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Peter Leroy resumes his exploits on Bolotomy Bay

Little Follies:

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

By Eric Kraft
Crown, 437 pages, \$22

Reviewed by James Idema

A writer who reviews frequently for the Tribune

Fans of Eric Kraft's novellas about an appealing little boy named Peter Leroy growing up in Babbington, Long Island, the "Clam Capital of America," will warmly welcome this anthology of all eight of the stories, plus a new one.

The originals came out serially every few months, starting in 1982, and almost immediately attracted a following that expanded rapidly until 1985, when the last one appeared. Now anxious fans can relax; Peter is back, appealing as ever, and many more stories are promised.

Unconverted readers, on the other hand, might hesitate before

Books

laying out for a book of this bulk. That's a lot of "little boy" to catch up with, they might argue. And that long, whimsical title could be a deterrent for those who just naturally shy away from whimsy.

Well, the non-elect are hereby encouraged to take a chance. You'll surely encounter whimsy in the pages of "Little Follies," quite a bit of it, but enough of the other qualities that make lives interesting—mystery, tragedy, jealousy, love, wisdom, irony, wonder—that you'll read quickly and happily, eager to finish one story and get on to the next.

"Little Follies" is fictional autobiography twice removed. Writer Eric Kraft, who actually lives on Long Island, has dreamed up an alter ego he has named Peter Leroy, also a writer. Peter Lives on Small's Island in Bolotomy Bay, where he runs Small's Hotel. (That "Bolotomy" is an obvious anagram

for a kind of brain surgery is never explained. Presumably it's just a funny name.)

Musing on his boyhood, when he lived with his parents and grandparents in an old house on No Bridge Road in nearby Babbington, Peter fills in the less interesting interludes of his youth with imaginary people and events, some but not all of which he identifies in his stories.

This patient, intimate way Eric Kraft takes with the reader—he urges us at one point to "bear with me on this"—will inevitably bring Garrison Keillor to mind. And Babbington, with its quirky, provincial townsfolk, will invite comparisons to Lake Wobegon.

Both writers have invented more or less credible histories for their towns, people them with believable, likable citizens, and given them resonant names:

Peter Leroy's closest chum is Raskol, short for Raskolnikov, and his ancestors include Black Jacques Leroy and his son, Fat Hank. Late in the 19th Century, Black Jacques

developed "the legendary Leroy Lager, a sturdy and honest drink, relative only by name to the insipid brew later marketed by his son."

Beer and clams tend to dominate the fare in Babbington, and clams are pervasive in the town's history, culture and economy.

Peter Leroy fans will spot their favorites among the eight original pieces in "Little Follies," but this newcomer particularly liked "Do Clams Bite?" with its gentle but hilarious exploration of boyhood sexual fears, and "My Mother Takes a Tumble," in which a neighbor, Mr. Beaker, places lonely-hearts ads in the local paper and signs them "Mary Strong." An increasingly erotic correspondence ensues with a woman who signs her letters "John Simpson." Another story, "Life on the Bolotomy," featuring Peter and his pal, Raskol, affectionately updates Mark Twain.

The new story in "Little Follies," "The Young Tars," is, however, a rather startling departure for Kraft, ending as it does on a dark note of sexual abuse.