

Happy As a Clam

LITTLE FOLLIES

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

By Eric Kraft
Crown. 437 pp. \$22

By Michael Upchurch

WHAT IS chockfull of digression, lightly strewn with bizarre illustrations, and published in installments?

There's Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, of course.

But a similar and more recent confounder of literary convention, which originally appeared as eight chapbooks between 1982 and 1985, is Eric Kraft's *Little Follies: The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy (So Far)*. Now gathered in a single volume—with a new episode, "The Young Tars," thrown in—this delightfully absurd "memoir" of a 1950s boyhood spent in a Long Island clamming community is more fun than a barrel of quahogs.

Commencing with baby Peter's first glimpse of his family (which he vividly recalls), *Little Follies* follows him up through junior high school and ends with a promise of more to come. Kraft's zany fabular flights may not surpass the rhetorical extravagance of Sterne's 18th-century masterpiece, but they're often just as droll and poignant.

Tristram Shandy is only one of *Little Fol-*

Michael Upchurch is the author of "The Flame Forest."



DRAWING FROM "LITTLE FOLLIES"

lies's literary antecedents. With tongue-in-cheek bravado, Kraft pays homage to Thoreau, Aesop and Edmund Spenser as Peter recalls his clam-centric youth. He even dares to borrow the name of Peter's wife, Albertine, from Proust.

The action is set in Babbington, L.I., where the bivalve is the mainstay of the economy and a local cultural icon. Peter's maternal grandfather, Guppa, is a foreman in a clam-packing plant, while his paternal grandfather wades Babbington's tidal flats

to gather the shellfish in a most unusual way. Outside the family, Peter's friend Porky White grows up to be Babbington's "fast-food clam-bar mogul," and the whole town succumbs to "molluscan hoopla" when it celebrates its annual Clam Fest. Not everyone is clam-crazy, however. Peter's father works as a gas-station manager and has no taste for clamdigging. Next-door neighbor Dudley Beaker gets so tired of his job writing ads for the Babbington Clam Council ("Clamshells—the answer to family bore-

dom!") that he quits and sets up his own business as a salacious correspondent-for-hire under the name of Mary Strong.

If it sounds as if Kraft is testing the outer limits of suspended disbelief, there's good reason for it. In the prefaces that precede each episode, Peter gamely reveals the actual circumstances of incidents from his childhood, how he changed them in the story, and why. In altering the outcome of a school contest to his own advantage, for instance, he is prompted by a "desire to correct the errors of the past . . . one of the motives behind any fiction." In changing Guppa's profession from clam-packer to Studebaker salesman, he puts to rest the question of why every car in his neighborhood was a Studebaker (the implication being that while real-life mysteries can be allowed to stand, fiction demands a sensible explanation).

With the ground sufficiently destabilized below the reader's feet, Kraft proceeds to wreak storytelling havoc. He achieves a heartwarming surrealism when Peter and Guppa scan the pages of *Impractical Craftsmen* to learn how to construct an "Adventurer's Bubble" for local river exploration ("If you followed last month's instructions of making a convertible out of your sedan, you've got a spare roof on your hands!"). He casually slips in some highbrow anachronism when Garcia Marquez's fictional Macondo becomes a real place that Peter dreams of visiting when he picks up its signal on his grandfather's shortwave radio.

Kraft doesn't just invent for invention's sake. In "The Fox and the Clam," he dreams up a neo-Aesopean fable about brooding pessimism and complacent optimism, and then subjects it to a series of increasingly hilarious reworkings. In the process, he concocts a deliciously wry parable about a tricky friendship between two boys of opposite temperament.

"Call Me Larry" finds Peter literally becoming the author of the mystery novels that his grandmother gives him for his birthday. This occurs several decades after he reads his first Larry Peters adventure, "The Shapely Brunette." But rather than being a time-travel story, "Call Me Larry" is a paean to the powers of the imagination. Here and elsewhere, Kraft's purpose is to uncover truths that loom beyond the facts, the chief one being that the best part of a story is found "in the spaces where your mind [is] free to wander."

Kraft's writing powers are generally up to his task. Occasionally the action is unclear, or an excess of detail—on the workings, for instance, of a shortwave radio—gets in the way. A few incidents come across as merely silly, but most verge on the sublime.

PETER'S FAMILY and hometown are lovingly rendered, whether he's explaining his grandmother's fondness for slide rules (with illustration) or detailing the history of the feud between Babbington's clamdiggers and its chicken farmers. Digressions include a lament on the decline in "the art of piling leaves" and some sobering thoughts about the effect of pop-up toasters on children's intellectual development.

With Peter at the helm, "rowing the waterways of memory," Kraft has found a narrative voice that is winningly antic and dazzlingly flexible. His self-contradictory stories-within-stories, far from being a mere technical exercise, are the ideal vehicle for this serio-comic meditation on the art of fiction, the nature of memory and the many uses of clams. In Peter Leroy's world, both truth and fiction can be mighty strange—and both are equally entertaining. ■