

# Growing Up Absurd

**AT HOME WITH THE GLYNNS: The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy (Continued),** by Eric Kraft. Crown, 179 pp., \$20.

BY DWIGHT GARNER

IF ERIC KRAFT weren't such a fine, funny, nuanced writer, it would be hard to forgive him his goofy entrepreneurial instincts. He's American literature's kind-hearted Ross Perot, a cheerful megalomaniac whose brain teems with a million newfangled, grass-roots schemes.

Kraft has long skirted literary convention. He self-published his own work via newsletters in the 1970s, and he's always been fond of filling his texts with pages of fanciful advertisements, letters and digressions. In recent years Kraft has picked up a strange kind of cult status: His fan club now numbers some 1,200 readers, each of whom received his latest newsletter, titled "What I'm Up To (Making a Good Clam Chowder)," which brims with photos of Kraft as a child, pages of glowing blurbs about his previous books, information on how to contact his publicists and agents and titles of novels Kraft plans to write in the future. What's more, he's about to release an interactive computer version of his first four books. Whew. He's a literary one-man band.

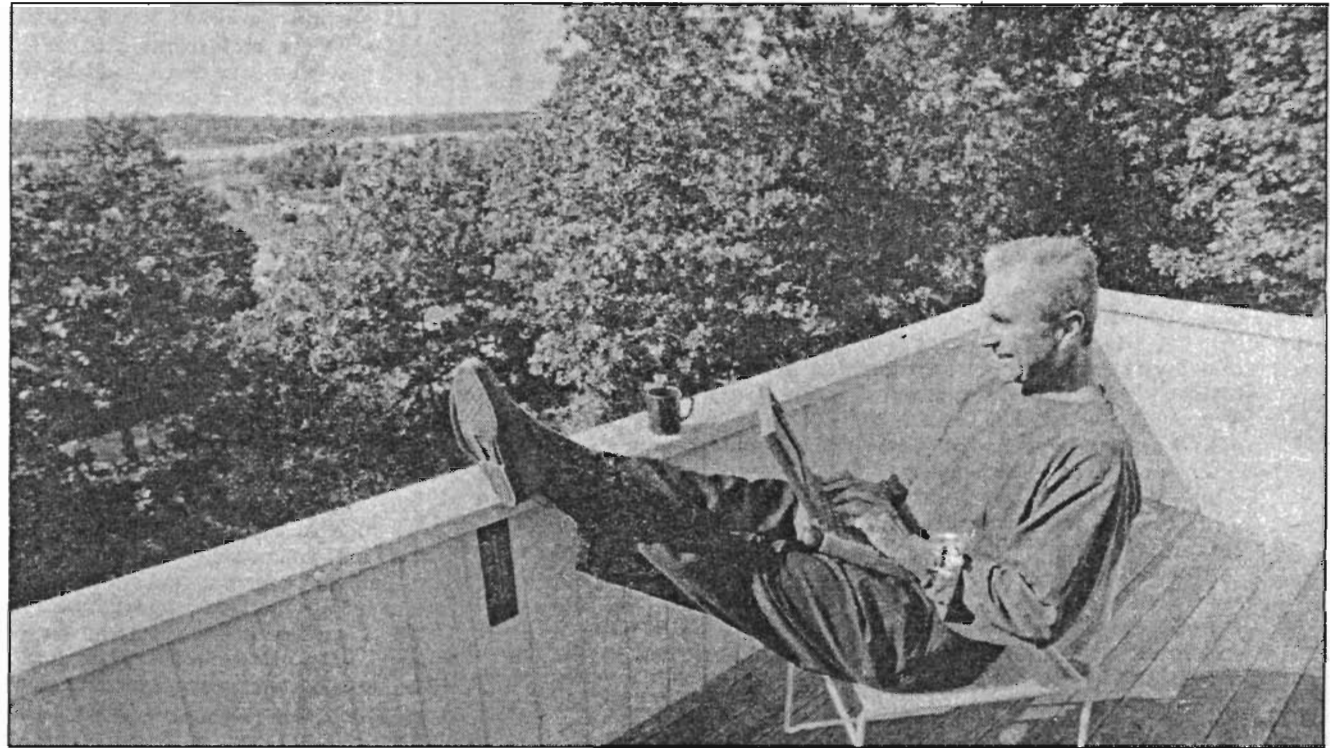
For those who are new to the Kraft phenomenon, it's worth knowing that the author's new book, "At Home With the Glynnns," is yet another piquant installment in his ongoing life's work, "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy," which now consists of six metafictional, interrelated books. Set primarily in the 1950s, Kraft's

