

## [Rubrics and Tendrils of Richard Gehr](#)

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At Home With the Krafts

"It's a lot like life, isn't it?" says Porky White to Peter Leroy. "A bus ride, that is."

I'm reappreciating Porky's wisdom, as it happens, on a crowded Hampton Jitney whisking me out Long Island to visit his creator, Eric Kraft, the critically beloved author of the ongoing *Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy*. Porky is one of the funnier characters in an immensely funny encyclopedic novel. "Whenever you get in trouble," one of Kraft's sons once advised him, "just bring on Porky White."

"Just think about it," continues Porky in Kraft's *Where Do You Stop?* "You're always on your way from one goddamned place to another, and you have to pay for the trip, and nobody cares whether you get there or not, and you feel miserable the whole time, and when you get there nobody's there to meet you, and like as not you step off the bus into some dog shit." (Little Follies, 241) I step off the bus, however, into an Easthampton of khakis, topsiders, and weathered faces; a place where writers like Eric Kraft hang out with painters like Eric Fischl and Larry Rivers.

Having lunched with Kraft a few years ago, I knew what a fastidiously dapper sort of fellow he was. However: the Krafts live in quite possibly the cleanest and most well-lit house I've ever entered--a modern grey beach abode with a mile-high living room and enormous light-gathering windows. The three of us huddle around Kraft's computer in his loft office, surfing his oeuvre and reminiscing.

Where Proust had his madeleine, Eric Kraft has his Madeline, the amusing muse to whom nearly all his books have been dedicated. Together since high school days in Babylon, Long Island (transformed by Kraft into Babbington, "Clam Capitol of the World"), and married for nearly 35 years, the Krafts are a real-life Swann and Albertine, as well as partners in the educational publishing enterprise that has long been the writer's day job.

Kraft, now 50, has written *Peter Leroy* in novella-sized installments since the small Applewood Press first published them by subscription in 1982. Three novels--*Herb 'n' Lorna*, *Reservations Recommended*, and *What a Piece of Work I Am*--were also spun off from the Leroy universe. The latest episode, *At Home With the Glynn's*, recounts 13-year-old Peter's sexual and esthetic awakening *chez* the entwining, grinning Glynn twins. The book's as touchingly resonant as any Peter Leroy story, although the superlatives used to describe Kraft's crafty output became redundant some time ago, as a skim through his dauntingly kudo-rampant press kit proves.

But to add a few more adjectives to the love fest: Kraft's ongoing "Very Large Fiction," now at a few thousand pages and counting, constitutes a Proustian endeavor of enormous wit and heart. The title character of *Peter Leroy*, a stand-in for the author, reminisces about his past, elegantly describing his family and acquaintances while piling on layer after layer of reflexive momentum. Sexy and bittersweet, nostalgic and yearning, the novellas explore the depths of a single personality with the gentle scrutiny of new parents exploring their child's constantly blossoming personality. The shimmering mirror opened up between the elder Peter, ensconced in domestic bliss on a small island, and the precocious young Peter, bobbing on childhood's imaginary seas, is simply beautiful. Pursued diligently for nearly 30 years, and not without a certain amount of personal sacrifice, *Peter Leroy* and its extended family of works does everything you'd like great American humor writing (if not metaliterary French fiction) to do.

Peter Leroy, Kraft's idealized alter ego, always begins his likewise altered and idealized recollections with self-conscious musings on his memory work and the creative process. "Peter's situation *starts* from my situation," says Kraft, explaining the fuzzy boundary separating author from character. "In some other universe, Babbington is right there on the south shore where Babylon is; and his parents and grandparents *start* from mine. What's left? Peter's *affection* for his grandparents is the same size as my affection for mine."

At worst, Kraft's work meshes together a little *too* tidily, lacking many of the "dark, gritty bits" of better-forgotten life incidents that might muddy his self-characterized metafictional "clam chowder." For a perfectly apt analysis (minus the jokes and irony, unfortunately), you could read Gilles Deleuze's show-stopping essay on Proust, "Antilogos, or the Literary Machine." But you'd have a lot more fun installing a copy of Voyager's *The Complete Peter Leroy (so far)* into your Macintosh. A bargain at \$24.95, as Kraft points out, these three discs unstuff themselves into a hypertext treasure chest of Leroyana, embracing everything from his first installment, *My Mother Takes a Tumble* to 1992's *Where Do You Stop*, along with *Herb 'n' Lorna* (perhaps Kraft's best known book) and *Reservations Recommended*.

As Roland Barthes demonstrated in *S/Z*, all novels are hypertext--sort of. But *The Complete Peter Leroy* is the first of Voyager's Expanded Books series to take advantage of the form's potential and loop it into unexpected areas. *TCPL* is introduced and annotated by Mark Dorset, who also contributes his own *Topical Guide to the Complete Peter Leroy (so far)*, embellishing such Leroyesque themes as boundaries and edges, clam chowder, follies, memory, time, and trifles. Dorset prefaces and afterwards Kraft's extended explanation of his work, "What I'm Up To," in a manner similar to that of John R. Phillipot's *Oysters and All About Them*, which Kraft discovered in a Massachusetts library and, whose successive editions were wrapped around the original like "the layers of nacre an oyster deposits to make a pearl."

