

Newburyport Proust's improbable delight

THE PERSONAL HISTORY, ADVENTURES, EXPERIENCES & OBSERVATIONS OF PETER LEROY. Vol. 2, No. 1, The Fox and the Clam.

By Eric Kraft. Apple-wood Books. 94 pp. \$4.95 (paperback)

By Mark Muro
Globe Staff

Peter Leroy lives, and in this, the fifth installment of Eric Kraft's serial remembrances of Peter's boyhood, the Newburyport Proust takes as his text a passage from Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius' "Consolation of Philosophy" and jaunts quickly to "The Little Folks' Big Book." If the trip sounds improbable, it is. Wonderfully so.

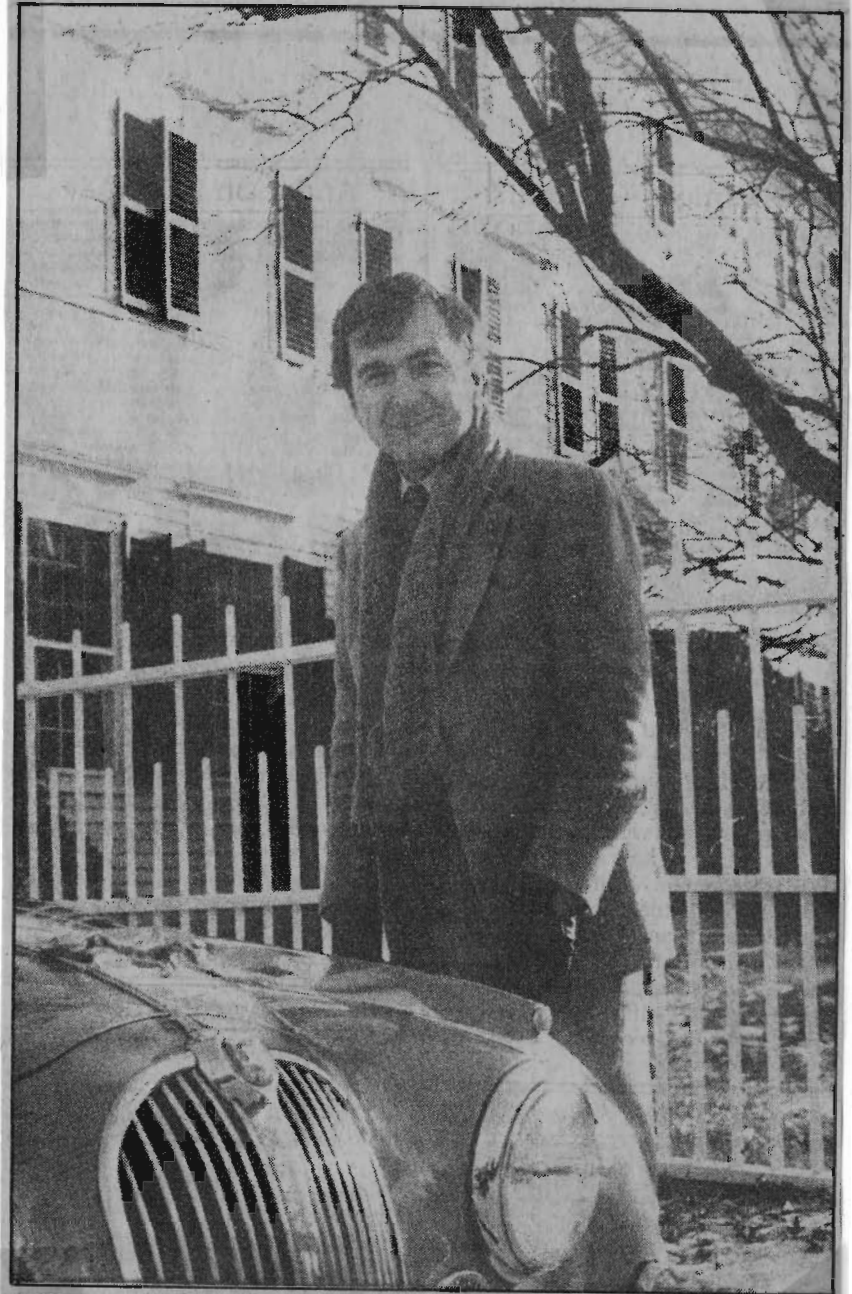
This time out Peter's adventures turn metaphysical. Peter learns to read, but he also learns of life's ineffable bitterness. The Misses Leighton's Nursery School

gives way to the yellow bus of kindergarten, and kindergarten to Mrs. Castile's first grade, but the same ultimate questions dance and repeat themselves: What is happiness? Should one live as a fox or a clam? What is - for goodness' sakes - life? It's big game Kraft tackles here.

Yet if it is, Kraft remains cheerfully adept, a sprightly pianist who operates with a martini in one hand and a nightclubber's smile on his face. As the questions ramify, the text circles and circles with no less than eight retellings of the same watery fable. The result - played with the usual Kraftian elegance - is a Mozart string quartet shot through with sunlight and the innocent fragrance of lilac. Out of simple prose and good spirited-whimsy comes wisdom.

Strange to say, no one knows if it's for children or adults.

NOTE: Comes complete with secondary meditations on the relation between fact and fiction, memory and imagination. No assembly required.



Eric Kraft outside his Newburyport home.

GLOBE PHOTO BY WILLIAM RYERSON