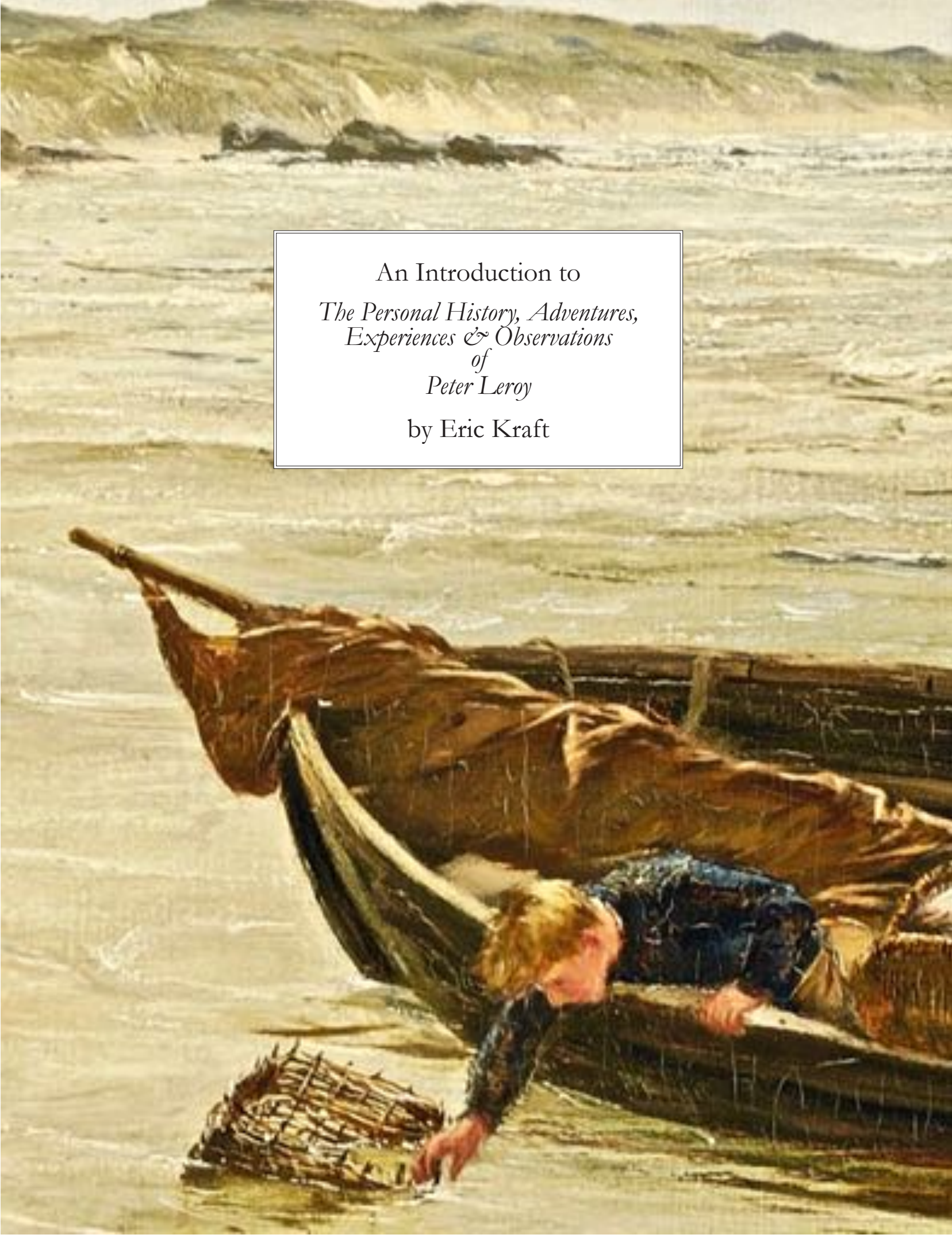


An Introduction to

The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy

by Eric Kraft

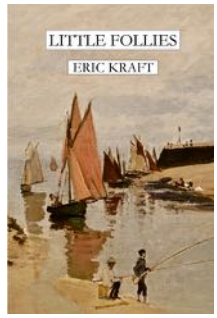
The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy

The *Personal History* is a large work of fiction that appears to be the memoirs of Peter Leroy, who tells an alternative version of his life story; ruminates upon the nature of the universe and the role of human consciousness within it; holds a fun-house mirror to scenes of life in the United States; and explores the effect of imagination on perception, memory, hope, and fear.

LITTLE FOLLIES

in which Peter explores his earliest memory; probes the causes of his childhood pelecypodophobia (fear of bivalve mollusks); navigates the Bolotomy River; builds a radio receiver; ponders the differences between dour foxes and happy clams; falls in love; takes the long way home; becomes a fan of the Larry Peters adventure series; and rises to the rank of Aluminum Commodore in the Young Tars.

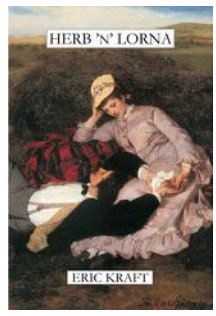
"A masterpiece of American humor."
Los Angeles Times



HERB 'N' LORNA

in which Peter investigates and reconstructs the life stories of his maternal grandparents, Herb and Lorna Piper, a cuddly couple who invented the animated erotic jewelry business.

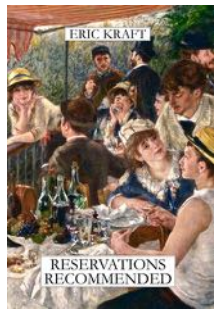
"A classic. Savor it."
Andrei Codrescu, NPR



RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED

in which Peter constructs a plausible adult life for his grade school chum Matthew Barber, now living in Boston, where he is vice-president of a toy company by day and Bertram W. Beath, restaurant reviewer, by night.

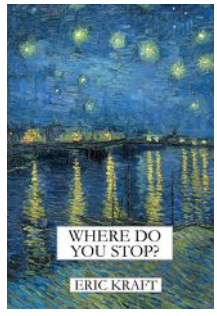
"Brilliant." *LA Life*



WHERE DO YOU STOP?

in which Peter finally completes a junior-high-school science assignment, thirty years late, exploring quantum physics, entropy, epistemology, principles of uncertainty and discontinuity, a range of life's Big Questions, and his memories of his intoxicating science teacher, Miss Rheingold.

