



# American Meta

Eric Kraft's fictional riffs on nostalgia, truth and imagination.

BY LAURA MILLER

WELL into "Flying," Eric Kraft's new book of three short novels, the narrator, Peter Leroy, and his wife, Albertine, check into a hotel off the Interstate where a convention of humorists is being held. At the bar, they take a seat next to two attendees who complain about the state of their profession. On one end of the spectrum, they grouse, there's the "ineffable high-concept" stuff, and on the other, there's "your lowbrow bathroom humor," while "the noble middle ground, where once we played," lies fallow. But the noble middle ground is precisely where you'll find Kraft — who, being Kraft, no doubt set that conversation in a bar to make an oblique joke about falling between the stools.

For the past 25 years Kraft has been writing picaresque novellas ("Flying" combines two of them, "Taking Off" and "On the Wing," with a third that hasn't been published before) in a series he calls "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy." Leroy is a bit like Philip Roth's Nathan Zuckerman, a quasi-autobiographical alter ego who lets Kraft write about himself without sticking to the facts. The Peter Leroy books (the most famous is "Herb 'n' Lorna") have been celebrated critically without winning a substantial audience, mostly because they slip between two bar stools in the tavern of literary taste.

If I could offer you a Venn diagram — which is just the sort of thing that's liable to turn up in a Kraft novel — it would show the extremely slender overlap between the set of readers who like the ineffable, high-concept fiction of, say, Jorge Luis Borges or David Foster Wallace,

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and the set of readers who favor fondly comic portraits of small-town life in mid-20th-century America after the fashion of Garrison Keillor or Jean Shepherd, whose own autobiographical writings inspired the movie "A Christmas Story." Each of these genres has a devoted audience, but not many people read both.

Those who hanker after wacky Americana will prefer "Taking Off," the first part of "Flying." In it, Peter, now 63 and living with Albertine in Manhattan, is summoned by a childhood friend to his hometown of Babbington on the South Shore of Long Island. The visit awakens a dormant guilt in Peter: as the "Birdboy of Babbington," he was celebrated for making a cross-country

## FLYING

By Eric Kraft.

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flight, from Babbington to New Mexico, on a homemade "aerocycle" at the age of 15. In truth, the vehicle, haphazardly assembled according to instructions published in a magazine called *Impractical Craftsman* (specializing in devices that could not be built), was never airborne for more than a few seconds, and Peter has at last decided it's time to set the record straight. This, for various reasons, involves retracing the original journey with Albertine, and an account of their present-day adventures alternates with recollections of his adolescent road trip.

Peter has three presiding obsessions: his memoirs, his wife ("uxorious" doesn't begin to describe his devotion to Albertine) and his hometown. These preoccupations can be a bit hard to stomach at times — the Babbingtoniana most of all, especially when it involves the hoariest of clichés: "colorful" local characters; a sweet, doting mom begging her son to

wear his galoshes; and phrases like "the sort of lazy summer day that invites a boy to do nothing but loaf and daydream." Yet Kraft seems well aware of the impatience his soft-focus nostalgia provokes; a running joke throughout the rest of the book is that every time Peter tries to tell people about his Babbington boyhood, they hastily change the subject or leave the room.

IN the second and third parts of "Flying," metafiction takes over, and any readers who signed up for gentle, sentimental humor will find themselves awash in a sea of literary and pop references, satires of commercial culture and frank acknowledgements of authorial unreliability. Peter (a fictional memoirist to begin with, of course) admits to fabricating when the truth strikes him as insufficiently interesting, making him a pioneering specimen of that currently modish figure, the lying autobiographer. In fiction, Kraft's most obvious models are Sterne, Cervantes, Swift and Pynchon. Other inspirations are more enigmatic: what to make of a chapter recounting the teenage Peter's sojourn in a town called Cornfields, in which he becomes a bystander to the crop duster chase scene from Hitchcock's "North by Northwest"? Another episode has him meeting the motorcycle gang leader played by Marlon Brando in "The Wild One," a man who, when Peter and Albertine encounter him decades later, has become a therapist who promotes himself through infomercials and specializes in the treatment of "pre-traumatic stress syndrome," caused by "contemplating the traumas we haven't suffered yet, but might."

Kraft's unpretentious parodies of contemporary society and its affectations are the best thing about "Flying," shrewd enough to delight any aficionados of post-modern fiction who can get past the novel's "Leave It to Beaver" facade. There's Jack and Jennifer's restaurant, a concept-driven establishment founded on the belief that "a meal is a story"; consequently, the menu comes in the form of "a slim paperback book," in which the ingredients of the dishes are undisclosed so as to avoid spoilers. Modern-day Babbington itself is invaded by similarly manufactured experiences: Main Street has been rebranded by the Babbington Redefinition Authority (BRA) as the "Historic Downtown Plaza," where restaurant patrons are "actual residents of the town — when they're off-stage, so to speak — but right now they're actors, *playing* residents of the town." One observer frets that soon, "the only real business left in this town will be the business of being itself, though not really itself but an image of itself as it never was."

Peter's own capably embellished memoirs amount to much the same thing: a Babbington boyhood as it never quite was, with the added twist that nobody's especially interested in the fairy tale. Beneath its aw-shucks surface, "Flying" is an ingenious, at times dizzyingly self-inverting assault not only on the truth, but on the concoction of palatable fictions, as well. Its only inviolate god is the human imagination; it's a paean to flight by a boy who never left the ground, except, perhaps, where it counts most: in his mind. □

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FLYING

ERIC KRAFT