

BOOK WORLD

A Wag's Tale

INFLATING A DOG The Story of Ella's Lunch Launch

By Eric Kraft
Picador. 242 pp. \$25

By RICHARD GRANT,
whose novels include *"In the
Land of Winter"* and *"Tex and
Molly in the Afterlife"*

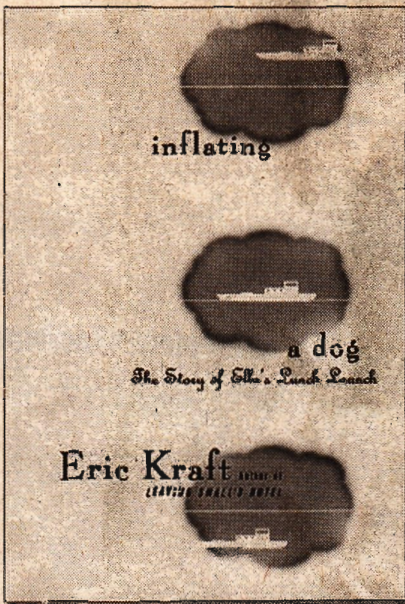
Among writers of genre fiction—science fiction, horror and the like—the term “literary” is often used pejoratively. To call someone a literary writer is to imply that the poor sod is, shall we say, overbred. His plots are thin. His paragraphs ramble. His characters have hang-ups and unconventional relationships, and they sometimes, for no good reason, speak in French. He is highly self-conscious and may fall into the postmodern habit of winking at the audience, as if to say, “Yes, I am writing this book, and you are reading it; why kid ourselves?”

The literary novelist (so goes the rap in the genre fraternity, to which I belonged for many years) is, above all, self-indulgent. He writes to please no one but himself. He abandons his story line, such as it is, to digress at chapter length about nothing much. He delights in parlor tricks such as switching fonts, satirizing other writers and puffing up the page-count with pictures and other “extratextual” gimmickry. In the end, his books are not about anything, really, but themselves; about a book being a book being written by a writer; or, as aptly put in a John Barth title, “About Aboutness.”

These charges having been made, my advice to novelist Eric Kraft is to plead *nolo contendere*. Kraft's eighth and newest novel, “Inflating a Dog,” gleefully commits every crime on the rap sheet and then some. The result is a sprightly, sly, sophisticated entertainment, light enough to digest in a long summer evening. Assuredly, it is not everyone's cup of tea-with-madeleine. But it's good fun for grown-ups, especially fans of Kraft's earlier books, which include “Leaving Small's Hotel” and “At Home With the Glynnns.”

“Inflating a Dog” takes up again the saga of Peter Leroy, whose coming-of-age during the 1950s and '60s in the fictional town of Babbington, Long Island, is the chief topic of Kraft's fiction (along with, of course, “aboutness”).

Peter's life is anything but linear, and this installment carries us back to his 14th summer. Our protagonist, an only child, has begun to question his paternity—“How on earth could I be



the son of that fool?”—and to take a lively interest in members of the female sex, two in particular. The year is 1958. Peter, as first-person narrator, sets the stage:

“There was at that time a vogue for combining everything one might want in a particular area of interest or endeavor into ‘one handy package.’ . . . In cynics, Diogenes would have been everything one could have wanted in one handy package. In sexpots, it would have been Patti Fiorenza.”

Sexpot, which ambushes you, is quintessential Kraft, showing his regard for the word-as-object, a thing to be revealed at just the

right moment, then left for the reader to examine. Here it evokes both a time and a thought-world, an attitude toward women. So does this stark epitaph for Peter's mother: “She died in the night, as Ella Piper Leroy, housewife.” It's a cool trick, such close attention to plain (yet not simple) words—though perhaps giving a whole chapter to the word “blow” is pushing things too far.

Mother and girlfriend, matron and nymph: These polar feminine types bracket Peter's life during the summer of our story. Two questions obsess him: Can he rescue his mom from failure in her zany quest to escape the bondage of housework? And can he (please, please, please) go all the way with Patti Fiorenza?

This being the book it is, Kraft does not prolong the suspense. He answers question No. 1 in the preface, and before long we have a pretty good idea where he's headed with No. 2. But plot is not the point. Peter, in one of his frequent narrative digressions, describes his life-story-in-progress as “modified memoirs.” The real topic here is not the way things happened, but the way happenings migrate into memory, and thence into art.

A quote from Cervantes (given in Spanish and two different, “adapted” translations) opens the book, but the story's presiding spirit is that of Marcel Proust. Kraft has long displayed a fascination with Proust's deft memory games, his dream-inducing sentences, his experiments with time—to the point of allotting grown-up Peter a wife named Albertine. The Proustian influence runs as strongly as ever through “Inflating a Dog.”

Peter does finally spring a little surprise: not a plot twist, but a revelation akin to Lawrence Sterne's ending a long novel by declaring the whole thing “the story of a COCK and a BULL.” In Kraft's case, the statement is couched in terms of inflation—or, in plainer words, hot air.