

# Sky Miles.

In Eric Kraft's comic novel, a boy and his aerocycle cross the country—just not in the air



**FIRST LINE**

When I was fifteen, I made a solo flight from Babbington, New York, on the South Shore of Long Island, to Corosso, New Mexico, in the foothills of the San Mateo Mountains, on the banks of the Rio Grande, in a single-seat airplane that I had built in the family garage.

**Private jet**

All you need is a motorcycle, fabric, some tubing and a dream

BY RADHIKA JONES

BACK WHEN STARRY-EYED inventors dreamed up airborne contraptions, not online social networks, a teenage visionary named Peter Leroy built an aerocycle in his parents' garage and flew it solo across the country. At least that's what the proud residents of his hometown of Babbington, N.Y., think Peter did. Turns out he did cross the country, but strictly speaking, he never quite got off the ground. More than 40 years later, conscience-stricken by the effect his legend has had on the town, Peter goes about writing a memoir to set the record straight.

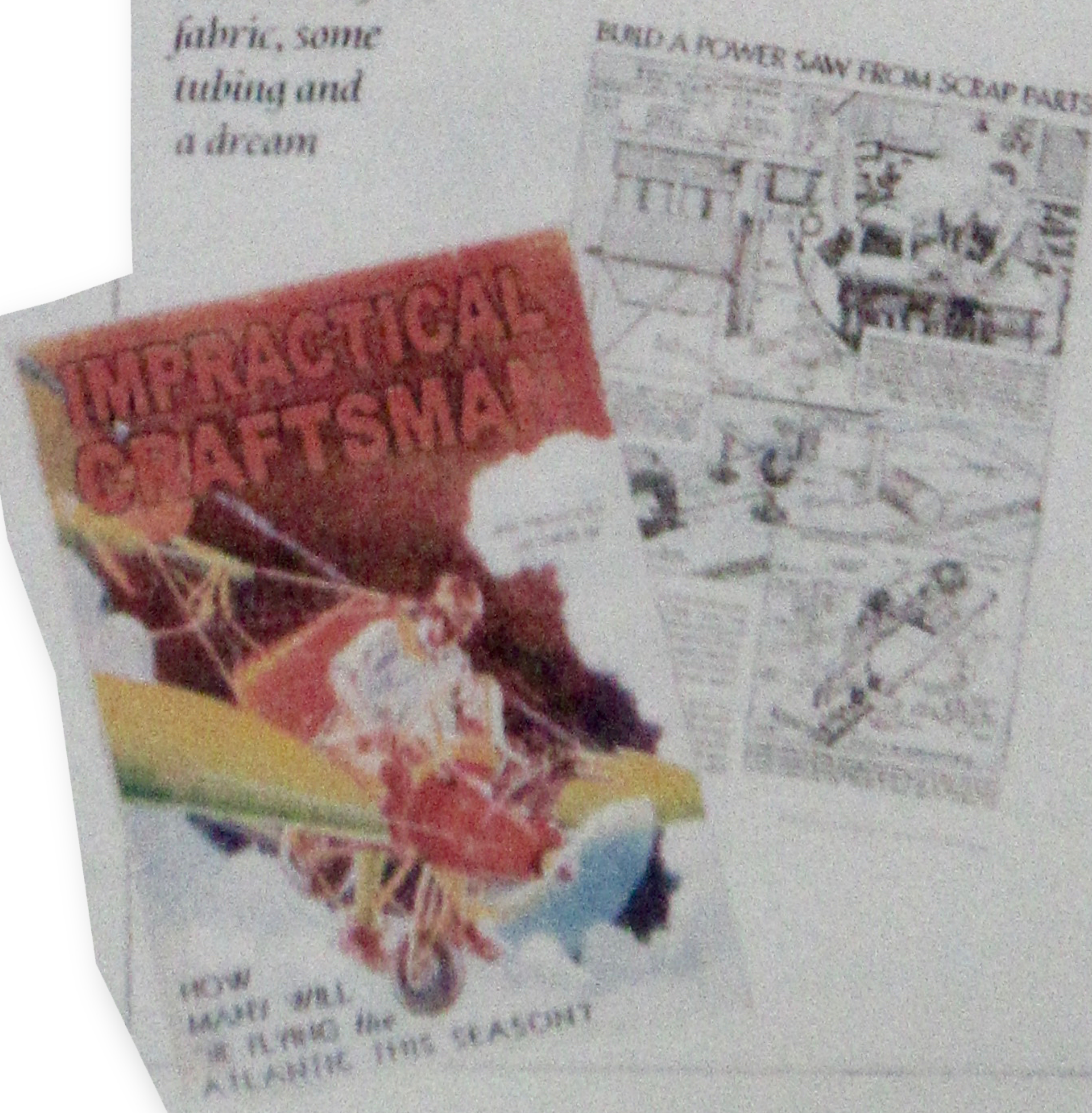
This is the story of Eric Kraft's novel *Flying* (Picador; 581 pages). And of course, Peter's "full and frank disclosure" is much more a Proustian exercise in creative recollection than a marshaling of the facts. After all, Peter is an imaginative soul, and he knows it—that's what got him into this mess in the first place. "When you are a seat-of-the-pants memoirist," he writes, "you don't write about your

life; you live your memoirs. You begin to feel that you and your account of yourself are one, like a mythical beast."

The beast gets a little heavy-handed when Peter and his wife Albertine re-create his childhood journey, this time by car. The strict alternation of chapters between the '50s and the present feels mechanical, and you start to wish the memoir as frame would temporarily recede.

But for the most part, *Flying* is a reminder of how entertaining a novel can be when it slips the surly bonds of realism. Kraft's characters don't talk like people actually talk. They're more witty, more astute, and they express themselves with infinitely more pizzazz. This is true even of Peter's winged steed, the charmingly anthropomorphized *Spirit of Babbington*, which may not be an ace at lifting off but proves a surprisingly excellent road buddy. The effect is like a happy-go-lucky Nabokov, with all the road-tripping wordplay and none of the incest. It's a joy to watch Kraft resuscitate stale idioms with a simple twist, as when Peter describes the verbally dexterous Albertine not as having a way with words but as having her way with them.

Having his way with words is Kraft's project too. The source of the plans for Peter's aerocycle is a do-it-yourself magazine called *Impractical Craftsman*—an inspired title for the age of armchair American ingenuity and, not incidentally, a nifty description of a fiction writer. On paper, a novel about hope, nostalgia, love, disillusionment, pataphysics and the science of lift might seem like a hopelessly overdetermined bucket of bolts, an aerodynamic impossibility. But Kraft's affectionately satirical, buoyant language makes *Flying* soar.



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**BACK IN PRINT!**

FLYING  
ERIC KRAFT