comic master who never achieved the status of Waugh and Barth yet whose prose moves much faster than either of theirs.

Kraft's novels are likely to leave no reader indifferent. You'll either love them or hate them because either you feel that you are in on a very complicated joke or, like Matthew Barber being humiliated (or not) by the cab driver, not. But even if you're outside of the joke, you're still reacting to it, so either way, reader, you're part of the story. Reading *Passionate Spectator*, don't be surprised if you feel as though you're dissolving into its pages, as though the sculptor of the Limo Fountain is yet another character in Peter Leroy's busy mind, and one of the passengers in the limo itself is you.

Poet David Kirby will teach this fall at the Florida State University Study Center in Florence, Italy.