

'Peter Leroy'

Certain of the emotions of childhood, one imagines, can never really be recaptured. Yes, one can reawaken long dormant feelings by munching fig newtons with a glass of milk (preferable to dunking a madeleine in tea any day of the week). One can even recover the sickly feeling of being a "new boy in class" simply by going alone to a cocktail party.

But until very recently, it seemed certain infantile sensations were beyond recovery. I had in mind specifically the simultaneous sense of achievement and the trembling joy of anticipation one felt as one graduated from one Ginn Basic Reader to the next. To know as one received a new volume in some primary color (in the late Forties when these works were being revised and my school was buying new copies there was even the possibility of receiving one with the binding unbroken) that one held in one's hands a fresh epoch in the lives of Dick, Jane, Puff and Spot.

To recapture such moments completely is, of course, impossible. But one can come very close in a series of books published by Apple-wood Books, Cambridge, Mass. It is a serial novel entitled "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy." The four numbers com-

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prising volume one have been issued over the last two years. Each runs about 100 pages, costs \$4.95, and describes the mental, emotional and physical development of a young boy growing up in New England a few decades ago. Even the large print recalls the Ginn style.

In these books novelist Eric Kraft evokes a number of lost worlds — the social, literary, even technological feeling of another America. In Vol. 1, number 4, for example, "The Statis of the Spheres," he conveys quite remarkably the aura of an America poised between two kinds of toasters, one in which bread traveled on tracks past a heating device, a technique without mystery, and, of course, the pop-up variety. Like Marshall MacLuhan he asks, "What effect, we might ask ourselves, does the pop-up toaster have on the intellectual development of the child who sits beside it, morning after morning, waiting with his plate and peanut butter?" Kraft surmises, "When they grow up these children are immediately attracted to the quantum theory, digital watches and electronic calculators."

These books are filled with such observations on American culture. At the same time they carry with them a profound sense of literary lineage — one detects echoes of such works as "Walden," "Huckleberry Finn" and, of course, "Moby Dick," Kraft's obsession with clams being as relentless as Melville's with whales. Is it necessary to know these works well in order to appreciate "Peter Leroy"? No, because if one knows "Peter Leroy" well one knows all these books too.

There also seems to be a certain French influence on Kraft, evident in frequent references to a woman named Albertine and in long sentences that start in physical description and end off in space: "The longer I spent with her there, the thicker the atmosphere became, as if the room were filling with one of the undulating gelatin desserts my mother was fond of making, and I could relax, stretch out, float and drift ..."

Vol. 2 has just begun with "The Fox and the Clams," an adroit study of narrative techniques and an examination of kinds of mental cruelty of which only children are capable.

By issuing these books four times a year Kraft and his publishers have created a feeling of suspense quite unparalleled in contemporary book publishing. Few books fulfill the reader's anticipation so completely. Even Ginn pales by comparison.

—HOWARD KISSEL