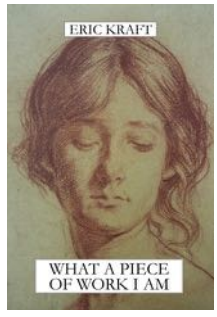
"Luminously intelligent fun." *Time*



WHAT A PIECE OF WORK I AM

in which Peter, working on the principle of the panopticon, constructs a plausible life for Ariane Lodkochnikov, the sultry older sister of his imaginary childhood friend, maker of her own self and her own myth.

"Conveys a sense of sheer play."
The New Yorker



AT HOME WITH THE GLYNNS

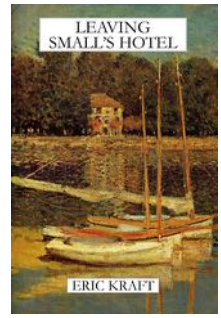
in which Peter receives his sexual initiation at the hands of the Glynn twins, becomes a sketch doctor, listens to tales about the night the Nevsky mansion burned, learns the value of hope, and discovers the love of his life.

"A daring tour de force."
The New York Times Book Review

LEAVING SMALL'S HOTEL

in which Peter reads the latest installment of his memoirs in fifty consecutive episodes, culminating on the night of his fiftieth birthday, while his wife, Albertine, tries to stop the old hotel they own from crumbling slowly around them.

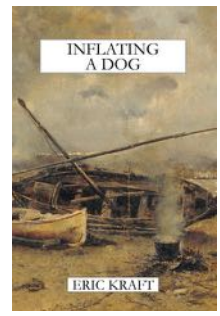
"One of the most delightful novels of the decade."
Kirkus Reviews



INFLATING A DOG

in which Peter tries to help his mother in a scheme to re-invent a sinking clamboat as an elegant cruising vessel. Each night he sneaks to the harbor and pumps the boat dry, inflating his mother's hopes a bit longer.

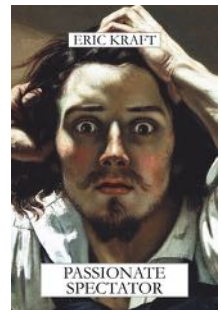
"Sentimental, loving, raucous, wise, and great fun." *Booklist*



PASSIONATE SPECTATOR

in which Peter, summoned for jury duty, allows his mind to wander into the mind of Matthew Barber, who finds himself in a Boston hospital, where he allows his mind to wander into the mind of Bertram W. Beath, who checks into a hotel in Miami's South Beach and into a life as an erotic opportunist and passionate spectator of beauty and human folly.

"Incisive prose and off-kilter wit."
Steve Smith,
Time Out New York



FLYING

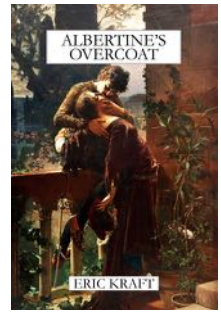
in which Peter sets out to give a full and frank account of his legendary flight from Babbington to New Mexico in a single-seat airplane that he built in the family garage during the summer of his fifteenth year—a flight that consisted mainly of taxiing.

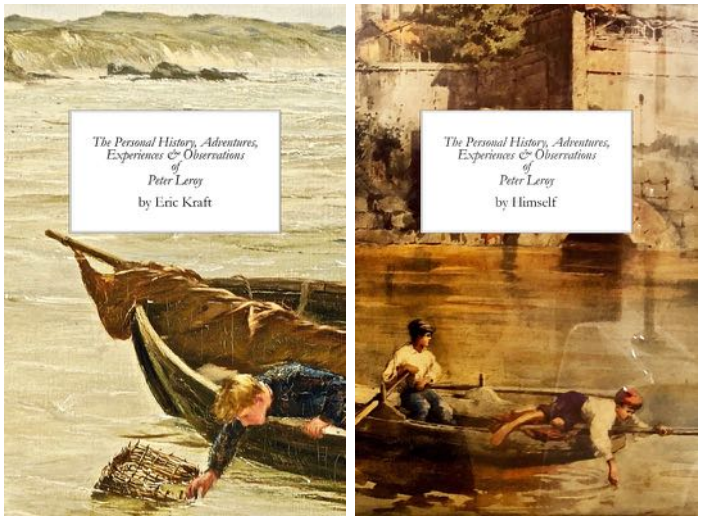
"The perfect jumping-in book for readers new to Kraft's vividly rendered and gleefully satirical fictional cosmos." *Newsday*

ALBERTINE'S OVERCOAT

in which Peter discovers that Albertine Gaudet makes a far better center for his life than he does himself, and begins one of literature's great romances.

"It was wonderful to immerse myself again in Peter's world, and to emerge blinking as if just awakened, delighted, beguiled." George Witte





Eric Kraft's novels contain Peter Leroy's memoirs.

"Eric Kraft has spent his writing career creating **a series of comic masterpieces**. . . . and am I ever glad he did. . . . The books can be read in any order, but be warned: Once you start the series, you won't want to read anything else until you finish them all."
Nancy Pearl, *Book Lust*

"Eric Kraft is an oddball, an eccentric, a bit of a genius — the writerly equivalent of a dreamer who puts together weird and wonderful contraptions in his garage. . . . Kraft has made his career out of **high-wire performance**, seizing on the merest hint or detail and spinning it into **magic.**"
Richard Rayner, *The Los Angeles Times*

"Kraft's imagination, like Leroy's, is endlessly fertile, not merely in its creations but in its connections, as well, so that each apparently innocent anecdote chimes with Kraft's broader theme of the imagined life, of its **thrilling, enhancing, and ultimately dangerous** connection to the real."
Claire Messud, *Newsday*

"Mr. Kraft's work is **a weird wonder**, successfully mating tales from the kind of small-town life that hardly exists anymore with a never-ending examination of what it's like to create such a world. His preoccupation with the homely lives of the citizens of Babbington is adroitly offset by his passion for the story of telling the story. . . . In an age when computer technology is on the verge of unleashing the all-singing, all-dancing novel, Eric Kraft's true theme, the awesome power of the low-tech human imagination, has never seemed so timely or so wise."
Karen Karbo, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Because Kraft expresses an abiding faith in steadfast love and impossible dreams, because he uses humor to shape a humanistic ethos, and because he takes profound pleasure in the resonance of language and the magic of storytelling, reading Kraft's **inventive and effervescent** tales is **a rare and sustaining joy**."
Donna Seaman, *Newsday*

"The cumulative effect of Kraft's work is of **a sober humor that refuses easy answers.** . . . This is crafty work indeed and **certain to endure** when more pretentious and more touted writers are forgotten."
Bob Williams, *The Compulsive Reader*

