

books today

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BOOK EDITOR

**MALCOLM
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The saga of Peter Leroy

Serial novel of a boy's life goes beyond kid stuff

Lately I have been trying to explain my fondness for Eric Kraft's serial novel *The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy* (Applewood Books), and every time I open my mouth I notice that my audience gets a slightly baffled look. A serial novel? Six installments issued over the last two years and no end in sight? A story about a little boy growing up on Long Island in the days before television?

I see all these questions forming in cartoon thought bubbles above the heads of my auditors. I sense that I am losing, not gaining, readers for Peter. Luckily I found a way around this dilemma when I began reading sections of the book aloud to anyone who would listen.

SO, HERE is a small section from Peter Leroy's sixth and latest adventure, *The Girl With the White Fur Muff*. For you to understand this scene, you ought to know that Peter, who has just skipped the third grade, has been named director of the fourth grade class play, *King Lear* (abridged and adapted for young performers; there is a happy ending where Lear and his daughters all get together for a nice dinner). No less than three of his female classmates want to play Cordelia, and one of them, Clarissa Bud, the girl with the white fur muff, has invited him over to dinner. Let's join them and listen in:

Clarissa's father asked me what I would like to drink. Everything seemed so urbane that I thought he was actually asking me what kind of cocktail I would like. "Oh, nothing for me, thank you," I said, not so much because I thought that I shouldn't drink a cocktail, but because I was trying to be polite, and I knew that one of the rules of polite behavior was that one should refuse everything the first time it was offered. He asked Clarissa what she would like. She looked as though she were considering a long list of drinks and then finally said, "I'll have a Shirley Temple."

"All right," said her father. "Sure you wouldn't like something, Peter?"

"You know," I said, knitting my brows, nodding my head, and thrusting my hands into my pockets, "I guess I could use a Shirley Temple."

Mr. Bud chuckled at this and I chuckled back, as if I had intended the remark to be funny, but I hadn't, and I felt like a fool. I tried mightily from then on to show Mr. and Mrs. Bud that I was quite grown-up for my age. I attempted some grown-up talk, drawing on what I heard from my parents. I tried several topics. The first was business.

"How's the byproduct business, Mr. Bud?" I asked, rocking on my heels and taking a swig of my Shirley Temple.

Mr. Bud raised an eyebrow, glanced at Mrs. Bud, and grinned. "Not bad, Peter," he said. "How's school?"

Next I tried local politics.

"Do you think there's a chance that the mayor will come to his senses some time soon?" I asked, as my father did when he was reading the paper.

Mr. Bud look startled. "What on earth do you mean?" he asked.

At dinner, I praised Mrs. Bud's cooking. "Yessir," I concluded, quoting from a Western I'd seen, "that's the best meal I've had in weeks." This seemed to be pretty well received, so I pushed on, figuring to make the most of the one topic that seemed to be a success. There wasn't anything else that I could take from the Western, so I borrowed my mother's highest praise for someone else's cooking. "You must give me the recipe for those mashed potatoes," I said. This brought down the house, and Mr. Bud said, "You're a regular comedian, Peter."

So I attempted to tell a joke. I began while Mrs. Bud and Clarissa were clearing away the dinner plates and serving dessert. As soon as I had introduced the main characters, three rabbits called Phhht, Phhht-Phhht, and Phhht-Phhht-Phhht, just at the moment when I had succeeded in capturing everyone's attention, I realized that I had forgotten the punch line. While we ate our dessert, I stretched the joke out with details of the home life of these rabbits, their forebears, the rabbit village where

