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LITTLE FOLLIES

Self-aware absurdity and truth shine in a form that Kraft crafts the best

"Little Follies: The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy (so far)" by Eric Kraft (Crown, \$22)

By Jim Erickson

I loved Eric Kraft's "Herb 'n Lorna," about the couple who made erotic gewgaws, in 1988, and liked "Recommended," about the restaurant reviewer who goes mad, in '90, without realizing that I was ignoring his finest work, which had been ongoing since 1982: "Little Follies: The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy (so far)."

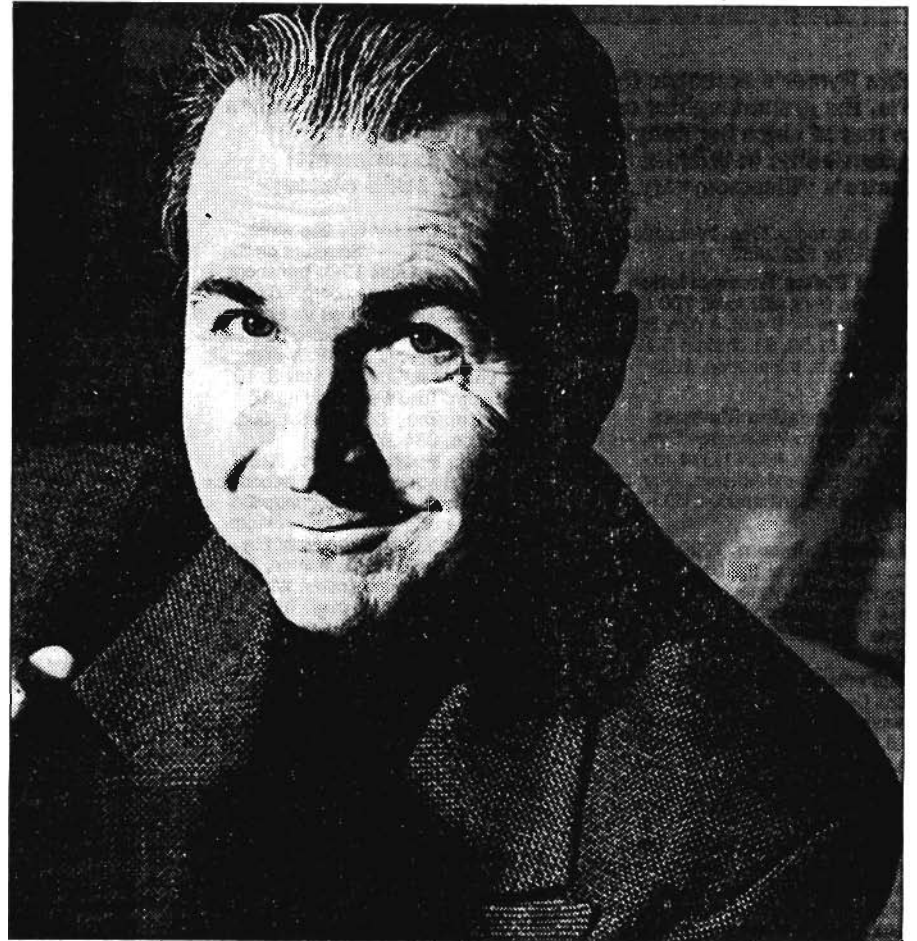
Kraft's special talent is for creating characters and people familiar enough to recognize and empathize with but who inhabit a world all his own, located somewhere between our minds and his, composed equally of memories and imagination, reality and fantasy, the physical world and the make-believe world of art. "Herb 'n Lorna" dwelt a little too much on raw sex to preserve the delicate balance, and "Reservations Recommended" collapsed into melodrama. But "Little Follies," like Baby Bear's porridge, is just right. It ends with "(To be continued)," and I hope it will be.

By the end of "Little Follies," Peter Leroy the character is still prepubertic and using



all his ingenuity to avoid sex, though Peter Leroy the narrator is entering later middle age — without, however, having reached what most of us would call full adulthood. (He has reconciled himself to sex, though, and has a fabulously beautiful wife who supports him.) He is trying to preserve his childhood memories, but his life has been imperfect and won't make the points he wants to, and so he quite frankly adjusts the facts to the way they should have been in the first place, and the result is complex and funny and sometimes touching and maybe sometimes even wise. The tone is generally whimsical, like Garrison Keillor with a touch more fantasy and a fair amount of self-conscious, maybe-half-serious discussion of the art of fiction and, at times, the theory of memory. And there are beautiful parodies of advertisements, and children's literature, a thoughtful comparison of love to clam chowder — even the placement of words on the page is imaginatively used.

Kraft is not much concerned with psychological or any other kind of realism, and uses our real world mostly to bounce off into various kinds of oddity. He has fourth-graders staging "King Lear" with a wonderful mishmash of insight, innocence and critical cliché: He loves to have his characters lapse into the language of second-



Crown

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rate professionals of academia and advertising.

But he never quite leaves reality behind. Partly it's his gift of description: "I set off for Raskol's, weaving and struggling along the street, with the wagon wandering this way and that independent of my steering, like a curious child holding his mother's hand." Partly it's his eccentric examples: "If it wasn't one thing it was another, if a radiator wasn't leaking, the wisteria was dying." Partly it's the imagination that enables him to describe the erotic sensation of sitting in a tub of Jell-O: "I'd be enveloped by Jell-O, resilient raspberry Jell-O, molded to me,

embracing me as no lover ever could, as not even a hundred lovers could embrace me at once." A lot of it is simple perceptiveness: "I enjoy these periods of misery ... because they give depth and texture to me life, to my character. ... Periods of brooding ... show that I'm serious, that I'm sensitive to the pain of modern life, that I'm not unaware of how fragile the fabric of a happy life is."

In its self-aware absurdity as well as in its truth, that quotation represents a lot of what Eric Kraft does. Few do anything like it, and nobody does it better.

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