"Reading the Peter Leroy saga is akin to watching a champion juggler deftly keep dozens of balls in the air while executing an intricate double-time dance routine—all without breathing hard. . . . **Sentimental, loving, raucous, wise, and great fun**, this is simply **not to be missed**."
Booklist

"**Perhaps the most ambitious and rewarding literary enterprise of our time.** . . . Even when you find yourself laughing aloud, it would be a mistake to take Eric Kraft lightly."
Andrew Ervin, *The San Francisco Chronicle*

"The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy is **one of the biggest, funniest, sweetest, and looniest undertakings in contemporary American fiction**."
John Strausbaugh, *New York Press*

"Eric Kraft's essential subject is suburban boyhood—in particular, that moment when it loses its innocence. . . . Like Laurence Sterne, Kraft is **unashamedly sentimental, digressive, and extremely funny**; like Proust, profoundly nostalgic and obsessed with loss. The typical Kraft novel is **a laugh-out-loud read with undertones of grief and ruefulness**. Almost all of his books revolve around a single individual, Peter Leroy, who is now . . . as fully realized as any character in current American literature. . . . Under the surface humor, Kraft's take on the national experience is thoughtful, disturbing, and unlike that of any other American writer."
Anthony Brandt, *Men's Journal*

"**One of the cleverest and most charming literary enterprises in recent American fiction**."
Mahinder Kingra, *The City Paper* (Baltimore)

"Is there a more **beguiling** writer today than Eric Kraft?"
Publishers Weekly

"This series is **smart, funny, warmly inviting, and delightfully impossible to define**."
Kate Bernheimer, *The Oregonian*

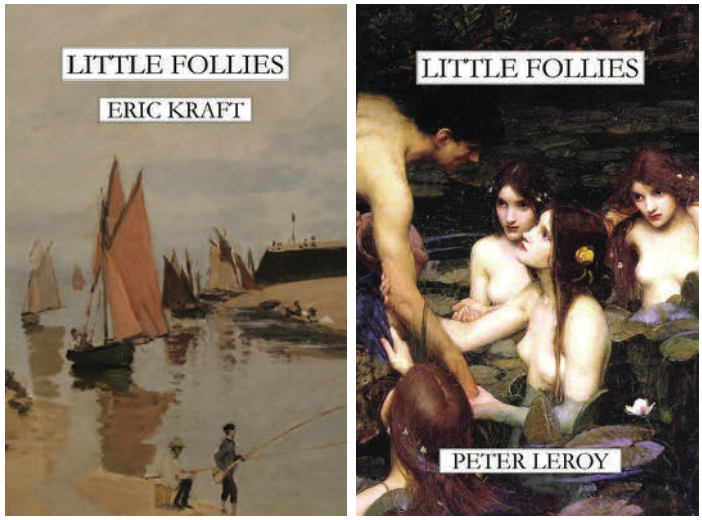
"Anyone who has mourned, or yearned for, his or her younger self will find Kraft **an enchantment**."
Publishers Weekly

"**An ever-evolving comic masterpiece**. Beneath the dazzling comic antics, Kraft has a serious purpose: to investigate the nature and interaction of memory, reality, and invention."
Michael Upchurch, *The Seattle Times*

"Charming but never sappy, droll but never cynical, Peter Leroy's adventures constitute **one of our wittiest and most acute portraits of America at mid-century**. In the bargain, they are the literary equivalent of Fred Astaire dancing: **great art that looks like fun**."
Malcolm Jones, Jr., *Newsweek*

"The Peter Leroy stories and novels of Eric Kraft are **among the most ingenious works of recent fiction**. They are this fine writer's way of using fiction to deal with that age-old dilemma of art, the links between illusion and reality."
Roger Harris, *The Newark Star Ledger*

"You should seek out and read the books of Eric Kraft. . . . His books are simultaneously sincere explorations of the lives of his characters and ironic commentaries on those lives. . . . Kraft's books contain **the kind of humor that can only come out of a deep love and understanding of the people he writes about**. Too much reverence can slip and become patronizing, phony. Kraft's books are totally weird and made up, but they're never phony."
John Warner, *The Chicago Tribune*



Eric Kraft's novel contains Peter Leroy's memoir.

"*Little Follies* is a modern rarity: a sly and sweet-spirited meditation on childhood in which **high art and sheer entertainment** are gloriously one and the same. I envy the lucky souls who are meeting Peter Leroy for the first time."
Armistead Maupin

"*Little Follies* reads like footloose light fiction, but the complexity of its fabric, and the precision of its effects, are the hallmarks of an artist who has made a serious commitment. . . . It generates its own . . . reality, and it's **profoundly funny**. Although it's doled out in short segments, the evolving landscape of this saga, this **masterpiece of American humor**, feels vast."
David Chute, *The Los Angeles Times*

"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 **seriocomic meditation on the art of fiction**, the nature of memory, and the many uses of clams."
Michael Upchurch, *The Washington Post*

"Eric Kraft is **one of our best writers**, the author of two extraordinary novels—*Herb 'n' Lorna*, a critical favorite, and the even more admirable *Reservations Recommended*, an urban fable told in the guise of restaurant reviews. Now Kraft has given us all of the Leroy stories. . . . They are quite as **delightful** as anything he has written."
Roger Harris, *The Newark Star-Ledger*

"Kraft's special talent is for creating characters and people familiar enough to empathize with but who inhabit a world all his own, located somewhere between our minds and his. . . . The result is **complex** and **funny** and sometimes **touching** and maybe sometimes **even wise**.
Jim Erickson, *The Wichita Eagle*

"*Little Follies* is, first and foremost, a **consistently funny** book. Kraft seems to have taken to heart Peter's grandfather's advice on writing, 'make sure there's **a laugh on every page**.' There is. Sometimes it's a short, sympathetic, share-the-remembered-pain-of-childhood laugh, sometimes a belly laugh at the absurdity of the situations in which Peter finds himself."
David Dodd, *San Francisco Examiner-Chronicle*

