



May 31, 1998

Clambake

Once again, Eric Kraft has gathered together the fictional inhabitants of Babbington, N.Y.

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- [First Chapter: 'Leaving Small's Hotel'](#)

By JAMES POLK

Eric KRAFT is a writer of episodes adding up to enigmas that revolve around the continuing "Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations" of one Peter Leroy. A passionate memoirist and alter ego, Leroy has recorded -- or created -- an eventful and detailed past in Babbington, on Long Island, "the clam capital of America."

Previously, readers watched Peter's grandfather and grandmother corner the market in exquisitely worked mobile pornographic miniatures, witnessed Peter's adolescent sexual trysts with the nubile Glynn twins and followed various other surreal histories he has concocted about the town of Babbington -- and about his friends, neighbors, family members and (most of all) himself. All through these funny, deftly structured adventures and asides, readers have tried to fathom Peter's peculiar relationship with his creator.

According to Kraft, the character first came to him during a reverie in the Lamont Library at Harvard in 1962. According to the character, the author first came to him during a simultaneous reverie on the Babbington town dock. "I had imagined," Leroy says (or Kraft says, speaking through Leroy), "a self who assumed that he had imagined me."

This sounds a little precious, and sometimes it reads that way, yet the result is a series of warm, engaging vignettes -- gentle speculations on the way the imagination works and memory distorts, and on the way we build and manipulate our personal mythologies. The wonder of these inventions is that they never seem ponderous or dense, despite the critical mass such author-character relationships usually precipitate. Here the implications are merely suggested and then left for readers to consider or pass over.

In this latest installment, "Leaving Small's Hotel," Peter has fallen on hard times. Along with his beloved and extremely long-suffering wife, Albertine, he has reached the end of the line, running a broken-down establishment on a modest island off Babbington. While he constructs (or reconstructs or deconstructs) his memoirs upstairs, she manages the place and keeps the books, which reveal a deep slide into debt.

They resolve to sell. But who will buy? The possibilities include cultists looking for a place to greet the millennium; entrepreneurs scouting sites for a water-sports theme park; militia members seeking a safe offshore training base; and a group of locals fed up with the modern world and wanting to create Olde Babbington, a place so rooted in the past that "you can't go right on a red light."

But this is only one of the novel's narratives within narratives. There are, in fact, so many, and they're all given such similar weight, that it's impossible to figure out which is the most important. Is it Peter's nightly reading of "Dead Air," a multipart distortion of his childhood -- with morsels like young Peter's marketing of a flying saucer/nuclear warhead detector (which soothes the tormented by never going off) and his construction of a cave, an activity that teaches "the art of self-deception"? And within this story is the tale of Mrs. Jerrold, from "just around the corner or across the street or down the block," who mixes memory and desire in a particularly combustible way. Is hers the central narrative?

Maybe we should concentrate on the mysterious Lou and his many friends. He comes for a reading and stays forever, solving problems while remaining a riddle. Or is it the cynical Baldy, the ventriloquist's dummy on the radio who seems to offer a running commentary on events at the hotel? As Lou points out, "It's the ventriloquist who controls the dummy, and not the other way around" -- but in "Leaving Small's Hotel" it's not always possible to tell which is which.

Everything in the novel is implication; nothing is certain. In the end, one story is all stories and all stories are one story, so no single narrative counts for more than any other. It's a tribute to the author -- whoever the author might be -- that this strange state of affairs winds up seeming just right.

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LEAVING SMALL'S HOTEL

By Eric Kraft.

Illustrated. 346 pp. New York:

Picador USA. \$23.

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