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# Review: 'Flying' by Eric Kraft

BY MARION WINIK | Special to Newsday  
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FLYING, by Eric Kraft. Picador, 581 pp., \$18 paper.

Eric Kraft's new book arrived on my doorstep bearing a bouquet of effusive literary comparisons: Pynchon, Proust, Borges, Nabokov, David Foster Wallace and, placed fetchingly among them like a spray of baby's breath, [Fred Astaire](#). Not having gotten through any full-length works by Pynchon or Borges, having assayed but not succeeded with "Infinite Jest," and not really getting the Astaire, I was more cowed than wooed.

Now that I've read it, I'll give you the not-so-high-culture translation: It's as if Pee Wee Herman starred in an adaptation of "The Phantom Tollbooth" written by [Tom Stoppard](#) and Alain de Botton. Extremely arch, extremely smart and more or less free of real narrative tension or emotion, Kraft's book is less a conventional narrative than a series of fables that explores imagination and memory, makes jokes about various intellectual matters and examines how we fabricate and promulgate the Story of Our Lives.

"Flying" contains a trilogy of novellas that comprise the 11th, 12th and 13th segments of a series - "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy." Peter grew up in fictional Babbington, [Long Island](#), not far from the shores of Bolotomy Bay, about 50 years ago. (Kraft is an LI native.) "Flying" covers Peter's legendary exploits as the "Birdboy of Babbington" - a teenager who built a plane in his garage and flew to [New Mexico](#) and back.

The legend has become so central to Babbington's identity that the town's Redefinition Authority has made the day of Peter's triumphant 1961 return the theme of its Historic Downtown Plaza (this is where you get your David Foster Wallace). But Peter, now all grown up and married to a woman named Albertine (here's the Proust) is compelled to correct the much-bowdlerized story of his trip.

While it is true that he followed instructions from Impractical Craftsman magazine to construct an "aerocycle," the wretched reality is that The Spirit of Babbington never did get off the ground. Peter's was an overland journey, one he recreates in memory while retracing it with Albertine in an electric car.

Forced to rely on the kindness of strangers during his first cross-country trip, the Birdboy of Babbington often runs into trouble. At the 97th Annual Marshmallow Festival in the town of Mallowdale, Peter lands in the hoosegow. When he gets out in the morning, the sheriff delivers this lecture on the lessons of his experience:

"I would hope you discovered that a readiness to perceive the state of things as pertaining specifically to ourselves is one of the ways in which our senses are often deceived. I would hope that you discovered that when we have insufficient data to know what is actually the case, we interpret the data we have in a way that suits our predilections: optimists see good news; pessimists see bad news; the timid see danger; and a nostalgic booster such as yourself is apt to see in a crowd of strangers the eager ears of friends-to-be who want to listen to him describe each and every detail about his humble hometown and its queer customs."

Philosophers are everywhere here, and the whole book is a running joke about how little anyone actually wants to hear Peter's story. The truth is, I know how they feel. I didn't really like the book - but the book already seemed to know that about me and come prepared with ever more charming strategies to win me over. I won't be reading volumes 1-10, but "Flying" did, quite often, make me smile.

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