

Life Stories

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BY JOHN STRAUSBAUGH

(BALTIMORE)

Kentucky Ham

By William S. Burroughs, Jr.

Overlook, 197 pages, \$15.95

Take The Long Way Home

By Eric Kraft

Applewood, 96 pages, \$4.95

Take *The Long Way Home* is the seventh installment in what some of us hope will be a very long-running serial novel: *The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy*. It began in 1982 with *My Mother Takes A Tumble*. Every three or four

months since then Eric Kraft has come out with another installment. They're usually around 100 pages, each a novella or extended vignette recounting a single episode of Peter Leroy's childhood.

One reviewer has aptly and succinctly summed up *Peter Leroy* as "Lake Wobegone as conceived by a modern day Marcel Proust." References to Jean Shepherd, Mark Twain, Nabokov, Laurence Stern, Sherwood Anderson, Dickens' serialized novels, *Soap* and the German *Bildungsroman* also fit.

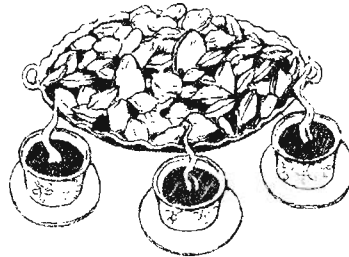
Kraft has constructed a complete comic universe, an American Macondo. He calls it Babbington, a seaside community on "Bolotomy Bay," somewhere in Long Island. In giving it a history and a cast of marvelously detailed characters, Kraft draws heavily on his own childhood in the Long Island town of Babylon.

Like *The Prairie Home Companion*, *Peter Leroy* makes goodnatured satire of our common quasi-nostalgia for pre-enlightened age we all think we remember though it never really existed. *Leroy* is a modern Tristram Shandy growing up in a satiric Our Town; his experiences are all the more funny and touching because they strike universal chords of recognition.

In book #2, *Do Clams Bite?*, six-year-old Peter gets a lesson in Oedipal complexes and Why Girls Don't Have Penises. In *The Static of the Spheres*,

Clams--

the cheery snack in the sturdy pack!



Your family's counting on you, mom! They're counting on you for some thing, some one good, at suppertime, something that will make up for the dreariness of the workaday world of work and the failures of the school-day world of school. Before you start fixing that chicken, better stop a moment and think -- in the soiree *old* thing going to warm the cockles of their hearts. Or will you see your mother all around the table, weeping that chicken again, huh? Bring a little *quahone* into their miserable lives-- serve Babbington clams in powder, steamed, baked, fried, or just as they are in their own handy shells.

The Babbington Clam Council

First Recipe Book: Yours for the asking. Write Babbington Clam Council, Bab Babbington, New York.

The Babbington Clam Council is introduced in the first book of the Peter Leroy series.

book #4, he and his grandfather spend an entire year in the workshop building a shortwave radio both have lost interest in by the third day. In book #6, *The Girl with the White Fur Muff*, sixth-grade Peter is invited to a girl's house for dinner. He tries to impress her parents with lines like "I guess I could use a Shirley Temple," and "You must give me the recipe for those mashed

potatoes."

By *Take The Long Way Home* Peter has reached the seventh grade. He faces one of those crucial dilemmas of young manhood—whether to take a girl to the roller rink or spend the money on a gas-powered model airplane. Like the Beaver, he resolves the conflict by a stratagem so complex and dumb it works.

Gentle irony, deadpan understatement and a wistful but self-mocking sentimentality are the hallmarks of Kraft's humor. The people and institutions of Babbington are all finally ludicrous—The Babbington Clam Council, the Babbington Central Upper Elementary School, and every dad's favorite magazine, *Impractical Craftsman*—just like the people and institutions you-know-where. Kraft never provokes savage mockery or brutal sneers, but quiet, sweetly melancholy smiles of recognition.

Book #8, *Call Me Larry*, should be out next spring. Since it's taken Kraft two years to advance his hero to the seventh grade, one suspects and hopes that the *Peter Leroy* saga will amble on at its own pace for several years to come. You can leap into it at any time, or go back and read from the beginning. Each takes about an hour to zip through and they're addictive as salted peanuts, so you can catch up in a few good nights.