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A Review of Inflating a Dog by Eric Kraft



In the business of juggling disparate elements and merging apparently irreconcilable positions, Kraft has few equals. Many writers that have provided less have been better known.

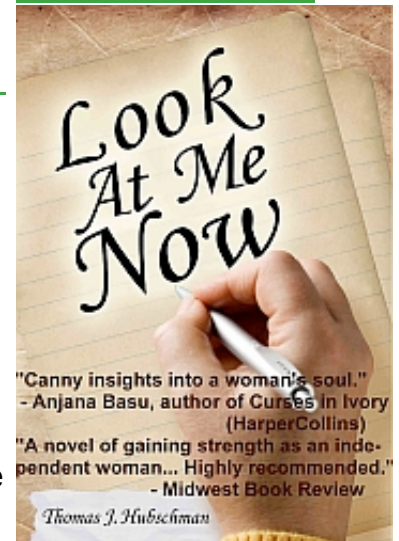
Even though Kraft's novels are a guilty pleasure and despite the trappings of Proust posing - as much tongue in cheek as everything else - and a variety of inventive intrusions modeled on Sterne, the novels are sentimental comedies.

Reviewed by Bob Williams

Inflating a Dog
by Eric Kraft,
Picador USA, 2002, 242 pages
ISBN 0-312-28804-2, \$25.00

Readers of previous volumes in Kraft's on-going story of Peter Leroy and his family will immediately recognize the loopy circle around reality in which young Peter travels. In *Inflating a Dog* he begins with an unfounded but psychologically attractive idea that he is a bastard. This allows him to dress up the usual teenage sense of alienation in a colorful suit of metaphorical clothing. With his customary imaginative leaps he decides that his real father is the recently deceased Dudley Beaker, former neighbor of his mother when she was a girl. It is Dudley's widow, Eliza, that asks him to care for her house while she travels in Europe. The home becomes the setting for his experiments with Patti.

It is a curious not-quite-coincidence that Peter had a relationship, fostered by his mother, with Dudley. Dudley, his mother



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Do you think that literary prizes are biased against genre fiction?

- No, genre fiction's biased against literary prizes
- No, genre fiction tends to be

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hoped, would be a mentor to Peter and she sent him to the older man for advice and guidance. It was a strange choice, perhaps reflecting Ella's own oddity, for Dudley was a bitter man, disappointed in his life but convinced of his own exemptions from human failing. Whatever the cause, the experiment was a failure and Peter developed a spirit of opposition that brought their meetings to an end. At loose in the house Peter searches for clues that Dudley was his father. The best that he can find is a photograph album that contains pictures of his mother from the time she was a girl of thirteen to the time when she was a pregnant women of twenty-four.

Patti Fiorenza is a potent force in young Peter's life. She is, in fact, a young sex goddess of the community whose very presence evokes lust. Peter fantasizes about her virginity or the lack of it and, because they are friends, she agrees to assist him in his efforts to recapture the verisimilitude of his mother's liaison with the deceased Dudley. In the process the author steps out of the first person past narrative mode to adopt a stance in the future. We are still listening to Peter's voice but the contrivance reminds us that Peter is a fictional character. The narrative intrusion creates an interesting tension between the voice of the fictional narrative voice, which we hear, and that of the real narrator, Eric Kraft, whose voice we do not hear but which is of course the real voice of the book. It is very crafty indeed.

Patti asks to meet Ella before they continue with their reconstruction of an imagined life of Ella and Dudley. Peter takes her home but on the way is stricken with misgivings as he perceives Patti anew. She appears, he decides, to be a slut. But he reckons without his unconventional mother who easily and immediately takes to Patti. They hit it off so well in fact that they forget entirely that Peter is there at all. Brought back to earth

tends to be formulaic

- No, there are plenty of prizes for genre fiction
- Some genres do better than others
- Yes, no Sci Fi in the Man Booker?!
- Yes, it's part of a broader biase against genre.
- Yes, prizes are out of touch with readers
- Other (please comment)

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by the reminder of his presence Ella will - after a scholarly digression on the differences between the words fellatio and blow job - detail the latest extravagant idea that has come to her. She wants to operate a cruise ship to tour the nearby bay. The format that presents this scene is a script, a kind of zany infomercial. Another differently formatted chapter follows - a list of all the responses that Peter could have made to his mother's idea before the three of them leave the house to go buy a boat. The relevance of the title - a reference to an incident in Don Quixote about a madman who masters the difficult art of inflating dogs - is urged through examination of the slang for passive and active forms of enthusiasm. These all revolve about notions of inflation and of floating.

Ella is afraid to tell her husband what she has done, especially since the purchase of the boat required from her a check for which there are insufficient funds. On the way home she decides to buy her husband his favorite food in an attempt to mollify him. Patti, now very much part of the group, accompanies her, meets the father and immediately sees him as such a yahoo that she begins to believe that Peter is in fact someone else's son. We have another glimpse of the future Peter and his significant other, Albertine. There have been other references to Proust and we begin to see that Kraft's involvement with Peter is indeed Proustian. The comedy of the story rests on serious foundations, the sobering reflections of Peter as an older man, struggling to make a living as a hack writer and bearing the burden of his mother's unsatisfactory life and painful death.

Ella, Peter and Patti - a not very bright trio - take possession of the boat. Peter discovers but keeps to himself the fact that the boat is slowly sinking. He returns alone late at night to do what he can to keep it afloat. Peter discovers the seller of the boat

has anticipated him and is bailing the bilge. His obvious reason is to avoid the imputation of having sold Ella a boat that leaks. Peter watches his performance for several nights and, when the man leaves, completes the job since the seller has decided that verisimilitude does not require him to bail the entire bilge.

The pleasure cruise boat is a failure but one from which the author wrings a great amount of humor. Its reincarnation as a boat that sells food and beer to the clam gatherers and vacationers is a success and there is a satisfying moment when Peter is able to sell the boat to a gullible group of buyers.

In the business of juggling disparate elements and merging apparently irreconcilable positions, Kraft has few equals. Many writers that have provided less have been better known. Even though Kraft's novels are a guilty pleasure and despite the trappings of Proust posing - as much tongue in cheek as everything else - and a variety of inventive intrusions modeled on Sterne, the novels are sentimental comedies. That they are edged with seriousness and even, as in *Inflating a Dog*, the grimmer aspects of life does not lessen their frothy character. They might be better books if Kraft did not try so hard but each writer writes as he or she must, not as he or she should. It is significantly better to accept Kraft, a major writer of minor works, on his own terms than to forego the pleasure of his acquaintance.

For more information on *Inflating a Dog* visit:

[Inflating a Dog: The Story of Ella's...](#)

Read our interview with Eric Kraft [Here](#)

About the Reviewer: Bob Williams is retired and lives in a small town with his wife, dogs and a cat. He has been collecting books all his life, and has done freelance writing, mostly on classical

music. His principal interests are James Joyce, Jane Austen and Homer. His writings, two books and a number of short articles on Joyce, can be accessed at: <http://fracman.home.mchsi.com/>

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