

Passionate Spectator

By Eric Kraft.

St. Martin's, \$23.95.

Peter Leroy is a struggling freelance writer who lives with his gracious, patient wife, Albertine, in New

York City, attempting to eke out an existence as a memoirist. Seeking inspiration during his daily trek to the diner for his Big Coffee, Peter impulsively purchases a tattered book on self-promotion from a street poddler—only to discover later that it's targeted to taxidermists. Nevertheless, the book and a jury-duty summons trigger a personal journey that is mundane in detail yet mythic in scope.

Bored during jury selection, Peter imagines episodes in the lives of his childhood friend, Matthew Barber, and Matthew's anagrammatical alter ego, Bertram W. Beath. Both are drawn

from Kraft's earlier novel *Reservations Recommended*, but here they represent aspects of Peter's own personality: Matthew embodies Peter's caution and timidity; BW, his boundless curiosity and unbridled id.

The tip of an extensive literary iceberg, *Passionate Spectator* is the eighth in a series of novels devoted to Peter. (As with Philip Roth's Zuckerman novels, each installment can be savored independently.) Less a narrative than a gamboling reflection on the ways in which memory shapes supposedly objective history, the novel playfully riffs

on Proust and the Nabokov of *Pale Fire*, and its denouement touches on *The Odyssey* and "Jack and the Beanstalk." That the book also manages to entertain the neophyte is a credit to Kraft's colorful, incisive prose and off-kilter wit.—*Steve Smith*

