

Kraft revisits the style of Twain

LITTLE FOLLIES:

The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy (So Far)

By Eric Kraft

Crown

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“WE ARE all obliged, if we are to make reality endurable, to nurse a few little follies in ourselves,” wrote Marcel Proust in “Within a Budding Grove.” For novelist Eric Kraft, this observation serves not only as an epigraph to his poignant seriocomic novella “The Static of the Spheres,” but also as something of an axiom for his entire literary career.

Kraft is widely regarded as a first-rate comic novelist, but this familiar categorization fails to account for his talents as a literary miniaturist and the creator of a highly eccentric, utterly self-contained imaginative world. From 1982 to 1985, Kraft published a series of eight paperback “novellas” which taken together were titled “The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy” and intended as a single body of work.

This serialized novel has now been republished in a long-overdue hard-cover volume with the addition of “The Young Tars,” a new concluding piece. As a compendium of works about the theme of boyhood in America, “Little Follies” is about as close as any contemporary American author has come to revisiting the narrative terrain of Mark Twain’s classic novels of boyhood misadventure, “Tom Sawyer” and “Huckleberry Finn.”

Each of the novellas in this collection begins with an introduction by the now fully grown Leroy, a middle-aged writer and dreamer who lives on a fictive island (called Small’s Island) off the coast of Long Island with his beautiful and resourceful wife, Albertine, proprietress of the picturesque local hotel. In each of these self-reflexive prefaces, Leroy explains the artifice involved in the rewriting of a key episode in his young life from his admittedly idiosyncratic and still vestigially childlike adult perspective. For Kraft, as for his surrogate Leroy, childhood is the inexhaustible raw material from which one extracts — with a generous license for embellishment — his or her own personal mythology.

In revealing how much of his narrative is based on remembered “fact,” how much on hyperbole and how much on literary invention, Leroy engages in a second level of commentary, one that suggests that his tangential relationship to the novelist Eric Kraft

is even more complex than we might imagine.

The novellas themselves describe quixotic intrigues in the essentially serendipitous life of young Peter, a precocious boy growing up in coastal community of Babbington, L.I. — the erstwhile “Clam Capital of America” — in the early 1950s.

The darkness that hovers on the peripheries of Peter’s sanguine world, however, stems not only from powerful social forces outside of his protective familial cocoon, but more immediately from his awareness of the underside of his own congenital high-spiritedness.

He comes from a long male line of self-deluded dreamers: men who were seduced by their dreams and pursued them with a foolishly relentless monomania — such as his great-great-grandfather John Peter (“Black Jacques”) Leroy, a brewer who developed the legendary Leroy Lager Beer — as well as men who were ashamed of their dreams, and began pushing them away almost from the moment they embraced them.

The Babbington of Leroy’s youth is richly populated by such lovable eccentrics as the comically methodical Dudley Beaker, advertising copywriter for the Babbington Clam Council, and his witty and sensuous wife, Eliza, who engage in epistolary gender-swapping in “My Mother Takes a Tumble.” He has boyhood friends like Rodney Lodkochnikov (“Raskolnikov” for short), who plays Huck Finn to Peter’s Tom Sawyer in “Life on the Bolotomy.” There’s Matthew Barber, a schoolmate whose persistent melancholia makes him the perfect antidote to Peter’s unfocused exuberance in “The Fox and the Clam,” as well as the ideal adviser to his hilarious fourth-grade production of Shakespeare’s “King Lear” in “The Girl With the White Fur Muff.”

Even Leroy’s maternal grandparents, affectionately referred to as “Gumma” and “Guppa” — the loving and ingenious couple who, in a slightly different incarnation, are the principal founders of an erotic jewelry empire in Kraft’s much acclaimed 1988 novel “Herb ‘n’ Lorna” — participate in his boyhood infatuations.

The first of Kraft’s nine novellas begins on Peter’s first birthday, an age when he is presumably almost as unreliable a narrator as Sterne’s “Tristram Shandy” is in the nearly 100 pages of that novel before he is born and leads us on a journey that culminates in Peter’s first tentative adolescent steps toward romance in “Take the Long Way Home” and rebellion against abusive authority in “The Young Tars.”

“Little Follies” represents the essential work of one of our most distinctive comic talents. For those unfamiliar with Kraft’s work, this is the logical place to begin.