THE PERSONAL HISTORY, ADVENTURES, EXPERIENCES & OBSERVATIONS OF

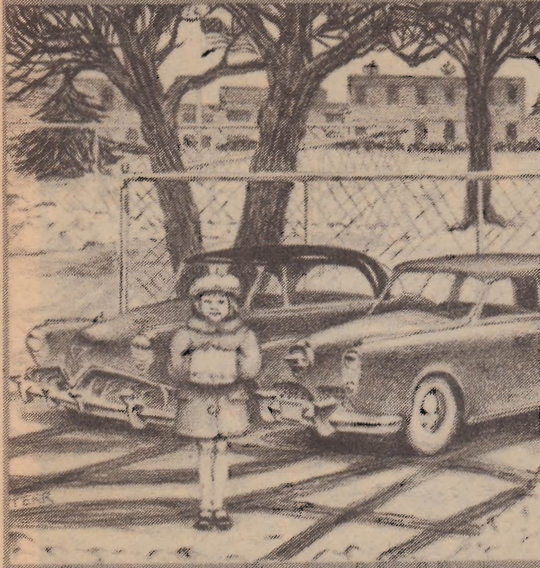
PETER LEROY

A Serial Novel

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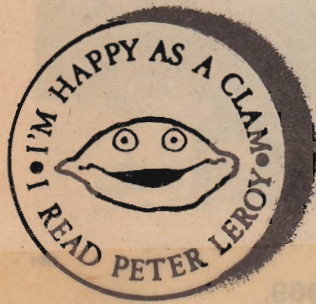
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The Girl with the White Fur Muff



I raised the camera to my eye and found her in the viewfinder.

by Eric Kraft



The cover of the sixth and latest *Peter Leroy* book, above. At left is a pin touting the benefits of reading Eric Kraft's serial novel.

they lived, their hobbies and favorite meals, and the mysterious illness that led to the death of the youngest of them, Phhht, and then struck the middle one, Phhht-Phhht, while my mind raced ahead to try to recover the end of the story.

Mr. Bud finally said, "Peter, maybe you and Clarissa would like to be excused."

"Sure," I said, "I'll finish the joke for you later."

That passage bears several Kraft trademarks. Its humor is most obvious, and wit and humor pervade all the adventures of Peter Leroy. Also evident is Kraft's apt portrayal of that sense of bafflement that children feel upon being thrust into the adult world. He conveys a child's confusion and fear with a sure but never heavy hand. In Kraft's world, we are submerged in a world where chance remarks, sex, storybook characters, jokes and the misty reveries of children all carry equal weight.

Kraft has Peter Leroy narrate the whole sequence of books as an adult, and he makes his purpose clear in the preface to *The Fox and the Clam*, the penultimate installment in our story thus far, when Peter says, "I have now a fond affection for the idea that all the characters in books live in the same place, the Big-Book place, and I've painted in so much of it over the years that I have a picture of a well-populated town, where, with Albertine on my arm, I sometimes walk along a shady street on a summer morning and pause to watch the talking squirrels gather nuts in Emma Bovary's front yard while Tom Sawyer paints her fence."

IN OTHER WORDS, imagination, which is the most direct link between childhood and adulthood, begins as chaos and ends, if we are as lucky and talented as Eric Kraft, in the order of art. The astonishing thing, though, is that imagination is not diminished in this process. If anything, it becomes more powerful. Just how it does this is anyone's guess, but the process is certainly paradoxical. For example, the dutiful novelist Kraft is obliged to itemize the specifics of Peter's childhood, and so far his readers have a full picture of the life in Babbington, N.Y., a clamming town ("Clams — the chewy snack in the sturdy pack!") on the banks of Bolotomy Bay. Oddly though, as the specifics accumulate, the more they combine to form a general invitation to the reader to dive back into the reaches of his or her own childhood, where fear and delight and wonder were kissing kin. It is a sometimes spooky place, a place we would just as soon leave behind in many cases, but Kraft is so gentle and entertaining that we forget those fears with him as our guide.

So much for esthetics and literary criticism. I have to throw that stuff in so they won't revoke my literary license. The thing to make clear is that *Peter Leroy* is funny, lighthearted and sexy, too, oddly enough. Each installment runs about 95 pages long, so you can rip through one of these paperback babies and pat yourself on the back for knocking off a novel in an afternoon at the beach.

I have nothing but praise for Kraft and Peter Leroy in his various incarnations. I can't remember a *saga* I've enjoyed as much, and I can't wait for the next installment. I likewise have a lot of admiration for Apple-wood Books, his publishers, who have had the good sense to commit themselves so handsomely to this continuing adventure.

If you like, you can subscribe to the series at the rate of \$16 a year or \$30 for two years. The six titles in print are available for \$4.95 each. Write Apple-wood Books, Box 2870, Cambridge Mass. 02139. Coming soon: *Take the Long Way Home*, in which Peter wins one contest and loses another . . .