Kraft, enormously enthusiastic about his Voyager edition ("I'm already working on version 2.0"), suggests we look up "Mark Dorset" in his

topical guide. "Modestly enough, he only provides a list of places he's appeared. But the best place to learn about him is in *Herb 'n' Lorna* ." Dorset, it turns out, is a self-conscious literary figure capable of recognizing his lineage in *Pale Fire*'s Charles Kinbote. A figment of Peter Leroy's imagination, whose involvement in the story adds yet another layer to this metafictional merengue, Dorset ends up marrying the Glynn twins years after Peter's involvement with them (Dorset's relationship to Peter is actually much easier to read about than to explain). Peter's history with the Glynnns, along with his prolific lucidity, leaves Dorset with certain unresolved issues vis a vis his relationship to his fictional creator.

"Actually," explains Kraft, "the girls use the fact that there are two wives, in effect, as a way of getting away from him now and then, as he can be annoying. He's pedantic, he's not very sure of himself, and he's a real procrastinator, although he's accomplished a lot. His list of publications is really impressive. But he's never published the work he most wanted to accomplish, which is: *The Topical Autobiography of Mark Dorset* . His own life story in encyclopedic form. So when the opportunity came to him to annotate *Peter Leroy* , he seized it."

Dorset's fussy, pedantic style obviously reflects a facet of Kraft, who's driven and disciplined enough to dive into his Peter Leroy persona every morning at 5:30. He shelves his alternate world a few hours later to return to the stringent protocols of educational publishing. What's amazing is the ease and facility with which Kraft makes his daily transition into Peter Leroy's mind, which Mark Dorset believes is the *real* subject of *Peter Leroy* .

"The question of the relationship between me and my character *really* fascinates me," says Kraft, "because I feel that I have a complex relationship with myself that I can't seem to understand at all. I don't understand most of the time why my moods change and why it's so difficult for me to escape from a mood I'd like to escape from, even when I can see that logic dictates that this not persist. Why then is it so easy for me to make an imaginative leap into another state of mind, another nonexistent person's state of mind, and be in a *completely different* mood and sense of being? I can do that every morning: sit down, start up the computer, and I'm there."

Eric and Madeline often speak of "buying time" for Eric's writing, and have been mostly dissatisfied with how his work was handled by his various publishers. Only recently, for example, have his books enjoyed well-distributed paperback editions, a natural for the college audience that would, in the best of all possible worlds, eat them with a spoon. "I used to suffer from fear of flying," Eric tells me, "a controlled terror. I would fly, but I'd have to have a couple of scotches on the ground, a couple in the air . . . But around the time that six or so of the Applewood novellas had been published, my fear of flying vanished. I guess part of it was that I didn't want to die unfulfilled."

What Kraft lacked for many years was the perfect form for his work. "I remember one night particularly well," he recalls, "when we were driving through Harvard Square on our way to a party, and I was in such a state. It was *awful* . I can remember myself ranting and despairing in the car. A lot of those problems--of form and format and getting all the voices in--have been solved," he says in a voice gradually assuming fake pomposity, "by the passage of time and the vigorous application of labor!"

A Borgesian labyrinth of doublings and mirrorings reflecting Kraft's complex relationship with his character, Peter Leroy is an intricate literary gizmo writ large. Bells jingle and lights flicker hypnotically as Kraft unspools an endless series of stylistic diversions in the form of a children's reader, the home handyman magazine *Impractical Craftsman* , the "Larry Peters" boys adventure books Peter Leroy writes as *his* day job, an epistolary novel, love stories aplenty, restaurant reviews, the occasional fairy tale, a school play, and even Shakespearean tragedy. Most amazing, however, is the lightness with which Kraft weaves together these writing widgets, these nearly forgotten texts, this big-hearted Everything of an endeavor.

As Jitney time approaches once again, Madeline brings over a loose-leaf binder containing some of Eric's earliest Peter Leroy writing. (As a rock critic for *Boston After Dark* , Kraft was banned from the Boston Tea Party, Beantown's biggest rock venue, for panning the Nazz as overly derivative of the Who.) The long-unread pages, sent to a mailing list of a few dozen friends during the late '70s, separate with little clicks as the moisture between the pages gives. A feeling of vertigo passes over me toward the end of the binder, when I come across a 1977 conversation with the Glynn twins' artist father, Andy, that reappears nearly verbatim in *At Home With the Glynnns* . It's a strange feeling, and I half expect to turn the page and find a copy of my own unwritten article included in their scrapbook.

"The real truth," laughs Eric, "is that Maddy and I wrote this book yesterday. Sticking the pages together was the hard part."

"But do you know what is particularly wonderful about this, if I may say so? it's that when I sent this out, part of my pretense was that there must be a whole novel around this that I've already written, that's finished. But this story of Andy in the studio, this little glimpse, must be just an excerpt from a whole work that I've finished. And now, 18 years later, there *is* a novel around it!"