

THE FEATURE PAGE

BOOK REVIEWS

LITTLE FOLLIES, THE PERSONAL HISTORY, ADVENTURES, EXPERIENCES & OBSERVATIONS OF PETER LEROY (SO FAR) by Eric Kraft. Crown. \$22.

By David Walton

Eric Kraft's "Little Follies" brings together into one book eight of the comic novellas Kraft published in single paperback volumes in the early 1980s, chronicling life in the Long Island town of Babbington, "the Clam Capital of America."

These eight, along with a new story titled "The Young Tars," are narrated by Peter Leroy, a boy who like David Copperfield stands at the intersection of an assortment of quirky, colorful characters, and holds together a loose and episodic plot.

"Within a family," writes Kraft/Leroy at the start of the opening story, "some events that an outsider might consider important are allowed to pass almost unnoticed and are soon forgotten; yet others, which seem trivial to the world at large, may be elevated to positions of such eminence

that they acquire the status of milestones."

Mr. Beaker next door, an ad writer for the Babbington Clam Council, has quit his job and put an ad in the local paper: "Lovely young woman in unfortunate circumstances wishes to correspond with lonely man," and signed it "Mary Strong."

Among those responding is Eliza Foote, a typist at a local insurance agency, who signs the name of one of the firm's managers, Jack Simpson.

The salacious correspondence between these two makes up the bulk of Leroy's first adventure-observation, and ends, as the reader feels it should, with a meeting, unmasking of identities and eventual courtship -- the couple's true names, genders and intentions properly in place.

Kraft is a spirited writer, and these nine stories, of which the funniest is called "Do Clams Bite?," are entertainment of an old-fashioned kind: broad and whimsically awry, with a humor untinged by cynicism or irony or anything that might be labeled Serious Intent.

Readers of Kraft's earlier book "Herb'n'Lorna" have already met Peter's maternal grandparents, and much of the action of "Little Follies" takes place around their house on No Bridge Road, where Peter and his parents also live.

A second volume of Peter Leroy's "Personal History" will appear in the fall, bringing together all the episodes (so far) in this appealing, funny serial novel -- a history that may, by all indications, never move very far past Peter Leroy's childhood -- which should suit Eric Kraft's many established and growing coterie of new readers just fine.

(David Walton is a Pittsburgh short-story writer and a part-time English teacher at the University of Pittsburgh.)