

Remembrance of Bivalves Past



DAVID WERNER/APPLE-WOOD BOOKS

By Walter Kendrick

THE PERSONAL HISTORY, ADVENTURES, EXPERIENCES & OBSERVATIONS OF PETER LEROY: A Serial Novel

By Eric Kraft

Volume 1, #1: *My Mother Takes a Tumble*; #2: *Do Clams Bite?*; #3: *Life on the Bolotomy*; #4: *The Static of the Spheres*. Volume 2, #1: *The Fox and the Clam*.

Apple-wood, \$4.95 each, paper

In January 1841, as a long-awaited ship neared its dock in the port of New York, an oddly silent crowd jammed the piers, with a single urgent question on its collective mind. The ship had hardly come within earshot when the question rang out from a thousand throats: "Is Little Nell dead?" Hearing the mournful answer, the crowd broke into tears—as if, somehow, everyone had lost the same dear friend.

What they'd all lost, of course, was a fictional character, the heroine of Dickens's *Old Curiosity Shop*, the last installment of which formed the cargo of that ill-fated ship. Fifty years later, Oscar Wilde tossed off the remark that no red-blooded Englishman could read the death of Little Nell without laughing; such unabashed sentimentality had already come to seem silly. Nevertheless, that weepy crowd was reveling in an experience we more sophisticated souls have never known. Every month for over a year, a new installment of Little Nell's tribulations had arrived and been quickly devoured; cliff-hanging, her readers looked forward to the next, and the next. Her story had grown so closely interwoven with their lives that, even if she didn't expire, the end would be cause for weeping.

I cried when I finished *Remembrance of Things Past*, the last of the great serial

novels. Being French and something of a lunatic, Proust neither curried his readers' favor, as Dickens did, nor bothered to outlive his characters; but his seven magnificent volumes, published between 1913 and 1927 (the last three posthumously) must have worked on their original audience much as Dickens's trashier tales had on the Victorians. I spent only a few months, not 14 years, reading about Marcel, Albertine, and the rest; they're an unsavory lot, too. Yet to read the last of them was a bitter wrench, and for a moment I glimpsed what it was like to lose Little Nell.

We still have serials of a sort—*Dallas* and its imitators, for example. The perennial appeal of *I Love Lucy* and *Mary Tyler Moore* has the same power, and the whole country stayed glued to its TV sets for the final episode of *M*A*S*H*. But it's been a long time since the atavistic urge to know what happens next, to characters we've learned to love, has cut much ice in respectable fiction. Like most strikingly new works, *Peter Leroy* is a throwback, resurrecting forgotten feelings and making them fresh.

The format is almost as charming as the novel itself. For more than a year now, Apple-wood has been issuing, every three months or so, a new installment of Peter's experiences, in tidy little paperbacks of about 90 pages each. At the completion of Volume One, an omnibus hardcover was published at \$19.95. You can subscribe to *Peter*—\$16 for one year, \$30, for two—from Apple-wood Books, Box 2870, Cambridge, MA 02139. And, if you hurry, you'll also receive a cutesy little button proclaiming to the world, "I'm Happy As a Clam. I Read Peter Leroy." This could turn into a cult.

A fishy cult, since *Peter Leroy* is deeply concerned with the fruits of the sea, especially clams. The little town of Babbington, Long Island, where Peter spends a '50s childhood, bills itself as the Clam Capital of the Western World; every Babbingtonian owns a clamboat, there's a yearly Clam Fest complete with Queen, and clam by-products are everywhere, from chowder to driveways. Clams have a mythic dimension, too. In *Do Clams Bite?*, timid Peter is compelled to resolve a form of castration anxiety called pelecypodophobia (a lovely word, invented for the occasion; it means "fear of bivalve molluscs"). In *The Fox and the Clam*, the relative merits of vulpine and pelecypod lifestyles are measured to telling effect, and six-year-old Peter is left to draw what moral he can.

Peter grows up to be Eric Kraft, as we know because each installment contains a preface equipped with Kraft's name and a date, from April 1982 to July 1983, describing how that episode came to be written and how it diverges from supposed fact. These prefaces are my least favorite feature of *Peter Leroy*, though they're probably the most fun to write; they simply rehearse (gracefully enough) the worn-out Modernist repertoire of the distortions of memory, the distortions of fiction-making, the hall-of-mirrors interplay between imagination and truth. This stuff is all too familiar now; and Peter/Eric's wife is named Albertine, an overly coy allusion that hardly flatters the lady. In the more recent installments, the

prefaces are longer and more complex. I hope this isn't a trend.

Too much explicit attention to memory-work would spoil *Peter Leroy* for me, because what the book does best is portray that work, not comment on it. The most touching instance so far comes at the end of *The Static of the Spheres*, when Guppa, Peter's maternal grandfather, after 828 hours of labor ("discounting the time that he had spent pumping the cellar out and drying its contents"), finishes the radio he's been building for Peter, following instructions in *Impractical Craftsman* magazine. Of course it doesn't function; as Mr. Beaker the neighbor heartlessly points out, the coils are wound all wrong. Instead of Balbec, London, Macondo, Moscow, Paris, or Tokyo, when Peter puts on the earphones he receives "a sound like wind through willow trees, the rustle of the hanging branches of a weeping willow, the sweep of the branches along the ground. Winding through this was a deep and indecipherable murmur, like the voices of my parents and Gumma and Guppa when I had heard them talking together at night, years before, when I lay in my crib." "It's just right, Guppa!" cries Peter, growing up with a great leap.

