

REVIEWS IN BRIEF

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Inflating a Dog

By Eric Kraft

PICADOR USA; 242 PAGES; \$25

Having trouble getting through Proust? Forget it. Read Eric Kraft instead. With the possible exception of William T. Vollmann's "Seven Dreams" cycle, the eight volumes of Kraft's fictional memoirs, known as "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy," constitute perhaps the most ambitious and rewarding literary enterprise of our time.

In the latest installment, "Inflating a Dog," Kraft's 59-year-old alter ego looks back upon his mother's desire to make a name for herself as an entrepreneur. The failures of every previous attempt to make a buck don't deter her from buying a used clam boat and offering luxury cruises on the bay. Unfortunately, the dinghy isn't the most sea-worthy of vessels and, unbeknown to his mother, Peter must sneak out every night to bail out the bilge water and prevent it from sinking. To make matters worse, his mother's business partner happens to be the school hottie on whom he has a crush.

Through it all, the adult Peter sometimes addresses the reader directly in order to comment on the events he's describing, the faults in his own memories of things past, and the nature of story telling itself. The title derives from an episode in "Don Quixote" in which a madman uses a hollow reed to blow up a stray dog like a balloon. That image becomes a kind of theme from which Kraft (or is it Peter?) draws a series of variations until the novel resembles an extended meditation on the word "blow" and its many connotations.

"At some point toward the end of my adolescence," he explains, "I became embarrassed by my affection for beauty and by my tendency to become so quickly and fully inflated in the presence of it. I felt that I was in danger of becoming an aesthete, one of those people who is inflated by own marvelous susceptibility to inflation, one, ultimately, who inflates himself, a blowfish. "

Though thoroughly engaging, the story sometimes takes a backseat to brilliant word play and anecdotal philosophical dalliances. "Inflating a Dog" comes across as a deceptively easy read in which an expert comic timing belies an enormously important literary project in motion. The clever mingling of fiction and memoir evokes Proust at every turn but does so using a vernacular attuned to contemporary audiences. Even when you find yourself laughing aloud, it would be a mistake to take Eric Kraft lightly.

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