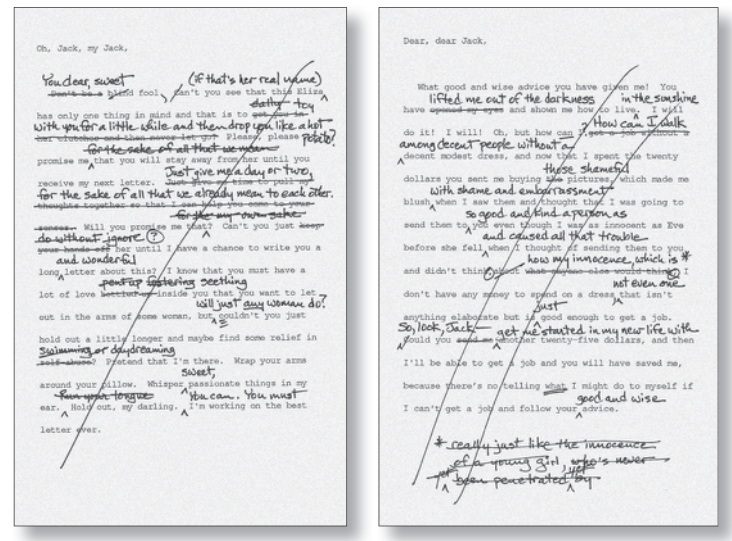
"Whimsy . . . mystery, tragedy, jealousy, love, wisdom, irony, wonder . . . **you'll read quickly and happily**, eager to finish one story and get on to the next."
James Idema, *Chicago Tribune*

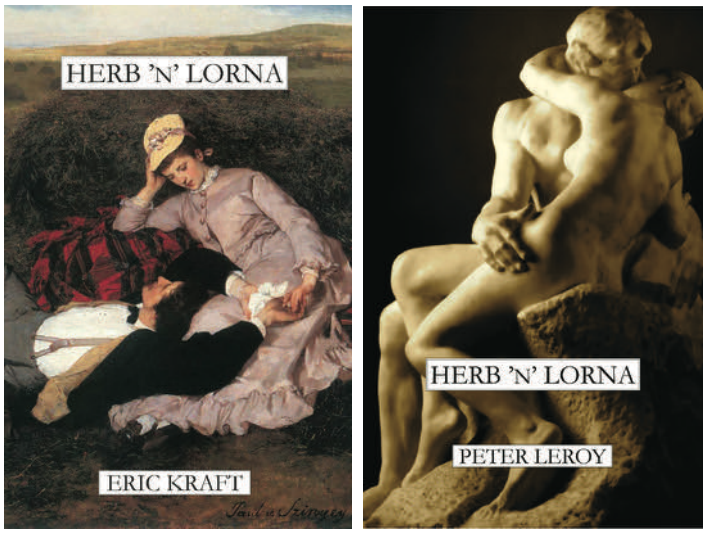
"Kraft is widely regarded as a first-rate comic novelist, but this familiar categorization fails to account for his talents as a literary miniaturist and the creator of a highly eccentric, utterly self-contained imaginative world. . . . *Little Follies* represents **the essential work of one of our most distinctive comic talents**. For those unfamiliar with Kraft's work, this is the logical place to begin."
R. D. Pohl, *The Buffalo News*

"*Little Follies* is **one of the funniest novels I have ever read**. . . . As if the marvelous writing were not enough, the book is studded with delicious little chunks of material which are not exactly the novel itself. . . . If, as one of Mr. Kraft's characters says, 'childhood is like a moment on a mountaintop in the sunshine before we descend into the vale of tears,' then this book is a long vacation at the peak."
Michael Z. Jody, *The East Hampton Star*

"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**. . . . 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.'"
Julie Salamon, *The Wall Street Journal*

"At times, reading Kraft is like stumbling across memories of your own life, and yet the work is self-consciously—pointedly—literary. In effect, you're always reading 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 **a deceptively modest attempt to render the very substance of experience in its smallest, stop-action increments**. . . . Kraft's little follies are the work of an ardent reader, who gives others of his kind what they love most . . . In them, the world of the imagination and the world that produces cars, junk, and an opposite sex are a peaceable kingdom."
Anna Shapiro, *The New Yorker*





Eric Kraft's novel contains Peter Leroy's memoir.

"**A high-spirited romp** through four generations of recent American history . . . the most pleasant surprise of the current literary season. It's hard to recall a more auspicious mainstream debut in recent American fiction. A remarkable romance . . . without contemporary parallel . . . **an unconditional success** on its own terms."
R. D. Pohl, *The Buffalo News*

"A historical farce, a comedy of four generations of happy errors. This **very funny** novel—as **graceful**, complicated, and **exhilarating** as a quadrille—is an appreciation of folly . . . a work of lovely formal artifice. Mr. Kraft has the gift of generosity of vision, and he detects passion, satisfaction and joy in the most mundane activities. . . . Satirical novelists like to poke holes in things; Mr. Kraft sees the holes that are already there and thinks they form intricate designs. He writes about the formal beauty of having fun. The novel is all about sex, and sex, in 'Herb 'n' Lorna,' means everything in life that is good—craft and art and imagination and hard work and humor and friendship and skill and curiosity and loyalty and love. Eric Kraft is **an exacting comic novelist whose work is happy and expansive**."
Cathleen Schine, *The New York Times Book Review* (front page review)

"This isn't really a biography but a novel in biographical form. But whatever you call it, **you have to love it**. The charm of Kraft's delightful novel is that despite the strangeness of coarse goods or cork furniture, the reader comes to really like and care about these people. Erotic art or not, you begin to wish that Peter's grandparents were your own."
Roberta J. Wahlers, *The Milwaukee Journal*

"A **warm, inventive** novel whose quirky humor and typically American optimism should delight many readers."
ALA Booklist

"A warm, gently humorous, leisurely story, quite proper throughout; **a charmer.**"
Library Journal

"A **beautiful** book that shines with affection and crackles with good writing."
Marc Munroe Dion, *The Kansas City Star*

"A whimsical investigation into the past. An **exhilarating** comic novel that is both marvelously **sly** and enormously good-natured. A wonderful love story . . . but there is much more to it than that. Loony and **beguiling**."
Lisa Jensen, *San Francisco Chronicle*

"The unlikely premise of this book is a real grabber, and once Kraft gets hold of his audience, he doesn't let go. **Bawdy, raunchy, and warm. Great fun.**"
Susan Sprague, *The Trenton Times*

"One all-American joyride of a novel, celebrating the carnal and the corny with equal exuberance. It held me in its thrall from the moment the first box was opened. Eric Kraft is **nothing short of brilliant**."
Armistead Maupin

