

## BOOKS

*The Little Big Book*

UP to now, most readers who have encountered the writings of Eric Kraft have done so through two novels—"Herb 'n' Lorna" and "Reservations Recommended," which came out in 1988 and 1990. But over the last decade Kraft has generated a cult following through a series of eight slender paperback novellas—set in fictional Babbington, Long Island, on Bolotomy Bay—which irradiate with humor and clarity a world of tract houses, public schools, and the hearty bromides of the American nineteen-fifties. The novellas were issued, beginning in 1982, by Applewood Books, a small Boston-area publisher; the books were always hard to find and are now out of print. It was not their obscurity that made them cult objects—or not only their obscurity—but, rather, their intensely personal quality, which turned the unstated pact that is always present between reader and author into something that felt more exclusive, like a private joke. The eight novellas (along with a new one) have now been collected into a hefty volume called "Little Follies: The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy (so far)" (Crown; \$22), and previous initiates into Kraft's world will have to forgo the coziness of

belonging to a privileged élite. The secret is out.

Mostly, what happens in the novellas is that time passes: "so far" stretches from infancy to the shaky verge of puberty. Their claim to fame is the creation, through a profusion of literary and visual devices, of a reality that is recognizable and believable but also frankly artificial and contrived. At times, reading Kraft is like stumbling across memories of your own life, and yet the work is self-consciously—pointedly—literary. Its allusions, some blatant and others invisibly woven in, range from Proust to Mark Twain. Its jokes range in style from buffoonish vaudeville to the kind of deadpan drollery you find in Raymond Queneau, while the prematurely ripe perceptions of the narrator's younger self inevitably call to mind the pseudo-biography of the literary prodigy in Steven Millhauser's "Edwin Mullhouse."

In the earliest installment, Peter Leroy performs impossible feats of memory, at one point placing himself in his high chair trying "disdainfully" to push to one side of the tray a piece of toast that was retrieved from the floor with "cat hairs and a little fluff ball . . . stuck to it." In later episodes, he is often consciously aping the adults

around him, but not altogether in the way a child normally would: at the age of eight, Peter refers to a beer manufactured by an ancestor as being "not like the insipid pisswater they try to pass off on people nowadays," and a year later he describes a classmate to whom he feels no attraction whatsoever (a point central to the story, since she is hotly pursuing him) as "quite a little number." That these stories are about a child, beginning with his departure from the hospital where he was born and ending with his birth as a writer, around the age of eleven, does not in the least preclude their being, thanks to a witty prematurity, preoccupied with sex. Peter progresses from his sexy neighbors in "My Mother Takes a Tumble" (the opening story) to twins who demonstrate that girls are not castrated boys in "Do Clams Bite?" (the second one) and eventually to a boys' adventure serial featuring a certain improbable maid: Peter imagines her imprisoned in a bathtub full of Jell-O from which her rescuer can release her only by eating his way toward her naked flesh with a spoon—"Not a big spoon. A little spoon, a demitasse spoon."

What the stories gracefully decline to be preoccupied with is their narrator. The people looming largest on Peter's early emotional horizon—and hence in the book—are his two grandfathers, a bachelor neighbor, and a rough-and-ready older boy, each of whom can be seen as initiating this thoughtful child into a version of manhood to which he would otherwise be unlikely to aspire, or at which he must fail. He is inadequate at claming with his father's father, useless in building a shortwave radio with his mother's father or a boat with his pal, and can win arguments with the neighbor, Dudley Beaker, only in revisionist fantasy.