narratives unspool in the fictional Babbington, Long Island ("clam capital of America"), which Kraft writes about with the same kind of luminous, clear-eyed nostalgia that John Updike bestows on his beloved Shillington, Pa. — the books have a youthful sense of discovery, sexual and otherwise. And if Kraft's fictions lack the alusiveness and *gravitas* of Updike's

books, they're never less than bright and engaging, dotted with small but very real pleasures.

In a preface to "At Home With the Glynnns," written by Kraft's alter-ego Peter Leroy, we learn that the novel was nearly titled "War and Peas" — or, more accurately, "War (Life, Love,

PLEASE TURN THE PAGE



Newsday / J. Michael Dombroski

Dwight Garner is a free-lance writer.

Eric Kraft at his home in East Hampton

## KRAFT

Death) and Peas.” Thankfully, he took a pass on the idea. But it’s typical of Kraft’s work that he explains the elaborate process of choosing a title. As a novelist, Kraft has always been something of a cheerfully post-modern carnival magician, announcing what he intends to do — “Wanna see me pull a rabbit out of my hat?” — and then generally pulling it off in high style. “At Home With the Glynnns” even includes a chapter that Kraft (as Leroy) decided to delete, but then stuck in anyway, so we can see once again how the writer’s mind works.

As it happens, peas do play a substantial role in “At Home With the Glynnns.” The book is about 12-year-old Peter’s infatuation with the bohemian Glynn family, particularly the enchanting Glynn twins, Margot and Martha. Although they’re only slightly older than Peter, the first half of the novel is devoted to the twins’ elaborate efforts to sneak him into their oversized bed on chilly Friday nights. Before he’s invited in, however, the “romantic and resourceful” pair conspire to teach him sexual technique by having the innocent, uncomprehending Peter roll peas under his fingers. (“Close your eyes,” Martha says, while Peter pushes peas around in the school cafeteria.)

Peter soon becomes justifiably smitten, and the book contains many wonderfully evocative scenes of the romantic threesome at large — going to movies, wandering home in a hormonal daze and finally clambering into bed. On nearly every page there is splendid writing about the quirks of adolescence. For instance, Peter notes that the twins, while trying to sit in a chair, “found it impossible to keep all the parts of themselves in the customary places. A leg would fling itself outward or bend under the other leg, and then

the whole girl would have to be rearranged, the chair shifted, and then the girl’s nates would find that they couldn’t fit themselves into the two scoops in the wooden seat, and that meant more shifting . . . The unflexible chair and the flexible girl were engaged in a struggle, with the chair bent on teaching her the necessity of compromise, but the girl had a will and it was a will to win, to dominate, and she meant to get the best of that chair, and while she was working to do it she was a treat to watch.”

The novel’s second, and less successful, half is devoted to somewhat more serious matters, as Peter begins to learn painting from the twins’ father, Andy, an artist who had narrowly escaped death at the hands of fascists in Eastern Europe. For Peter, art becomes more appealing than girls, and when Andy hires him to secretly improve the sketches of his drawing students, he becomes obsessed with form and figure and the book takes long — and slightly shallow — detours into artistic theory.

Kraft’s narrative never slows down for long, however. When “At Home With the Glynnns” steers clear of digressions about the meaning of art, the book is a splendidly vivid exploration of “sexual pleasure amplified and augmented by the thrill of adventure” — a striding tour through a young boy’s mind as he enters what he calls “that enchanted Glynnscape.”

“At Home With the Glynnns” may make you want to poke around in the rest of Kraft’s oeuvre, but — trust me — stay away from the author’s newsletters and mailing lists. Novelists as interesting as Kraft needn’t be quite so cute, nor flack themselves so strenuously. ■