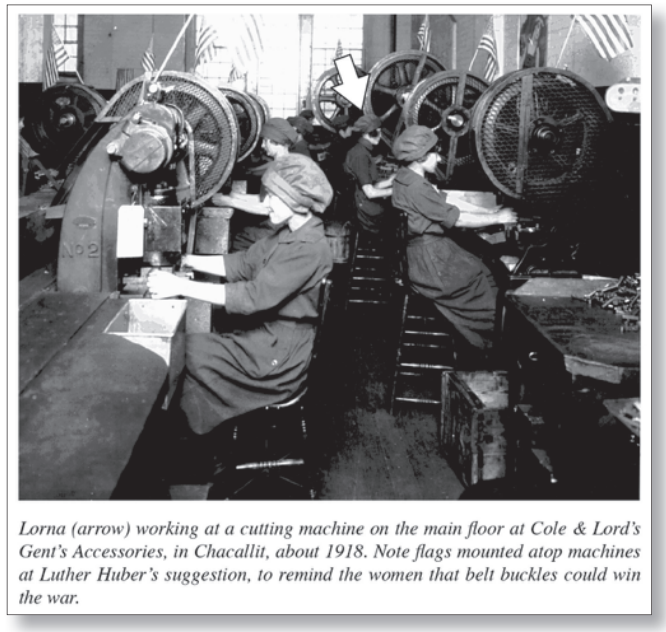
"A **funny, sexy** story told with consummate skill. However high its sexual content, it is always about love, and the twists and turns, logical and illogical, that love takes between two lives bound together down the years. Reality gets stood on its head. Everything works out. Love is a charm. *Herb 'n' Lorna* is funny, readable, **carefully plotted and cleverly told.** You don't get this lucky that often."
Malcolm Jones, Jr., *The St. Petersburg Times*

"**Rejoice**! . . . Joyful sex suffuses *Herb 'n' Lorna*, making it an oddity in these just-say-no days . . . sex indeed, but love and friendship, too, every sort of pleasure offered and taken. Kraft says yes to it all. Peter Leroy couldn't have staged a more **delightful** comeback."
Walter Kendrick, *The Village Voice*

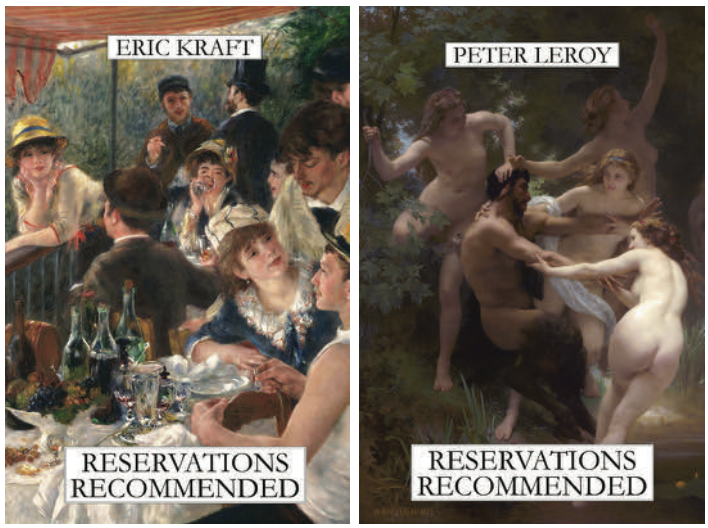
"The kind of sweetness and passion and laughter Kraft draws from these ordinary lives is rare and endearing. *Herb 'n' Lorna* is **the happiest of books—not to mention the sexiest**."
Charles Trueheart,*The Washington Post*

"There aren't enough adjectives to praise this delightfully generous storyteller. *Herb 'n' Lorna* is **a classic**. Savor it."
Andrei Codrescu, National Public Radio

Recommended by the Reader's Catalogue
A New York Times Notable Book of the Year (1988)



Lorna (arrow) working at a cutting machine on the main floor at Cole & Lord's Gent's Accessories, in Chacallit, about 1918. Note flags mounted atop machines at Luther Huber's suggestion, to remind the women that belt buckles could win the war.



Eric Kraft's novel contains Peter Leroy's memoir.

"Eric Kraft is **a satirist with style and sting**. By looking askance at the downside of modern maturity, he sees it with more truth and clarity than the maudlin army of novelists who meet it grimly head on."
Amanda Heller, *The Boston Globe*

"*Reservations Recommended* is . . . **a merciless sendup of contemporary American pretensions**, which aims to show the disastrous effects of many kinds of human disguises. Among its targets are pen names, pseudo-imported beers, faked orgasms, post-structuralist literary jargon, inauthentic nostalgia for the '50s and faux decor, including the likes of 'faux-tiger upholstery' and 'faux-leopard carpeting.' . . . Eric Kraft can pack more **wit** into a sentence about grilled pork tenderloin than a lot of authors can fit into an entire book, which is just one of the things that makes *Reservations Recommended* fun."
Janice Harayda, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*

"At first, this **dark comic novel** seems like no more than a deft satire of chic big-city restaurants . . . . Each chapter spotlights such an eatery, and each closes with a restaurant review by the pompous B. W. Beath. Just as Beath is only a pen name, masking the identity of one Matthew Barber, the true subject of the book—a society gone mad with self absorption—isn't on the menu. . . . The novel gets darker as it goes along. From the outset, [Matthew] is plainly a mite screwy: he has a whole wall of his trendy apartment demolished to locate an odor that only he can smell. By the end, having all but lost his soul to the Sybaritic B.W., he is clearly going mad. Matthew's journey from soup to nuts, though **disquieting**, is **salutary**, because Eric Kraft has a moral vision. His target is those who take nothing seriously but themselves, and his **artful, bitter** portrait of a man without compassion makes the best possible argument for that quality."
Malcolm Jones Jr., *Newsweek*

"A **deft satire** on the excesses of contemporary America."
Greg Johnson, *Chicago Tribune*

"A **moving urban fable** that contains all the ingredients, comic and tragic, of our flawed design for living."
Roger Harris, *Newark Star Ledger*

"Like all Kraft's work, *Reservations* rejoices in games, frames, masks, and artifice. . . . *Reservations Recommended* is a **wonderfully readable** novel about an intelligent man's capitulation to the anger and fear endemic to middle-aged, middle-class white American men. At times an extremely uncomfortable read, it's never less than touching and intelligent."
Richard Gehr, *The Village Voice Literary Supplement*

"Displays a tremendous empathy for the ways human beings distort themselves in restaurants and how the critical stance makes liars of us . . . . The seven satirical restaurants are **hilariously on the mark**, and some of Beath's criticism . . . is **witty enough to steal**. . . . This novel has a mean streak, but it allows for belief in Santa Claus."
Robert Nadeau, *The Boston Phoenix*

