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Book Review

When childhood memories and the imagination collide

By [Michael Upchurch](#)
Seattle Times book critic

Two-thousand-two-hundred pages ... and counting.

That, by my estimate, is where Eric Kraft's shape-shifting, seriocomic, multi-volume "Peter Leroy" saga now stands. And with Kraft in such fine form in "Inflating a Dog," the latest installment, one can't help wishing Peter's story could continue forever.

Babbington, Long Island ("Clam Capital of America") is the center of Peter's universe. And a singularly sunny vision of 1950s America provides the backdrop to most of his boyhood adventures.

In Kraft's hands, however, the eight Peter Leroy books add up to anything but a routine coming-of-age tale. They're packed with highbrow literary allusions, surreal advertising parodies, zanily precise technical illustrations (for school experiments and offbeat home projects), and a generous dose of low comedy. They're also subject to sudden shifts in perspective, including prefaces by an older Peter alerting you to what really happened ... which can differ considerably from the story that follows.

What obsesses Kraft is the juncture where memory and imagination collide with one another, thus imbuing mere "facts" with delightfully far-fetched meanings. Lately in Kraft's work an element of midlife regret has come into play, as well.

In "Inflating the Dog," that regret stems from Peter's sense that his now-dead mother, Ella, never got to do what she wanted with her life: start a little business, enjoy a little success and be something other than an ordinary housewife.

"Must it be as it was when the way it was was wrong?" the 56-year-old Peter asks himself. "No. Not while I'm around."

And so he invents a long-ago dream-come-true for Ella: a "quixotic undertaking" in which he assigns his 13-year-old self a pivotal role as her ever-fretting sidekick. That undertaking — coming on the heels of "Ella's Cards for Forgotten Holidays" and other doomed enterprises — is a floating catering business, run in elegant style ... aboard a clam boat.

Two problems: The clam boat has a worrisome leak, and Babbington just isn't ready for the kind of elegance Ella is offering.

Some readers may already have guessed that "Inflating a Dog" is Kraft's riff on Cervantes' "Don Quixote," with Ella in the role of fragile delusionary and Peter as a beleaguered Sancho Panza. The book's title comes from a Cervantes passage about a rather unusual street performer. Throughout the novel, the phrase "inflating a dog" serves as a highly malleable figure of speech, covering almost any kind of effort to find fame, recognition or success in this world.

The book comes packed with innumerable subplots and side excursions. Chief among them: Peter's speculation that family friend Dudley Beaker might have been his real father, which leads to some titillating role-playing and sexual experimentation between Peter and 14-year-old Patti Fiorenza (a Lolita-like head-turner). Digressions on doo-wop music, the slang usages of "blow," and the "Morphology and Aesthetics of Clam Boats" are part of the fun too.

Beneath all the foolery is a loving, tender homage to Peter's (and Kraft's) mother. This may not be the entrepreneurial adventure she had, but it undoubtedly is one she would have relished. And "Inflating a Dog" is just as much about "vanity and pride and folly and the way they get a boy — particularly an adolescent boy — into trouble." Kraft is being a little hard on his alter ego here. After all, Peter's claims to clam-boat expertise are entirely inspired by his eagerness to be a good Cervantian sidekick to his mother.

If you're new to Kraft, "Little Follies" — his 1992 book collecting the first nine Peter Leroy adventures — remains the best starting place. But for longtime fans, "Inflating a Dog" serves up some rueful-riotous pleasures as only Kraft can deliver them.

Michael Upchurch: mupchurch@seattletimes.com

"Inflating a Dog"

by Eric Kraft
 Picador USA, \$25

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