

Back to Babbington

The continuing adventures of Peter Leroy, the Long Island boy of Eric Kraft's imagination.

INFLATING A DOG

The Story of Ella's Lunch Launch.

By Eric Kraft.

Illustrated. 242 pp. New York: Picador USA. \$25.

By Jennifer Reese

STARTING in the mid-1970's, Eric Kraft began publishing (initially self-publishing) a series of eccentric novels and stories about a winsome Long Island boy named Peter Leroy. Every few years since, he has provided another installment to this sprawling collection. Because the books aren't written in chronological order, they don't trace Peter's life so much as add more layers to it, moving freely back and forth from Peter's middle years to his childhood in the fictional town of Babbington, on Bolotomy Bay. They include photographs, diagrams, fragments of plays and other ephemera, forming an unpredictable, gentle and often charming literary collage.

"Inflating a Dog," the latest Peter Leroy volume, is a novel about physical and spiritual buoyancy. It's about keeping boats afloat and hopes aloft, and how, in one summer of Peter's adolescence, he manages to do both. It isn't Kraft's best work, but it has some lovely moments.

At 56, Peter is looking back at a period in his early teens when his mother, Ella, was losing faith in herself and life's possibilities. In an attempt to become something more than a bland housewife, Ella had started various crackpot businesses, from candy making to "high-heel-low-heel convertible shoes." None succeeded. "Most of the time," Peter observes, "there was a deadness in my mother's eyes, the blankness that comes with the expectation that nothing will make today different from yesterday or tomorrow different from today."

In 2002, we would label Ella "depressed," but in the wonderful invented idiom of the book she is "deflated." In the town of Babbington in the 1950's, Peter reports, teenagers had devised a very precise vocabulary to describe the phenomenon of enthusiasm and all its nuances. They had start-

ed with the phrase "blown up" — or, more elegantly, "inflated" — to capture the feeling of being filled with amazement, delight and inspiration, and had come up with ever more exact locutions: "When we suspected people of faking or exaggerating a response, we said that they were *pumping themselves up*. People who tried too hard, particularly those who wanted to make very sure that everyone saw how blown up they could get in the inflationary presence of art or nature, we called *blimps* or *gas bags*."

Over the course of the summer, Peter has two projects: to inflate his mother and to seduce Patti Fiorenza, a schoolmate of cartoonishly exaggerated sexual allure. The plot revolves around Ella's purchase of a leaky clam boat (clams are a recurring Kraft motif, his madeleines) and her plan to offer catered cruises. Peter believes it is essential that Ella never discover the seriousness of the boat's leak. "Hope," he explains, "is like a warm breeze that lifts and lofts and carries us on when we hardly have the will to carry on otherwise." Every night he sneaks away and pumps out the boat, so that his mother can proceed in ignorant bliss and, with luck, regain her zest for life. (The book's title comes from a mystifying episode in "Don Quixote" in which a madman inflates a dog, a difficult feat that is presented as the equivalent of keeping Ella's dream intact.)

NO one who has ever taken a creative writing course can have escaped the admonition to show, not tell. Well, so much for that old saw. Kraft does both, but his showing is far less effective than his telling. When he sets his characters in action, the book wobbles. The plot is undeniably original, but also far-fetched and haphazard; it's not particularly funny, just kooky. Kraft is unfailingly and refreshingly generous with his characters, but, perhaps because many have figured in earlier novels, they aren't richly developed here.

On the other hand, when he sits back and starts telling us, for example, about the invented language of 1950's Babbingtonians, we're hooked. Kraft's erudite asides and abstract musings are what make "Inflating a Dog" fascinating and sophisticated reading. □

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