"A **brilliant satire** . . . a gem that is both **awfully funny yet terribly serious**, striking at the heart of our contemporary dilemmas. Kraft is a Swift for the 1990s, and *Reservations Recommended* is a novel that shouldn't be missed."
LA Life

"Kraft has enough **spring and freshness** in his repertoire to do one of the things a novelist almost never manages—keeping a reader awake during sex."
Thomas Mallon, *Washington Post Bookworld*

"Una obra seria, muy seria, abierta, inteligentemente amena, realista, divertida, **trascendente y hermosa,** que revela la presencia de un sólido escritor dueño de su propio concepto del mundo, con cosas notables que decir para que alguien las escuche."
Robert Saladrigas, *La Vanguardia* (Barcelona)

"Hacía tiempo que no topaba con un humor tan inteligente, con un personaje tan acertado y con una forma de narrar tan controlada **como un paquete-bomba**. *Mesas reservadas* consigue lo que pretende: burlar la convencionalidad, reventar a los tipos vulgares y corrientes, embadurnar con mostaza lo que parece el plato especial del chef."
Félix Romeo Pescador, *Diario16* (Madrid)


RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED 43

THE EPICUREAN
ADVENTURES of B. W. BEATH
IN THE HUB OF THE UNIVERSE

The Alley View Grill

We really enjoy the **Alley View Grill**. Honest. We do. Whenever we get a late-night craving for goat-cheese pizza or a veal-and-*pancetta* burger with some tomato *coulis*, it's almost the first place that comes to mind. Oh, sure, we know it's a frenzied, schizoid place, with one foot in Mom's kitchen back in bucolic Kansas and the other in New York's arty SoHo, but what the heck, we're probably a little schizy ourselves.

The décor—ah, the décor. Faux-zebra Formica, faux-tiger upholstery, faux-leopard carpeting, faux-peacock wallpaper. Our companion thought she had stumbled into an old Busby Berkeley musical—something like *Decorators on Safari*. But we like it. And since we've always favored gigantism in floral arrangements, we adore the Brobdingnagian bouquets. We don't even blush at their showy sexuality, the way they flaunt their whopping pistils, their stupendous stamens. We keep an open mind. We tolerate lubricious vegetation in all its bizarre varieties. We don't even blink at the gigantic buds of shell ginger, which seem to us so very like the spent and drooping members of enormous armadillos.

In a way, the Alley View Grill is a mom-and-pop eatery brought up to date: the décor is dada-deco, and the food is *nouvelle* Mom—a type that we have begun to see more and more in cutting-edge restaurants. Restaurateurs seem to be savoring anew their memories of Mom's kitchen. Suddenly they're nostalgic for the food they ate before they came to the city, learned to speak another language, began ridiculing their parents, and tried to hide their small-town naïveté. They don't serve up their nostalgia straight, of course; it's seasoned with the sophistication they've acquired away from home. So every remembered dish must be treated with face-saving contempt. Each is made the butt of an elegant, and sometimes quite delicious, joke. So the Alley View Grill offers Dad's favorite—grilled sirloin—but it's smothered in nasturtiums, not the onions Dad preferred. It arrives looking like a ritual sacrifice to Kong—grilled thigh of virgin, perhaps. There's grilled pork tenderloin, too, but it's served rare, flouting everything Mom said about pork. The apple pie is made with six varieties of apple (three American, one French, two Australian) and dusted with chopped macadamia nuts. There is even

• BOSTON BIWEEKLY


44 PETER LEROY

a burger, but it is the aforementioned veal-and-*pancetta* burger, with tomato *coulis*, about which Mom and Dad knew from nothin', we bet. (Even Dad's martini gets the snicker treatment. It's just a frozen gimlet, minus the touch of vermouth that would elevate it from an anaesthetic to Nick and Nora's favorite tipple.)

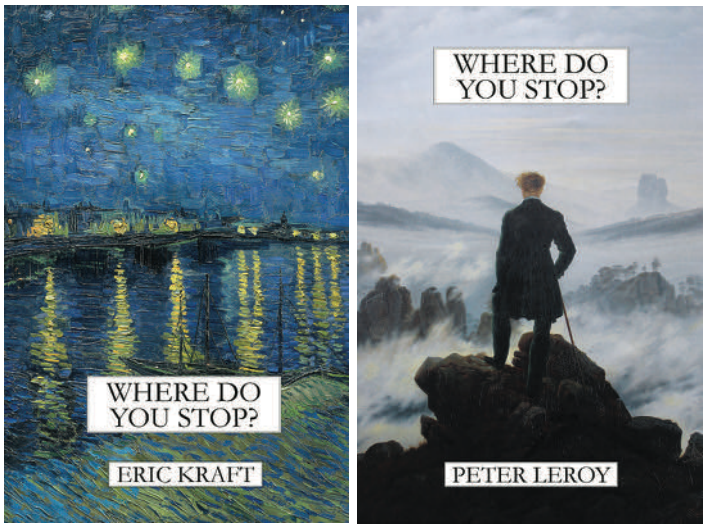
The service. Well. Our heart is warmed by the sight of waiters and waitresses enjoying themselves, and here they certainly do. On some evenings our heart has been so warmed by their happy chatting and chortling that we have scarcely noticed that they have scarcely noticed us. Apparently the owners have quite an enlightened attitude toward what in the old, benighted, classist days of dining used to be called "service." Nor does the enlightenment end there. The Alley View Grill has, apparently, a hiring practice that favors waiters and waitresses with striking good looks and a total ignorance of food. We say bravo! These people have to start somewhere, don't they? Let them practice on us! We can attest to the fact that the Alley View gang learns quickly. They've already mastered indolence, indifference, and ignorance, the three essentials of contemporary sophisticated service. But does the place have style! The waiters mispronounce the names of the foods with impressive panache, and the menu misspells them in handsome deco-revival type. The golden-tressed fellow who will tell you, when you phone for a reservation on a Friday or Saturday, that he can't possibly fit you in for four weeks will be speaking to you over an old black telephone straight out of an uncolorized *film noir* (perhaps that should be a *film noir-et-blanc*). The neon sign over the entrance once flashed beside a motel somewhere on the banks of the Connecticut River, the Valley View. Rescued from a salvage yard, it flashes again, all but the first *V*. And the ne plus ultra: above the bar, in pale green neon script, is the single word *Champagne*. Now if that's not *style*, we sure don't know what is.

