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BURRELLE'S

Tales of a young boy make a wonderful collection



Part of the allure of Eric Kraft's stories is that they are as immediate as each of our own childhood dreams.

CSO By JUDITH ROSEN

While Eric Kraft's "Herb 'n' Lorna," a very funny novel about the country's foremost designers of erotic jewelry and trinkets, went on to become a national best-seller, his earlier books, which also feature the endearing Peter Leroy, have been overlooked, primarily because they are hard to find.

Originally published by a tiny Boston publisher, Applewood Press, they were released during the first half of the 1980s as short serial novels in the 19th-century tradition, when many well-known writers like Charles Dickens regularly serialized their work.

Even in the Boston area, relatively few stores carried these charming tales, each centering around some crisis in the life of the young Peter, but written by a middle-aged Peter looking back. That's why it's an especially welcome treat to have Crown Publishers bring out in one volume all eight early books along with one that was never published.

Although the books clearly follow each other thematically, they have the feel of separate books. They can be read one per day in no particular order, or all at one sitting.

Each novella-length story is reprinted with its original preface, which sets the context and also makes the reader feel as if he or she is in on the creation of the actual book. In one preface, for example, Peter tells us that although his grandfather (Guppa) really worked in a clam factory, he has made him a Studebaker salesman in this book.

It is this delicate balance between outrageousness and truthfulness that give the Peter Leroy stories their charm and strength. Anyway, it's hard to resist characters like Peter's grandmother (Gumma) who enjoys the inexactitude of working out mathematical problems on her slide rule each night; his great-grandmother, who carves coconuts representing each of the members of the Leroy clan, or his Leroy forebears, creators of Leroy Lager, distinguished primarily by its labels — each one bearing a different poem.

"Little Follies: The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy (So Far)," by Eric Kraft. Crown: 448 pp.; \$22.

Kraft, who lived in Boston during the '80s, claims that he first met Peter Leroy, a sort of Every Boy of '50s middle-class America, in a dream while dozing over a German lesson in a Harvard library. From that dream came the imaginings of Peter's beginnings in Babbington, N.Y., a community whose economy is dependent on the clam. In due course Peter grows up to work as a publicist for Babbington's Clam Council, while munching away on meals at a chain of Babbington fast-food restaurants.

In one especially funny story, "Call Me Larry," Kraft mocks the very notion of serial books by relating the convoluted plotline of the Larry Peters books, an adventure series for teen-agers featuring Larry, his shapely sister, his best friend and his family's bric-a-brac business. All the plotlines center on sex and on evildoers trying to get ahold of next year's plans for bric-a-brac.

In other tales Kraft is guided by his love of the sea — and the ever-present Babbington bivalve, almost as important a character as Peter himself. He explores the eternal seafaring themes: "life is like a clam chowder" and "love is like clam chowder."

Anyone who has ever had a bad memory of the scouts or other group high school activities will appreciate "The Young Tars," the only story never to have been published before.

In "My Mother Takes a Tumble" Kraft puts a very different spin on personals columns. Other stories explore childhood and even grown-up dreams, such as the one where Guppa spends a year building a radio that never works.

Part of the allure of the stories is that they are as immediate as each of our own childhood dreams. Fueled by an imagination that could come up with a "clampact" as another way to recycle clam shells, they are also written with a delicious sense of atmosphere.

Kraft notes that these are Peter's observations "(So Far)." This reviewer for one is very much looking forward to their continuation. □