



Editor's Picks

SELECTING THE BEST BOOKS OF ANY GIVEN YEAR IS no small task. Some 40,000 new titles are published each year, and, even if you exclude the movie star diet books, the movie star exercise books, the movie star photobooks, the movie spin-off books, and the novelizations of popular movies, that still leaves a few thousand.

You won't necessarily find the most important books on best-seller lists, though, sometimes, a few manage to generate enough enthusiasm from the reading public to make it onto such lists for a week or two. Unless you read the review media, chances are you won't be aware of the truly important books that deserve your attention. Even when you do read reviews, you are only getting one person's opinion. Granted, it may be a valid opinion, well-stated and delineated, but one person's pleasure is one person's pleasure, and sometimes there's no accounting for taste. Still, those of us in the book reviewing business find ourselves wanting to recommend some titles over others. Here are some of our favorites.

FAR AND AWAY THE BEST BOOKS I HAVE read all year are the six volumes of Eric Kraft's serial novel *The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy*.

Roving back and forth in time, Kraft charts the childhood of a small boy, Peter Leroy, growing up on the western margin of Long Island in the days before television, when the sound was yet pure enough to sustain the clamming industry on which Peter's hometown of Babbington was built ("Clams — the chewy snack in the sturdy pack.")

Peter's adventures and those of his family and friends tumble one upon another in a profusion of incident and style. A good half of the first novel, for example, is spent on a loony romantic correspondence between a man and woman, where each thinks the other is someone else, and each writes in the guise of the opposite sex. Somehow this oddball romance intertwines with Peter's first memory — piling a litter of kittens into his wagon — and the day his mother fell out of her lawn chair. All of these incidents, and a couple more, commingle in the logic of the child and the logic of the novelist. Shocks of recognition abound, and everything is funny as hell.

These are not children's books, but they may be the best books about childhood we shall see any

time soon. Kraft immerses us in a world where chance remarks, sex, storybook characters, jokes, and the reveries of children all carry equal weight. By having the adult Peter narrate the series of books, however, Kraft endows all this with a guiding intelligence that puts the necessary distance between the reader and the jumble of quotidian life as children know it.

Time and again, however, the adult perspective yields to an evocation of childhood that teaches, as nothing else can, that life is mysterious and the mysteries abide. At one point in the chronicle, Kraft has the adult Peter say,

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 art. The best part about *Peter Leroy*, which has been appearing at the rate of a couple of installments a year since 1982, is that Kraft isn't done yet. I wish he would go on forever. □

Each title \$4.95 paper;

Volume I: *My Mother Takes a Tumble*

(ISBN 0-918222-40-0);

Do Clams Bite? (ISBN 0-918222-45-1);

Life on the Bolotomy (ISBN 0-918222-48-6);

The Static of the Spheres (ISBN 0-918222-49-4).

Volume II: *The Fox and the Clam* (ISBN 0-918222-53-2);

The Girl with the White Fur Muff (ISBN 0-918222-54-0);

Applewood Books, Box 2870, Cambridge, MA 02139

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