The propensity of memory, and fiction, for revision is something the adult Peter makes much of in prefaces to the novellas, where he purports to account for oddities of narration. But what follows invariably contradicts the prefaces, and a network of additional tiny contradictions leaps out as one proceeds. The preface to "My Mother



*"I'll be lunching at my desk, Peggy."*

Takes a Tumble" says, logically enough, that the following story concerns the significance of a day when Mrs. Leroy fell from her lawn chair. It turns out, though, that the real significance of that day is the introduction of the Leroy family to Dudley Beaker's new sweetheart, Eliza Foote—who turns out to be the central character—and the whole story takes a tumble if you remember that Peter has asserted in the preface that Eliza Foote is the major element of fiction in the story. More outrageously contradictory is the preface to "The Fox and the Clam," which discusses a fable and a boy called Matthew. In the story, the narrator meets Matthew in nursery school and encounters the fable in an anthology titled "The Little Folks' Big Book." But the preface has told us that the fable was not really in the "Big Book" and that "I didn't meet Matthew until I entered high school."

Even the information within the frame of the preface is likely to wobble off the canvas. In "Tumble," as in all the stories, Peter's grandfather is a Studebaker salesman. (In "Herb 'n' Lorna," which also involves some of the "Little Follies" characters, his job figures in the plot and is "documented," as in a biography, with glossy pages of photographs midway through the book.) But in the preface to "Tumble" Peter assures us that he invented his grandfather's career, because he needed to explain why everyone on their street owned a Studebaker: "I knew that if I included this remarkable fact without explanation the reader would regard it as gratuitously absurd." He then goes into an elaborate backpedalling refinement of his description of the houses in the neighborhood, in which is buried the news that on the other side of the street there were no Studebakers, "despite the efforts of my grandfather"—efforts that we've just been told didn't exist.

The sincere and cautious tone of these prefaces is that of someone struggling for truth. They're like the italicized interpolations in Mary McCarthy's "Memories of a Catholic Girlhood" ("The most likely thing, I fear, is that I fused two memories. Mea Culpa"). But this narrator is either remarkably careless or lying through his teeth. In either case, the scrupulosity of the prefaces makes you believe in a real historical past belonging to a person named Peter Leroy—that is, makes

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A D V E R T I S E M E N T

you believe in the stories. That the adult Peter Leroy confesses to having made things up only enhances his credibility; if you don't exactly believe him you nevertheless find yourself believing *in* him. His comradely confessions of authorial high jinks invite you to feel superior, as the worldly reader who knows all about things like "willing suspension of disbelief," and at the same time you do, quite simply, believe. In effect, you are always reading at least two stories: the manifest one, which is clever, anecdotal, suspenseful, and funny, and a mystery, full of clues about the construction of the very book you are reading.

The stories are not without their own double messages. The Eliza Foote supposedly invented by the invented author of "My Mother Takes a Tumble" materializes in response to an ad placed by a "lovely young woman in unfortunate circumstances" looking for a Lonely Man. The person behind the ad, however, is not a woman, lovely or otherwise, but the suave and pompous Dudley Beaker, who hopes to cash in by creating a form of epistolary soft porn. What emerges is an epistolary romance—or romantic travesty. Eliza answers the ad as "John Simpson"; Dudley writes back as "Mary Strong." Comic cross-purposes proliferate, and the correspondence is soon a mishmash of furious crossings out and veiled reproaches. The comic potential of cross-dressing has been amply demonstrated by the likes of Mozart and Shakespeare, and is as old as theatre itself. But this is mental cross-dressing, and what you have to do while reading it—to keep in mind that the man, writing as a woman, thinks he is writing to another man, and that the woman, while imagining herself into the voice of a man, is writing to another woman, who really isn't one—may make you feel that your mind is working as a gender-tracking literary abacus.

Baroque as the narration is, poking in several directions at once, it is always moving forward, in a way that both reflects and exemplifies the passage of time. The stories are Proustian in intent, if not in style. It doesn't take twelve years to read the nine Peter Leroy novellas—it probably doesn't take twelve hours—but the stories are a deceptively modest attempt to render the very substance of experience in its smallest, stop-action increments. The

allusions to "Remembrance of Things Past"—Peter's eventual wife is named Albertine, and he refers to Balbec as one of the places that he "could, someday, actually visit"—are jokes with serious purpose (which is more or less the m.o. of the whole enterprise).

