

BOOKS Patricia Holt

Peter Leroy's Welcome Return

Herb 'n' Lorna

By **Eric Kraft**

Crown, 310 pages, \$17.95

They don't look a bit eccentric, I thought upon meeting Boston author Eric Kraft and his wife, Madeline, during their recent visit to San Francisco.

Then halfway through the interview, Madeline suddenly pulled a camera out of her purse and took a photograph of me as Kraft said gravely, "We'd like you to be our Picture of the Day."

This, I knew, was a great compliment. The Krafts, who work together as packagers of educational materials, are fastidious in their daily organization. They begin work promptly at 9 and end exactly at 5 p.m., when they break out the martinis. On Sundays their "religious

experience" is attained by reading Proust aloud with friends.

At some point during the day (the precise time appears unplaned), one or the other takes the Picture of the Day, a photo evoking the ordinariness of life — Peter collating papers, Madeline at the post office, the odd avocado at the market.

This would not seem all that eccentric were it not for the fact that for more than three decades, Kraft has been living a double life, turning to his word processor at night to "hang out" with imaginary people who so clamor for attention that he has "virtually surrendered driving a car to Madeline," he says heavily. "I have become an incautious driver because of this preoccupation."

The word processor has become "someplace I can go to wander among the people of [the fic-

tional Long Island town of] Babbington, or go into one of the bars there where I might meet, say, Corky White, who's quite outrageous and unbridled. His opinion is always useful to me. Our older son, Scott, says that when in doubt, bring in Corky White! So true."

Happily, Kraft is a novelist and is thus judged sane by society for having this second life. His fiction is so ingenious, so close to his own life, yet so droll that we easily confuse the mirror for its image.

Kraft still refers to the center of this other life as "that little fellow," even though the fictional character of Peter Leroy has grown to adulthood through eight novellas and one extraordinary summer sleeper, the thick, rich, humorous and affectionate story of Peter's grandparents, "Herb 'n' Lorna." Taken together, all of Kraft's books are a single "serial novel" that goes by the name of "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy."

Published without much regard to Peter's chronology (the first eight began in a newsletter Kraft used to mail to 250 friends and friends of friends), the work presents an ironic and charming look at American life as personified by "that little fellow" and his innocent, somewhat loony friends and relatives. "Herb 'n' Lorna" begins when Peter, now in his 20s, realizes that "Gumma" and "Guppa," his loving and seemingly simple grandparents, have made their fortune de-



Eric Kraft: a double life, writing about 'that little fellow'

Realizing that this is a side to his grandparents he has never known, Peter sets out to investigate and describe their lives, and the result is a love affair between readers and these two ordinary people who never think of erotic jewelry as anything that sensational.

Kraft says his first "glimpse" of Peter occurred in 1962 in the midst of falling off his chair during a snooze at the Harvard library. "On the way down I saw a picture of a boy sitting on a dock, a boy who was not me, but part of me." For the next 15 years, Kraft filled up cardboard cartons of "practice writing" about Peter until, quietly and tentatively, he started showing "excerpts" to friends.

Lucky for us he finally did. After reading "Herb 'n' Lorna," we too never want Peter's story to end.