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Features

The Birdboy of Babbington

BY DONNA SEAMAN
SPECIAL TO NEWSDAY; Donna Seaman is an associate editor for Booklist.

July 16, 2006

TAKING OFF, by Eric Kraft. St. Martin's, 205 pp., \$23.95.

Proust gave the world "In Search of Lost Time." Balzac enriched civilization with "The Human Comedy." Eric Kraft bemuses and entralls us with "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy," a series of funny, erudite and deliciously loony novels featuring a charmingly hapless, Long Island-born and -raised writer and the love of his life and guiding light, wise and wry Albertine. For readers fortunate enough to have already discovered Kraft's scintillating and covertly philosophical tales, the latest installment, his 10th, is especially pleasing because it cycles back to Peter's teenage years. This focus also makes "Taking Off" the perfect jumping-in book for readers new to Kraft's vividly rendered and gleefully satirical fictional cosmos.

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Kraft's ongoing saga of Peter Leroy is laced with cleverly off-handed tributes to various cherished literary works matched by covertly incisive takes on human nature, in general, and the American character, in particular. As one might expect from his seriocomic alignment with Proust, Kraft's great subjects are the nature of memory, the forging of the self, and love. And what better avenue into the heart of these classic themes than a hero's return to his hometown on a mission to correct old fallacies.

You see, Peter has been living a lie. Way back when he was 15, he became the fair-haired boy of Babbington, Long Island, by allegedly flying solo to New Mexico, in a small airplane he constructed out of scrap metal and an old motorcycle in his family's garage. The intrepid flyboy made banner headlines, and since then has endured wildly inaccurate accolades in numerous "anniversary recaps." Now the "Birdboy of Babbington" intends to "set the record straight," although, as he confesses in his preface, he hadn't planned on revealing quite as much as he does in the uproarious tale that follows, illustrations included. And this is only the first novel in a promised trilogy about Peter's aeronautical fiasco.

Here Kraft's adept spoofing expands to embrace the old do-it-yourself culture, a lost aspect of American know-how now that all our gadgets are digital and built to break. Motivated by envy - a friend of Peter's has won a coveted scholarship to the summer institute at the New Mexico College of Agriculture, Technology and Pharmacy - our young hero decides that he, too, must fly to the Land of Enchantment. Armed with plans from a madcap variation on the magazine Popular Mechanics titled Impractical Craftsman, and assisted mightily by family and friends, he succeeds in building an aerocycle, and he journeys to New Mexico and back. But he only flies his homemade plane the distance of about 200 feet.

Kraft makes wily use of the tried-and-true story-within-a-story structure. While he whisks the reader back in time, Peter and Albertine, now living in Manhattan, visit Babbington after a long absence and find it has been transformed into a cheesy theme-park version of the town circa 1956 when the Birdboy built his amazing flying machine. Peter and Albertine puzzle over this manifestation of cloying civic nostalgia and desperate bid for tourist dollars in a sly dissection of our society's ability to commodify and hence desiccate anything of meaning, then find themselves navigating a sequence of revealing calamities and bittersweet recoveries.

Kraft is a judicious literary magpie, not only lifting bits from Proust and Balzac, but also from Mark Twain and Evelyn Waugh. And let us not neglect his riffs on the story of Daedalus and Icarus, or his hero's mythic nocturnal junkyard quest for parts for his flying machine, a scene that evolves into a complexly evocative metaphor for forgotten memories awaiting reclamation in "the dark

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recesses of the majestic salvage and wrecking yard of the mind." Because Kraft expresses an abiding faith in steadfast love and impossible dreams, because he uses humor to shape a humanistic ethos, and because he takes profound pleasure in the resonance of language and the magic of storytelling, reading Kraft's inventive and effervescent tales is a rare and sustaining joy.

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