Both the modesty and the seriousness of purpose are encapsulated in a three-page essay, in a story called "The Static of the Spheres," on the nature of time and the making of toast. Peter extolls an appliance of his grandmother's that conveys bread slices in a "rhythmic rightward shuffle" progressing toward toast:

From a very early age, I loved watching—and listening to—the operation of this toaster. As the toaster operated, it produced a repetitive sound from somewhere inside the machine, from the scraping of some parts against others, a sound that I interpreted as words, the words *Annie ate her radiator*, repeated over and over while the bread toasted. I would sit and watch and listen to the toaster and watch the bread through the little window and try to decide where in its passage from left to right it became toast. And from that toaster I learned to think of time as a belt, to think of being as being in transit, and I laid the groundwork for a persistent nostalgic affection for the wave theory of electromagnetic radiation and round-faced watches and slide rules, and I developed a sense of time's passing.

The suburban landscape of "Little Follies" is scattered with relics like this toaster, lovingly reconstructed or resurrected in words or else in drawings, by three illustrators, that are straight-faced in presentation but usually ridiculous in placement or substance. There are slide rules (shown in a diagram, as if you might never have seen one), Studebakers, short-wave radios and radio dramas, paint-by-number kits, Brownie snapshots (rendered in a pencil-shaded naturalistic style), interchangeable postwar houses with attic-like unfinished second floors, and model boats and airplanes. The glamour of suits, small talk, Martinis, and adulthood is evoked, and so is the memory of woollen bathing suits that tie with a string, do-it-yourself projects (equipped with star-

tlingly frank instructions proffering "hour after interminable hour of baffling precision work... sure to bring you an almost enervating sense of satisfaction"), clamshell ashtrays, and words and expressions like "wingding," "whoopeddo," and "guilty as sin." Even things that have remained a part of daily life reclaim a lost aura of mystery: Coke sold at gas stations, outboard motors, twins, toast dunked in cocoa or coffee, basement workbenches, grandparents. If you didn't experience these things in your own early years, then reading about them induces vicarious nostalgia: homesickness for a home you never had. And what all the details in "Little Follies" have in common is that practically every one of them grows fragrant, delicately deepens in color, and emerges crisply as metaphor—which is to say, ordinary things take on the kind of significance that children involuntarily attach to objects and actions. Everything seems to mean something. Everything seems to mean more than what you're told it means.

Eliciting this sensation is the job of literary art—to catch life in its snares and, by the pattern and form of the snares, to accumulate meaning. In Kraft's novellas, ideas like "toast" and "clams" take on so much freight, with so much of it humorous, that they become like those jokes shared by prisoners—so well known that you only have to say a number to draw a laugh. Toast, for example, begins to acquire import when the infant Peter is disgusted by a slice's sogginess but chafed by the dry parts, and so causes Dudley Beaker to comment windily that the slice represents "the elusive, ever-receding twilight line of this moment, ahead of which lies an abrasive future, and behind which we leave a messy past." Clams, however, are the real leitmotiv of the book. Clamming is the chief industry of Babbington; the town's driveways are paved with crushed clamshells, and shapely shells are recycled as knickknacks by Bivalve By-products. Dudley's posters for the Babbington Clam Council fill a couple of pages in the book, in the form of illustrations with corny script proclaiming "Clamshells—the answer to family boredom!" And so on. Clams are referred to as "the elusive quahog," "tender little darlings," and "tasty bivalves." The meaning of the Babbington universe hangs on alternative



allegiances—to chicken or to clams—as both food and way of life (or backyard commercial farming versus the romance of the sea, to put it in a way that echoes the book's bias). The apotheosis of clamdom is reached in "The Fox and the Clam," in which the clam clearly represents only one thing—being happy-as-a—but does so in a set of thematic variations (ranging from a Saturday-afternoon cartoon about a happy hippo and an unhappy one to a deadly competition having to do with skipping third grade) that raise complicated farce to the level of calculus.

