

Serialized novels create cults for lovers of ironic whimsy

THE PERSONAL HISTORY, ADVENTURES, EXPERIENCES & OBSERVATIONS OF PETER

LERROY. By Eric Kraft. A series of paperback novels. Volumes 1-7. Applewood Books (Box 2870, Cambridge, Mass. 02139), 96 pp. each, \$4.95 each plus postage if ordered by mail.

By JOHN STARK BELLAMY II

Eric Kraft is obviously not William Faulkner or Mark Twain. And "Babington, New York" — the scene of Kraft's serial novel *Peter Leroy* — is not Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County or Twain's St. Petersburg. But if you enjoy ironic whimsy, mock naivete and winsome literary parody, you may find yourself as hopelessly addicted to Peter Leroy's fictional hometown as any worshiper of Faulkner's southern gothic precincts or Twain's small-town village for adventurous boys.

Already followed by a small but growing cult, *Peter Leroy* installments of 96 pages each have appeared every three or four months since 1982. Readers have two choices: they can love the series or loathe it. Nothing is so delicate or treacherous as the appreciation of another's sense of humor, and Kraft's is superlatively arch. Like Garrison Keillor's chronicles of Lake Wobegon on National Public Radio's "Prairie Home Companion" or William Saroyan's mythical childhood stories (e.g., *My Name is Aram*), the comic misadventures of Kraft's picaresque and autobiographical boy hero are archly naive, relentlessly whimsical and often pursued to a point where individual volumes become but 96-page shaggy-dog stories. To join in the fun, you must be willing to suspend the initially considerable disbelief that *Peter Leroy* requires.

For Eric Kraft has not only created a wonderfully touching and mythic childhood of the 1950s; he has also managed the difficult feat of fabricating brilliant parodies of many of the most sacrosanct monuments of American and world fiction. And so

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deftly has he done it, that one doesn't even have to pause during the chronicle of Peter's droll misadventure and dime store epiphanies to revel in the uproarious sendups of Twain, Proust, Melville, Shakespeare and other writers that litter the pages of *Peter Leroy* like so many casual crash-and-burns on the roadway of world literature.

The plots, although not uniformly excellent, are generally amusing enough, and often brilliant showcases for Kraft's considerable writing talent and his stupendous overall achievement of approximating Marcel Proust-as-an-American-child-of-the-1950s. In *My Mother Takes a Tumble*, both the literature of American confidence men and some hoary old movie plots are satirized in a piece that might have been the result of a collaboration between Melville and Kafka. *Life on the Bolotomy* concerns the river journey of Peter and his chum Raskolnikov to the source of the Bolotomy River — a riotous inversion of both Thoreau's Merrimack expedition and Huck 'n' Jim's Mississippi quest. *The Fox and the Clam* is a wonderfully wacky ringing of plot changes on the kind of idiotically moralistic fables that use to fill the pages of elementary school readers. And *The Girl with the White Fur Muff* is probably the best yet: the chronicle of Peter's Charlie Brown-like trials, tribulations and triumphs as the casting director of a grade-school production of *King Lear* (a version with a happy ending).

It must be clear by now why Kraft isn't for everyone. But wait, there's more. *Peter Leroy* takes place in Babington, a weird place Melville might have invented if he'd been landlocked and hung up on clams, not whales. Babingtonians — when not losing their innocence or helping others to do the same — sit around reading magazines like *Impractical Craftsman* or celebrating the clam, its lore and byproducts, or making impossibly baroque home remodeling plans, or going to restaurants like Corrinne's

Fabulous Fruits of the Sea and patronizing hardware stores like Two Regular Guys.

My suggestion is that you give these unique booklets a try. I loathed the first three I read, devoured the next four and now cannot wait to either reread the ones I didn't like or pass them on to the next potential addict of Eric Kraft's inspirationally addled world view. Join the Kraft cult if you can: If nothing else Babington is a lot easier to pronounce than Yoknapatawpha.

Bellamy is a free-lance writer here.