

Fiction

Peter Leroy prequel

Coming to terms with Guppa and Gumma Piper's kinky trade

Herb 'n' Lorna

By Eric Kraft
Crown, 310 pages, \$17.95

Reviewed by Richard Gehr
A writer who specializes in popular culture

From about '82 to '85, one of the things that made life worth living for a lot of us was Eric Kraft's "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy," a fictitious autobiography. This "serial novel" (or "series of novels," as it became known halfway through its run) consisted of eight slim volumes released every few months during that time. Critics fell over one another in praise of Kraft's perceptive and clever voice, while members of the series' rapidly expanding coterie paced the floor in anxious anticipation of each new installment—until they stopped appearing.

Peter Leroy was a classy extended literary juggling act; but you had to wonder

just how long Kraft could keep it up. Herb 'n' Lorna is the mildly disappointing answer.

Kraft's first full-length novel recounts the lives and times of Peter Leroy's maternal grandparents, the Pipers. Now in his late thirties, Peter feels his childhood, or at least his "overextended egocentric period," ended a few years earlier at Lorna's funeral, where he first learned of his grandparents' lifelong involvement in the animated erotic jewelry industry, the "coarse goods" trade. This information simultaneously depresses and sexually excites Peter, sending him on a Proustian headspin into the past. Indeed, the French novelist's influence is pervasive, down to the book's initial sentence: "For years, I tried to avoid writing this book."

Throughout "Peter Leroy," both narrator and readers knew the Pipers only as "Gumma" and "Guppa," immensely gentle and indulgent souls possessed of boundless affection for one another and

their precocious grandchild. Guppa/Herb was "small and quick, apparently always either amused or puzzled, a talented and hard-working salesman, a tireless home handyman... a happy tinkerer," while Gumma/Lorna "was large and soft, generous, enduringly pretty, pleasant, devoted to the domestic arts, the provider of beige-and-white meals."

With the assistance of their best friend, the rambunctious May Castle, Peter discovers he wasn't the only one ignorant of his grandparents' secret sexual selves. Their mutual involvement in erotic jewelry—Herb as a particularly clever designer and salesman, Lorna as the trade's clandestine yet preeminent craftsman—was also something they shamefully hid from one another for most of their marriage. Their liberating mutual revelation and decision to go public with their talents leads them to organize an entire Florida retirement community into erotic artisans.

While "Peter Leroy" concerned the delicate vicissitudes of a '50s childhood,

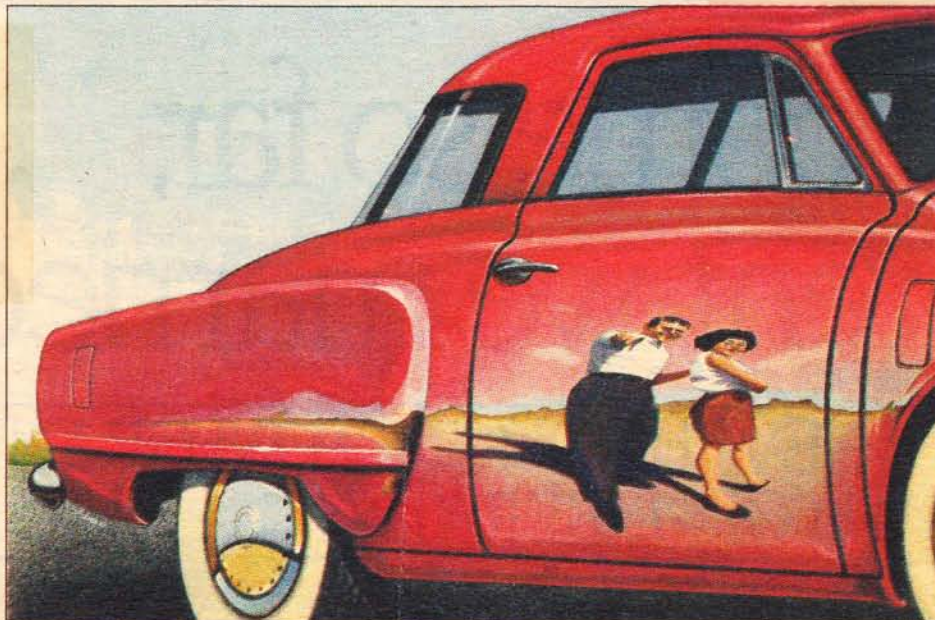


Illustration from the book jacket

"Herb 'n' Lorna" takes on a large slice of 20th Century Americana, as his characters struggle through World War I and the Depression. But where Kraft's earlier work evoked Mark Twain and Henry Thoreau, the new tale is darker and steamier.

The odd thing is, you'll find at least as much ambition, smarts and humor in each of Kraft's small prior books (assuming you can find them) as in the 300-

plus pages here. He obviously felt it was time to leave childhood behind, in more ways than one, and thus expands his scope to include America—and sexuality—at large, opting for a less "egocentric" narrative. But while "Herb 'n' Lorna" is certainly recommended reading, this "Peter Leroy" devotee appreciates it most as entertaining background material to an even finer primary text I hope will someday be resuscitated.