If animated cartoons could be incorporated between hard covers, Eric Kraft would probably unreel the hippo cartoon. The book reproduces, as if in facsimile, typed and scribbled-over letters, which cast the shadow of their edges on the page, and sections from a children's reader and from instructional journals. There are maps, and there is a page in an encyclopedia's small type, complete with accompanying "engraved" illustration. The urge to include all of life, to be comprehensive, marks the conspicuous literary overachievers—Proust, Tolstoy, Joyce—and Kraft's style of refining distinctions almost to the point of finickiness is related to that urge. In these novellas, however, the devices also seem to be an aspect of the author's modesty; it's as if his words could not bring enough of the world into a book. And the novellas invoke what has been conventionally looked upon as a degraded form, the comic book. The series grew out of a picture-and-print Peter Leroy newsletter that Eric Kraft began sending to a couple of hundred friends and then to their friends during the nineteen-seventies. Kraft refers to this as "samizdat" publication, but it is strikingly American, recalling in its nature, and in the affectionate cultishness with which it was welcomed, the cartoons of R. Crumb, Harvey Pekar (whose miserable autobiographies are sometimes drawn by R. Crumb), and Art Spiegelman.

As much as anything else, though, Kraft's little follies are the work of an ardent reader, who gives others of his kind what they love most; these novellas are his own big and ever-growing "Little Folks' Big Book." In them, the world of the imagination and the world that produces cars, junk, and an opposite sex are a peaceable kingdom. In

the preface to "The Fox and the Clam" he writes:

All the characters in books live in the same place, the *Big-Book* place, and I've painted in so much of it over the years that I have a picture of a well-populated town, where, with Albertine on my arm, I sometimes walk along a shady street on a summer morning and pause to watch the talking squirrels gather nuts in Emma Bovary's front yard while Tom Sawyer paints her fence.

—ANNA SHAPIRO

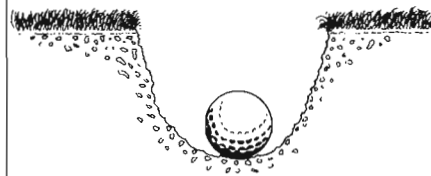
**BRIEFLY NOTED**

FICTION

**DAY OF ATONEMENT**, by A. Alvarez (Random House; \$21). This work of fiction is as much thriller as novel; for every convincing domestic or psychological detail, there's an unnerving little surprise. It's about a childless middle-aged English couple, Joe and Judy, who get mixed up in some risky business when their wealthy friend Tommy drops dead. Officially, Tommy died of a heart attack, but his legacy includes a packing crate full of Hungarian toy trains that are full of something else, a gang of unsavory associates who are convinced that the clueless Joe and Judy have some information they want, and a financial blessing that could turn out to be a curse. Joe and Judy narrate alternating chapters, and this construction becomes vital as their intimacy breaks down and their agendas diverge: Joe loses himself in the macho politics of avenging Tommy's death, while Judy gets shrewder, and discovers that suspicion turns her on. This novel gives you that longed-for feeling of forgetting yourself in a book—and the author doesn't settle for an easy solution to the mystery or the marriage.

**PRIMITIVE PEOPLE**, by Francine Prose (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; \$20). Simone impulsively flees Haiti when her lover runs off with her best friend; one week she has a coveted embassy job in Port-au-Prince, and the next she finds herself working illegally as an au pair in a dilapidated Hudson Valley mansion. Francine Prose's eighth novel is a sharp anthropological satire of the world that Simone discovers there, as she attempts to understand the customs of its self-absorbed inhabitants. Her melancholy charges, George and Maisie, cut eyes out of the family portraits for their paper dolls and bury used light bulbs, while their mother

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