

# Book Review

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## Growing Up Absurd

*The main event in the latest Peter Leroy novel is Peter's sexual liaison with twins.*

### AT HOME WITH THE GLYNNS

*The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy (Continued).*

By Eric Kraft.

179 pp. New York:

Crown Publishers.

\$20.

By Jonathan Baumbach

**E**RIC KRAFT seems to have taken to heart Wordsworth's visionary notion that "the child is father of the man." And in this latest episode of the "personal history, adventures, experiences and observations" of 12-year-old Peter Leroy — his adventures in the growing-up trade — the precocity of Mr. Kraft's narrator mirrors the audacity of the novel itself.

Through a string of digressions, the storyteller withholds the erotic main event he promises us in his preface. The method is risky, potentially maddening. It is a bit like Scheherazade inventing stories to evade her execution. A moment's letdown — the narrative must continually beguile — and all is lost.

The main event we are waiting for is Peter Leroy's sexual liaison with the slightly older, nymphettish Glynn twins, Margot and Martha. Peter's initiation into the mysteries is set in motion on the night he escorts the girls to a movie, "L'Amour, La Guerre, La Poussière," at the off-limits Fine Arts Theater. One trespass leads, as it will, to another.

But before Peter is allowed to accompany the twins to a movie, he must ask their eccentric parents, Andy and Rosetta, for permission. And before Andy will entrust his daughters to Peter, he wants to get to know the boy a bit better.

To that purpose, Peter becomes a constant visitor in the Glynn household, learning from, and about, the parents as they learn from, and about, him. And even before Peter is invited to meet the parents, the girls have embarked on their own educational experiment. One day at school, they set Peter the task of rolling two peas simultaneously with the middle fingers of each hand, a skill that will come into play later in the story.

These digressions, which seem arbitrary at first, twist together like weave in a fabric. "At Home With the Glynns" is as much about the ways of telling a story as it is about the playful coming-of-age story it has assigned itself to tell.

As an adjunct to the Glynns' history, we are also given the tale of the fire that gutted the Nevsky mansion, a signal event in the lives of most longtime residents of Babbington, L.I. As Peter tells us, "Hearing the story of the fire in the Nevsky mansion from so many sources on so many occasions taught me something about how to shape a story, because I got to see the storytellers at work, employing techniques of refinement, of elaboration." For the sake of closure, apparently (and perhaps metafictional fancy), there is another memorable fire at the end of the novel.

Long before this, Peter finds himself, in several senses, at home with the Glynns. He becomes a lover of the daughters and a confidante of the mother (who has moved from writing poems to composing contest jingles, in 25 words or less). He also becomes an art student of the father, who enlists him in another trespass: the doctoring of other students' drawings.

In his quest for experience-knowledge, Peter apprentices himself, with his characteristic mix of acquiescence and obsession, to each of the Glynns, who provide as a unit the occasion of his fortunate fall into the feckless adult world.

**P**ETER LEROY'S preadolescent voice, recaptured years later by his fictive middle-aged persona, is always unerringly itself, at once unexpectedly articulate and believably childlike. It is a likable voice, ingenuous, modest, wholly engaging. As such, it earns the most fanciful events in his story a certain credibility, or at least an unresisting suspension of disbelief. We are disposed to accept whatever Mr. Kraft, in the guise of Peter Leroy, tells us, even as he confesses to mixing invention with memory, even as events become more and more whimsically improbable.

A daring tour de force, "At Home With the Glynns" seems often to be dangling on a tightrope over the mine field of terminal cute. It teeters teasingly but never loses its poise. Mr. Kraft's cunning novel is really a children's book (like, say, "The Catcher in the Rye") for adults, which I mean as unequivocal praise. There is nothing more serious, after all, than the playful, given full play by an unapologetically childlike — even childish — imagination. □