

Weird novel is a potpourri of odd delights

By **KATE BERNHEIMER**
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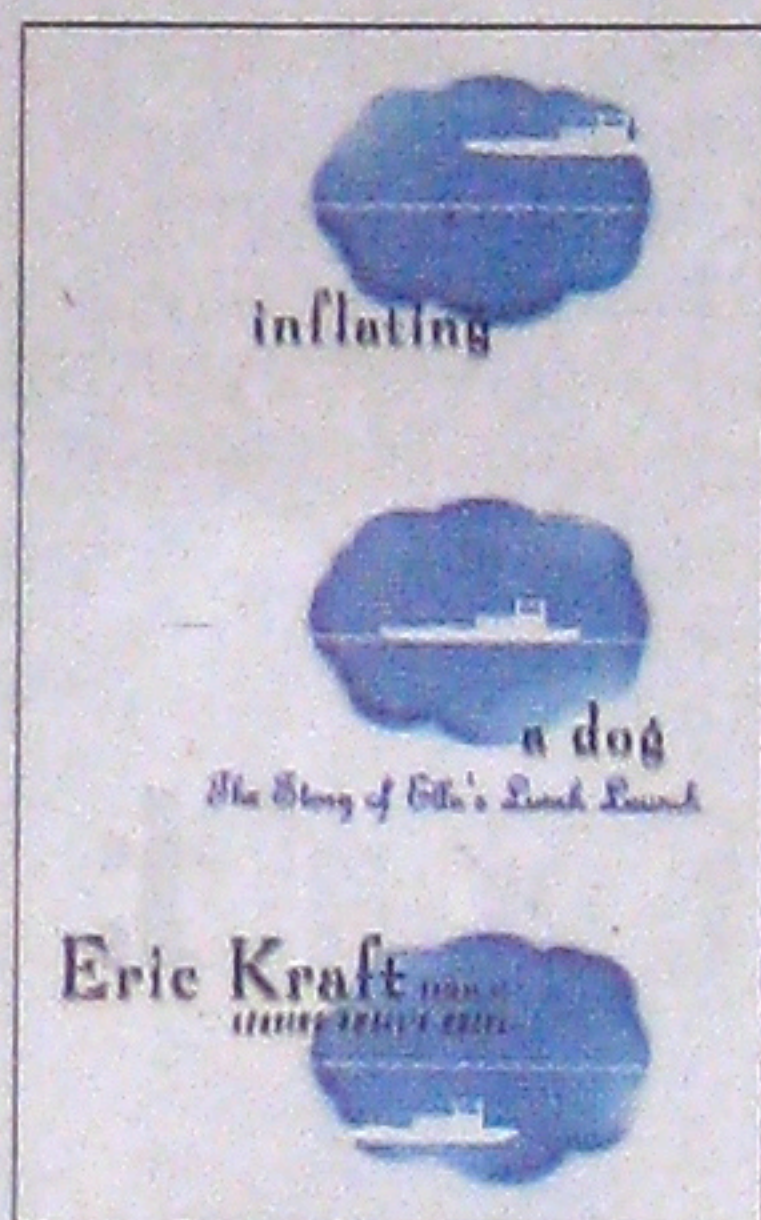
"Inflating a Dog" is the newest installment of Eric Kraft's fictional memoirs, known collectively as "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy." Or, according to the author's entertaining, eponymous Web site, "The Complete Peter Leroy (So Far)."

This series is smart, funny, warmly inviting and delightfully impossible to define. Like the preceding seven volumes, "Inflating a Dog" has a charming plot that works as an overlay for sophisticated meditations on language and storytelling.

What makes Kraft's work so good is that it is completely original. That is, his work is truly impossible to define. It is not exactly satire, though the book begins with the ditty of a line "Bastardy has been good to me." And it's not serious, exactly, though Chapter 11 begins, "The English language is a distributive language, one that conveys meaning partly through the meaning of discrete words within a sentence. ..." And for some reason, the novel isn't particularly cool, even though it's ironic and uses a montage of devices, gestures so popular today. Or maybe it is cool, and I'm not, because I don't know it is. Honestly, I can't tell. The book — the entire series, which I read to prepare for this brief review — has me totally confused, in a good way.

"Inflating a Dog," set in the fictional town of Babbington, mainly regards Peter Leroy's memories of his mother's sad sack attempts at earning money. Briefly summarized, former attempts — inventing Peanut Butter on a Stick and Ella's Cards for Forgotten Holidays — have failed. She has now bought a leaking clam boat she'll use for tours. Peter secretly patches its leaks in the middle of the night. It sounds simple enough, yet the novel is wickedly funny and philosophical and weirdly timeless. The title itself refers to a scene from "Don Quixote," in which an insane man blows up a dog with a straw. This provides the novel's overarching metaphor.

"There were already among us," its 59-year-old narrator reminisces of his adolescence, "a few adepts who managed to achieve a kind of transcendental state of inflation." And from an early age, he tells us, the fictional narrator become, in the presence of beauty, hopelessly "fully inflated." Kraft's writing has the same effect, and as mysteriously.



FICTION review

INFLATING A DOG Eric Kraft

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