

The truth about Grandma

Herb 'n' Lorna. By Eric Kraft. Crown. 352 pp.
\$17.95.

By ROBERTA J. WAHLERS
of The Journal staff

Peter Leroy learns a disturbing secret on the day of his grandmother's funeral. He learns that his beloved "Gumma" was a talented carver who used her abilities to create erotic art, or "coarse goods" as they were called. Not only that, Peter finds out that his "Guppa" was in the same line of work. Kind of disconcerting, to say the least.

So Peter decides to do some looking into his grandparents' lives and, being a writer, he decides to write the biography of Herb and Lorna Piper. And in writing their story he is also writing about America's growth over the last 80 or so years.

Of course, Peter didn't write this book, Eric Kraft did. Kraft also wrote Peter's "other," earlier book — "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy." So this isn't really a biography but a novel in biographical form. But whatever you call it you have to love it.

Kraft has written an engaging and entertaining look at two people from small-town USA and their marriage and the people they care about. He tells of friendships that last over the decades even when misunderstandings threaten their existences. Such as when Lorna gets it into her head that the lady they buy their house from doesn't really want to leave, so Lorna invites her to live with them.

That woman, Mrs. Stolz, would be just as happy to live in her little hotel room, but she gets it into *her* head that Herb needs her because Lorna is crazy. So she lives with the

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Pipers for almost 20 years and they never get the situation straightened out.

Or there's the time Herb and Lorna wander off separately with friends and each gets the idea that the other has committed adultery. (Neither did, though both thought about it.) But each silently forgives the other and never mentions the incident.

That's typical of the way the main characters treat each other in this book. There's a kindness and respect that's rarely seen in fiction these days, when melodrama is easier and more exciting.

Kraft also adds loads of quirkiness here to make up for the lack of excitement. Like how Herb's father loses his shirt on manufacturing cork furniture — easier to move, you know. Or that the town Lorna grows up in is called Chacallit — short for What-cha-ma-call-it.

The coarse goods business itself seems strangely silly when you think of a teenage Lorna at the turn of the century carving images of people caught in the act. Or when you think of Herb figuring out ways to mechanize the carvings he then sells on the sly whenever the couple need a bit of cash. Or the fact that neither Herb nor Lorna knows of the other's involvement with the goods for decades. None of this silliness produces belly laughs, but all of it brings smiles and some of it brings giggles.

I guess the charm of Kraft's delightful novel is that despite the strangeness of coarse goods or cork furniture, the reader comes to really like and care about these people. Erotic art or not, you begin to wish that Peter's grandparents were your own.