

IDEAS

A charming tale that never ends: the serial novel 'Peter Leroy'

By James Kaufmann

The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy: A Serial Novel, by Eric Kraft. Vol. 1, Nos. 1-4 and Vol. 2, Nos. 1-2. Cambridge, Mass.: Applewood Books, \$4.95 each or \$16 for one-year subscription.

"The house of fiction has many windows," said Henry James, and in one of those windows — a small, decorative, and slightly out-of-the-way window — we catch a glimpse of Eric Kraft, smiling puckishly.

Kraft is the creator of that now-rare thing: a serial novel, a novel in perpetual motion that he calls "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy."

The latest installment, "The Girl with the White Fur Muff," appeared in March.

Before that came these: "My Mother Takes a Tumble," "Do Clams Bite?," "Life on the Bolotomy," "The

Static of the Spheres," and "The Fox and the Clam." There are six volumes in all, each just shy of 100 pages.

Because there is nothing around quite like Kraft's "Peter Leroy," it is not easy to compare him with other fiction writers. Pressed, I'd say his fictional world of Babbington is like Lake Wobegone as conceived by a modern Marcel Proust, if such a combination is at all imaginable.

Each of the six Peter Leroy books begins with a preface by Peter Leroy. Frequently Kraft will then reproduce portions of the preface in the story, but with a different twist. A story will be told from several vantage points, through several characters, and Leroy jumps back and forth through time at will.

All this is done in an arch and quite self-conscious style, and it's clear that what Peter Leroy admits to in the preface to "Do Clams Bite?" applies to all the stories: "I was surprised and pleased to find that even in that very first telling I had altered the facts considerably."

The stories themselves are the stuff of family history.

There is the Huck Finn-like boat trip in "Life on the Bolotomy"; grandfather and grandson building a shortwave radio (following a model in the Impractical Craftsman and taking 828 hours to finish) in "The Static of the Spheres"; and the inevitable grade-school play described in "The Girl with the White Fur Muff."

And while the stories are delightful with their adult-informed looks into the past, they are, in many ways, stories about the making of stories, metafiction of a self-conscious but not pretentious kind. These books are also about the past: how we transform it, how we alter it to fit our wishes, dreams, and current situation.

It does not really matter, though, that you're never quite sure what's true and what's not in this serial novel. The pleasure taken is in Eric Kraft's telling and in his subtle expositions on the evolution of the sort of family narratives that inhabit our lives always.

James Kaufmann reviews books regularly for the Monitor.