To be told, immediately after this, that Guppa died of a heart attack when Peter was 25, and Gumma of cancer when he was 28, almost made me cry. Almost—tears don't come readily to us post-moderns; unlike Dickens's wild waifs, we require toughness in our sentiment, we're so skeptical and worldly-wise. When it tries for tears, though, *Peter Leroy* is exactly right. Grown-up Peter, who has held on to Guppa's failed radio, goes to the cellar in the middle of the night and puts the earphones on: "I know that, in a sense, the radio doesn't work, but I know too that in the night, sitting there alone in the cellar, dark except for the glow of the tubes, I can sometimes pick up, through the static, the flutter of Guppa's note cards, the whisper of Gumma's slide rule, the crackle of the living room fire..." That's tough sentimentality, Little Nell updated.

Peter Leroy is only occasionally sentimental. Its favorite tone is one of affectionate satire, inspired by the antics of the adults who surround little Peter and teach him how to live. Like Tristram in *Tristram Shandy*, another of *Peter Leroy's* serial precursors, Peter is too young (so far) to have much life of his own; the bulk of these early installments is devoted to the observations that will mold him. If he turns out like his elders, he'll be obsessive, or what Sterne would have called "hobbyhysical"—riding one private craze after another into the ground, blithely indifferent to reason or raised eyebrows. All the adults in *Peter Leroy* ride hobbyhorses, from Guppa's impractical radio and great-grandmother's gallery of carved coconuts to Mr. Beaker's epistolary flirtation with John Simpson.

That's a story in itself; it occupies most of *My Mother Takes a Tumble*. Enterprising Mr. Beaker devises a swindle for picking up a little extra money; he places an ad, signed "Mary Strong," in the paper of a nearby town: "Lovely young woman in unfortunate circumstances wishes to correspond with lonely man." "John Simpson" replies sym-

pathetically, and "Mary" bilks him with what looks like great success ("Ever since I was a little girl I have had a tradition of spending my whole birthday in my birthday suit, and I wish I could do it this year and write you a long letter all about it, but I guess I won't be able to keep this tradition alive after they shut the heat off because of the overdue bills, which come to around twenty-one dollars . . ."), until "Jack" begins harping on a certain Eliza Foote, making "Mary" wildly jealous. It turns out that "Jack" is Eliza Foote; the two frauds meet, fall in love, and go into business together. Only in Babbington!

All this happens while Peter is still in diapers, but like *Tristram Shandy* before him, he reports it accurately even so. As anecdotes and stories accumulate around observant Peter, they build a little world—a crazy place, full of absurdity and clamshells, but warm and loving, too, a fine world to be a child in. There's that matter of growing up, though. We know from the latest preface that grown-up Peter lives on Small's Island in Bolotomy Bay just off Babbington, where he and Al inhabit an abandoned hotel; they still hang out at Corinne's Fabulous Fruits of the Sea with Peter's childhood friend Raskol (short for Raskolnikov, but that's another story). All's well with Peter, but I dislike those prefaces and other scenes of the future (present) that Peter (Eric) throws in now and then. There's an air of mortality about them; every time I read one, I feel a Little Nell fit coming on.

As far as I'm concerned, Peter should remain a child. I tremble at the title of the next installment, *The Girl with the White Fur Muff*, due in a couple of months, because it suggests the onset of puberty, and I'm not ready for Peter to face that trial yet. Theoretically, though, there's no reason why Peter should ever grow up. Fidelity to the real world, or some other tangential motive, will probably compel Kraft to put him through those paces eventually, but nothing in the structure of *Peter Leroy* demands it. For Dickens and even for Proust, a story had a beginning, middle, and end, no matter how long it might take you to get through them; the world lurks in every tea-soaked madeleine, but if it's to get told, that world must be lined up, put in order, made to conform to the contours of time. *Peter Leroy*, like *Tristram Shandy*, doesn't believe that. Just when it seems to be turning chronological, it loops back, filling in an anecdote, a whole string of them, spreading time out and slowing it down. If it weren't for pesky reality, which insists on aging us and our fictions, Peter could stay a child forever.

Or as long, at least, as his novel goes on. In a remarkable gesture of hubris, the publishers have announced that installments of *Peter Leroy* will be coming out, every three months, "forever." I hope that the gods aren't watching. Still, though presumably not immortal, Kraft is only 40, so we may have a good long time ahead of us before Peter joins *Tristram* and Little Nell. I hope we do; in this bothersome world, it's a pleasure to think that memory is bottomless, and that someone possesses the leisurely generosity to spend his life plumbing it for us. ■