Of course we adore the ebullient, well-dressed clientele. They're a vastly diverse group, representing every shade of sexual preference, sporting the latest garb smuggled in from New York. You'll get to know them well, thanks to their indefatigable table hopping, the extravagance of their greetings (are they performing for hidden cameras?), and the fact that the management has had the foresight to put the tables close enough to one another so that your neighbor (soon your chum!) is nearer (soon dearer!) to you than your dinner companion. Beware, though, of the weekends, when the truly trendy are squeezed out by poseurs from the 'burbs, who have come in to see what they should be wearing and find out what arugula tastes like.

—*BWB*

The Alley View Grill
221 Rear Bartleby Street, 555-6100.
American Express, Visa, MasterCard. No checks.
Handicapped: handicapped restrooms.
Lunch 12–3, Tuesday–Saturday.
Brunch 12–3, Sunday.
Dinner 6–11 Tuesday–Sunday.
Reservations recommended weekdays, a must weekends.

BOSTON BIWEEKLY •



Eric Kraft's novel contains Peter Leroy's memoir.

"The title of this **sly and extremely funny** book is also the title of a paper that Peter is assigned by his science teacher, the luscious, leggy Miss Rheingold. We—and Peter—learn quite a bit about Miss Rheingold, although nowhere near as much as Peter would like. We also learn about epistemology; the boundaries of the self; the building of backyard lighthouses; terrazzo floors; Chinese checkers; American education; the restricted vision of children (and their parents); and the design of such exquisitely intricate gadgets as the phonograph, the scanning tunneling microscope, the universe, and the novel. . . . In what other novel this year will you find the instructions, complete with diagram, for constructing a flour bomb? Or a discussion, by a gum-chewing seventh-grade girl, of Zwischenraum, the empty space between the components of an atom? Or a canny analysis of racial prejudice proffered by Porky White, the entrepreneur behind the phenomenally successful Kap'n Klam Family Restaurants? . . . Like childhood itself, *Where Do You Stop?* is **filled with wonders**. It is a book designed to leave its readers—and it deserves many of them—as happy as clams."

Walter Satterthwait, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Fans of Eric Kraft's Peter Leroy series will unequivocally delight in this latest installment of Peter's adventures growing up in post-WWII Babbington, the 'clam capital of America.' Readers unfamiliar with this masterful storyteller's **pellucid prose** will equally enjoy his account of Peter's momentous and treacherous initiation into junior high school . . . a **magical, funny**, healing journey that features familiar and unusual memories . . . without lapsing into mere nostalgia."

Publishers Weekly (starred review)

"From the in-depth examination of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, to the inner workings of the drive mechanism of a windup record player, or the perfect proportions for a beer and lemonade shandy, the young Peter leads us on a merry investigation and exploration of his (and our) world, and, in the process, invests it with a great deal of warmth and humor and charm. . . . Mr. Kraft is **a splendid, smart, funny, slyly sexy, and insightful writer** . . . and Mr. Kraft continues to be a pleasure to read."

Michael Z. Jody, *The East Hampton Star*

"While most readers have been looking the other way, writer Eric Kraft has turned out a series of whiz-bang novellas about a kid named Peter Leroy who does a lot of neat stuff, like thinking, squidging for clams with his toes, and noticing the fantastic legs of his new science teacher, Miss Rheingold. . . . His books are good, **luminously intelligent fun**."

Time

"Kraft's humor is always **warm** and sometimes laugh-aloud, his characters are wonderfully sketched, and his themes are as **thought-provoking** as his efforts are charming. Delightful."

Library Journal (starred review)

"The giddy excitement of expanding scientific consciousness is coupled with the awakening of sexual desires in this goofy and **thoroughly enjoyable** novel . . . . You won't want this charming little exercise in learned whimsy to end."

Timothy Hunter, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

"Working on a vast scale but serving up the components of his ongoing saga in tasty morsels, Kraft has managed to create a 1950s world that is both wildly eccentric and universal in its appeal. His young protagonist, **earnest screwball Peter Leroy**, is the narrator of these 'adventures, experiences and observations' . . . and he's as winning a character as any to have appeared recently on the American literary scene. *Where Do You Stop?* is the latest installment, and it's **a treat**. . . . It's **an enchanting comic meditation on the quirkiness of memory and the joys of daydreaming**. At its most ambitious moments, it's **nothing less than an attempt to comprehend the nature of the universe itself.** . . . Droll, provocative, and filled with memorable characters, *Where Do You Stop?* confirms Kraft as a writer who is every bit as inventive as he is entertaining."

Michael Upchurch, *The Seattle Times & Post-Intelligencer*

"A **hilarious** reminiscence of Peter's pre-adolescent years, his awakening to sexual feelings, and other inchoate confusions . . . ."

Bruce Allen, *USA TODAY*

"Kraft gets better all the time, and Peter Leroy's fondly remembered world grows richer and funnier—more provocative, too—with each new episode. **Stay tuned**."

Alicia Miller, *Chagrin Falls Currents*

Recommended by the Reader's Catalogue
A New York Times Notable Book of the Year (1992)

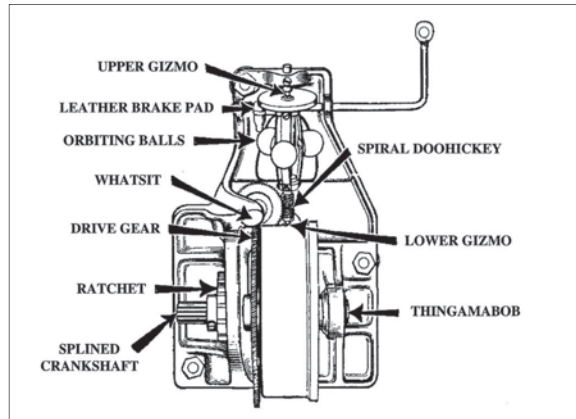


FIGURE 1: The drive mechanism of a windup record player like the one that I found in the cellar. Note orbiting balls that govern rotational speed. (Adapted from Part 3806, a diagram affixed to the bottom of a Victrola IV, manufactured by the Victor Talking Machine Company of Camden, New Jersey, January 1915.)

Eric Kraft's novel contains Peter Leroy's memoir.

"In his latest novel, Mr. Kraft has created a heroine as complex as his narrative. . . . [he] is **a master at illuminating the shoals and shallows of a young person's heart**. . . . Mr. Kraft's work is **a weird wonder**, successfully mating tales from the kind of small-town life that hardly exists anymore with a never-ending examination of what it's like to create such a world. . . . . In an age when computer technology is on the verge of unleashing the all-singing, all-dancing novel, Eric Kraft's true theme, **the awesome power of the low-tech human imagination**, has never seemed so **timely** or so **wise**."

