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## Book Review: Inflating a Dog

In the latest installment of Eric Kraft's Long Island Sound-set serial, Peter Leroy and his enterprising mother go boating for bivalves. But, oh, that sinking feeling.

By Richard Gehr

Richard Gehr writes for Spin, Blender and Modern Maturity

July 21, 2002

INFLATING A DOG: The Story of Ella's Lunch Launch, by Eric Kraft. Picador, 242 pp., \$25.

Reading Eric Kraft is at times like taking a dizzy tumble into Long Island Sound. As fine a novelist as the Island has produced, Kraft is the buoyant and brilliant presence behind a continuing eight-book serial novel collectively titled "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy." Likewise, his fictional alter ego, Peter Leroy, is himself the author of several volumes in a series of hardy-boy exploits titled "The Adventures of Larry Peters." The onion skins may stop there, but the complex relationship of Kraft to his fictional memoirist is as richly detailed in its way, and a great deal funnier, than the masterpiece from which it can never be disassociated, Marcel Proust's "In Search of Lost Time."

Over the course of two decades, Kraft's crafty and well-crafted books have pinballed among the various stages of Peter Leroy's life. "Little Follies," published in 1995, collected nine novellas originally put out by independent Applewood Books beginning in 1982. I'm probably still fondest of those bite-size gems, yet anticipate each new Leroy story as an opportunity to proselytize on Kraft's behalf to anyone who hasn't dipped into his charming river of artfully fabricated recollections.

As Herman Melville based his most famous work on the whaling industry, Kraft's books involve the Island's somewhat less flamboyant but no less evocative clamming culture. Kraft, who grew up in Babylon, at one time co-owned and co-captained a clam boat, which, according to the biography on his Web site, sank. A sinking clam boat happens to be the subject of the latest Peter Leroy novel, "Inflating a Dog." In this excellent addition to the Leroy canon, Peter recalls his mother's attempt to establish a business in the family's fictional hometown of Babbington. It is also a sexual coming-of-age story, as well as a way for Peter to reconcile himself with his parentage and mortality.

One of Kraft's more rewarding themes is that of conceiving and bringing to realization a project of some sort. Life is art in Kraft's universe, and nearly everyone in it is a craftsman, creator or critic of some sort. Dudley Beaker, the Leroy's next-door neighbor, writes ironic ad copy for the Babbington Clam Council; his grandparents, the titular heroes of 1988's "Herb 'n' Lorna," manufacture cunningly accurate erotic jewelry; and his friend Ariane Lodkochnikov becomes the walking work of art recounted in "What a Piece of Work I Am." His characters fail as often as they succeed, however, and "Inflating a Dog" in part concerns the compromises one makes in order to bring one's endeavors to fruition.

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Ella Leroy's prior failures, as Peter recounts in his preface, have included Ella's TV Colonizer, Ella's Cards for Forgotten Holidays and Ella's Peanut Butter on a Stick. But this time the fictional author will make things right. Kraft uses his prefaces to add another level to what Peter calls his "modified memoirs." While some have been put off by his prefaces' modernist musings, I've always been impressed by how deftly they invite the reader into the creative process.

Kraft has observed more than once that every book, no matter its subject, is actually about the author. But in the prefaces, where Peter usually explains what he (Peter) has altered in his history, and why, Kraft calls into question the idea of omnipotent authorship. "Must it be as it was when the way it was was wrong?" asks Peter before telling us that most of what he is about to recount didn't really happen. "No. Not while I'm around." The book may be about the author, but this author's one slippery character.

Thirteen-year-old Peter becomes his mother's sidekick in his improved version of her story. With the assistance of school slut Patty Fiorenza, he assists her in buying the clam boat in which she plans to serve brightly tinted clam-dip sandwiches and Champagne to sophisticated Babbingtonians as Peter navigates the craft over Bolotomy Bay. The boat leaks, however, and much clever metaphorical niffing devolves around the notions of inflation and deflation as Peter secretly pumps and bails in order to protect his mother from the truth concerning its condition.

"Hasn't every boy everywhere at some time wondered whether he might be the child of some man other than his declared father?" asks Peter, who thinks so. Other forms of inflation and pumping thus come into play when Peter begins researching his parentage with the help of Patty. Kraft is one joyously kinky writer at times - a side of his artistic personality that probably climaxed in "At Home With the Glynnns," which tells of Peter's early-adolescent sexual adventures with a pair of fun-loving twins. The kicks are more Oedipal in "Inflating a Dog," however, in which the friendship of Patty the slut and Ella "the nut" leads to a delightfully twisted scenario: Ashamed of his father, Peter imagines he might have been sired by next-door neighbor Dudley Beaker. He shares his suspicions with Patty, who agrees to explore his fantasy by playing the part of his mother in a role-playing game in which Peter takes the part of would-be-worldly Dudley seducing, or being seduced by, a younger version of Ella. Life in Babbington, as Peter recalls it, is funny, sweet and sexy - and he makes one wish real life were as wonderful.

The craft that eventually becomes Ella Lunch Launch, the imaginary successful successor to Ella's Elegant Excursions, is a love boat of many dimensions. Kraft captures the adolescent pride and vanity of a boy whose "actions often seem, from the outside, bold and confident, but he is standing on the brink of folly," especially as he attempts to displace his father as his mother's favored helpmeet. And in Peter's benign and somewhat magical world of pasts recaptured, symbolic fathers are always around to lend a hand when necessary.

"Inflating a Dog" ends darkly, however, with the death of Peter's mother. While the book's title and overriding metaphor come from "Don Quixote," Peter's immediate inspiration was a dead, bloated animal he came across on the beach. Life goes on, however, and Kraft, as one writer has noted, is a virtual Fred Astaire among novelists. Digressions on clamming, the constitution of the soul and Bernoullian physics are tossed off with such verve and humor that the reader feels flattered and privileged to be invited to join Kraft's remarkable, ongoing dance of time and memory.

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