

## A Precocious Boy

By JULIE SALAMON

Eric Kraft's Peter Leroy stories have recently been collected into a book, "Little Follies: The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy" (Crown, 437 pages, \$22).

That's cause for celebration though most people probably don't know it. These novellas began appearing every few months a decade ago and then stopped. The disappearance of Peter Leroy in 1985 was a non-event for the multitudes (including me) who hadn't noticed that he'd ever appeared.

But anyone who had read Mr. Kraft's delightful stories must have been deeply



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disappointed. In Peter Leroy, Mr. Kraft created a mischievous adventurer and boy philosopher, a combination Huckleberry Finn and Marcel Proust, the kind of kid we all would have been if we'd been luckier or braver—or imaginary, like Peter.

Written from the perspective of the adult Peter, the novellas can be enjoyed simply as charming coming-of-age stories about a precocious boy growing up in the 1950s. Mr. Kraft has given Peter a wonderful memory and an advanced sense of the absurd. So his recollections of his adventures and experiences in the (fictional) clam crazy town of Babbington just off Bologny Bay (also fictional) are great entertainments. He takes dangerous trips with his best friend, has crushes on older women, and always closely observes the strange behavior of grown-ups.

But Mr. Kraft is no casual spinner of

yarns. Within the framework of these artfully constructed stories, he has developed an ingenious investigation of the way we build our myths, private and public. He's a compulsive contemplator, much like the grown-up Peter Leroy, who sits in the hotel he owns with his patient and loving wife (who runs the place while her husband remembers and writes). Each novella begins with a preface written by Peter the adult, explaining the "truth" that inspired the story you're about to read.

In his world one thing leads to another, but not necessarily the thing you're expecting. He understands the way memory is often tripped by incidentals. An anecdote about the day his mother took a tumble off her chair leads to an amusing variation on a Miss Lonelyhearts story, complete with letters.

All of Mr. Kraft's stories reveal his obsession with the various communications that affect us. He peppers his book with all kinds of literary and not-so-literary references. So he includes the ads Peter's neighbor Mr. Beaker writes for the Babbington Clam Council ("Clams -- the chewy snack in the sturdy pack"). He includes pages from the impractical Craftsman, which he describes as "a monthly magazine chock full of plans for single-seater folding airplanes, concealed bookcases, inflatable rubber garages, and the like."

He understands the way Peter's growing identity is influenced not only by the people around him but by these cultural artifacts. Like many bright children Peter is constantly sifting through the information, fascinated by all of it but sensing that much of it is purely ridiculous and should be rejected.

Mr. Kraft writes evocatively about Peter's resistance to accepting the things that most grown-ups seem to accept. Peter is a powerful daydreamer who learns at an early age that people will work hard to undermine his daydreams. That doesn't stop him from pursuing all kinds of

schemes, ready to risk the disappointment that seems inevitable to him. His readers can only hope that he continues to be seduced by his dreams, and that he keeps the promise at the end of the last novella in this collection: "To be continued."