Karen Karbo, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Eric Kraft cooks up **another treat**. . . . [He] continues his **delightful** and **brainy** series of novels about the **engaging** denizens of the fictional Long Island clamming town of Babbington. . . . Lodkochnikov's voice is as **fetching** as can be, by turns **tough** and **wistful**. Like mythology, her **vibrant** stories show human beings at their worst, their best, and their most fragile. And they yield more than a few bits of wisdom. Above all, Kraft's new novel celebrates the joy of storytelling while gently probing the psyches of those who feel the need to create stories."

Timothy Hunter, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*

"Novelist Eric Kraft's niche in contemporary literature might well be as **a sunny, upbeat American version of the Argentine fabulist Jorge Luis Borges**. Like the latter's magical realism, Kraft's writing focuses on personal identity as an ephemeral, ever-changing construct, and this theme underlies his ongoing, major life's work, *The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy,* now consisting of five independent yet related novels . . . . His newest novel centers on the **sultry** Ariane . . . In this **complex** mirroring of two sides of an evolving identity, what the **masterful tale teller** Kraft does is show that, while Ariane may not exist materially, it is enough that she exists in Peter's imagination 'at a crossroads in a labyrinth of tales.'"

Mark Ciabattari, *Washington Post Book World*

"Ariane Lodkochnikov is practically **a walking sex fantasy**—her nickname is Tootsie Koochikov, and she is so alluring that even her dopey brothers spy on her through chinks in the bedroom wall. . . . Her fate is to be a modern-day Ariadne, though, which means that almost any path she tries is a dead end or loops back to where she started. That should be frustrating to the reader, but it's when we come upon new versions of what we've seen before that the novel is most **droll** and delighting. It conveys a sense of **sheer play** that a reader may not have experienced since building a fort in the back yard or setting up a dolls' tea party."

The New Yorker

"A story of travels that are **sometimes real, sometimes imaginary, and always diverting**. Kraft's gift is for minute observation, the depiction of small events and the metaphors to be found in things like clam chowder. Reading Kraft takes work, but it is work well rewarded."

Mark Munroe Dion, *Kansas City Star*

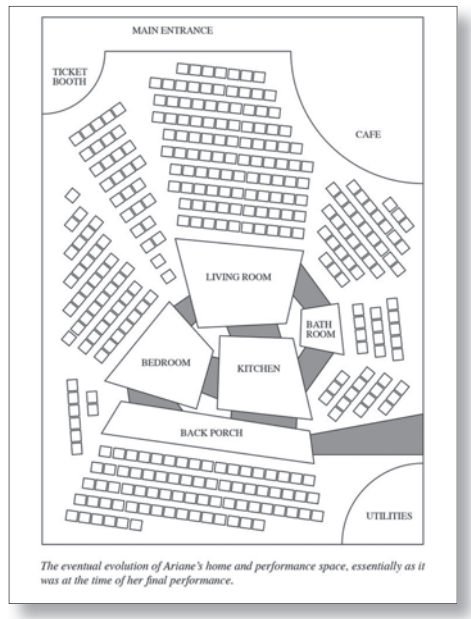
"**The Peter Leroy stories and novels of Eric Kraft are among the most ingenious works of recent fiction.** They are this fine writer's way of using fiction to deal with that age-old dilemma of art, the links between illusion and reality. . . . Kraft's techniques are sly indeed. He satirizes artistic pretentiousness, while, at the same time, obviously enjoying what he satirizes. The delicate line between art and truth has never been more entertainingly explored."

Roger Harris, *The Newark Star Ledger*

"Reality, in Eric Kraft's fifth novel, sometimes seems as **slippery and difficult to grasp as a jellyfish in baby oil**. Like a nimble child playing hopscotch, Peter Leroy, the present-day narrator of this confabulation, delights in hopping back and forth across the borders of truth, being, memory, meaning, and existence—asking, and often answering, provocative questions about the nature of being and becoming, and about how we construct ourselves (literally make something of ourselves) over the course of our lives. . . . Mr. Kraft is aiming high here, compelling his characters and his readers to struggle and grapple with preconceived notions about reality and fiction and truth and their relationship to how we become ourselves. It is well worth the effort, though, because **we are—as we have come to expect from Eric Kraft—in the hands of a master**."

Michael Z. Jody, *The East Hampton Star*

Recommended by the Reader's Catalogue
A New York Times Notable Book of the Year (1994)



The eventual evolution of Ariane's home and performance space, essentially as it was at the time of her final performance.

Eric Kraft's novel contains Peter Leroy's memoir.

"This gently provocative novel uses **a boy's delicious dalliance with two sisters** to serve up the author's true passion: **Deep Questions about the nature of art and memory**. . . . The plot, such as it is, pits Kraft/Leroy's digressive tendencies against the reader's fond hopes that the book will live up to the promise of its early **sexual-initiation scene, a model of the genre**. . . . The fact that the Glynns are Middle European exiles hiding under assumed names, that the twins' 'foreplay' consists of having Peter act out the plots of the foreign films that they see at the local art house, and that Peter's involvement with the girls will eventually resemble the plots of the movies he sees—well, that's the kind of **High Fun** to be found in Kraft's **self-referential but never boring** Art. . .. . Kraft's latest **sexy-sweet** novel devolves into a perfect madeleine—dissolving just as you bite into it, leaving **an insatiable desire for more**."

Kirkus Reviews

"Peter Leroy's preadolescent voice, recaptured years later by his fictive middle-aged persona, is always unerringly itself, at once unexpectedly **articulate** and believably **childlike**. It is a likable voice, **ingenuous, modest, wholly engaging**. As such, it earns the most fanciful events in his story a certain credibility, or at least an unresisting suspension of disbelief. We are disposed to accept whatever Mr. Kraft, in the guise of Peter Leroy, tells us, even as he confesses to mixing invention with memory, even as events become more and more whimsically improbable. A **daring tour de force**, *At Home with the Glynns* seems often to be dangling on a tightrope over the mine field of terminal cute. It teeters teasingly but **never loses its poise**. Mr. Kraft's cunning novel is really a children's book (like, say, *The Catcher in the Rye*) for adults, which I mean as unequivocal praise. There is nothing more serious, after all, than the playful, given full play."

Jonathan Baumbach, *The New York Times Book Review*

"The comedy of *At Home with the Glynns* comes equally from the boyhood tale, which **cheerfully flouts all the literary laws of childhood innocence**, and from the adult narrative voice in which it is slyly recounted. With self-mocking finesse, the novel celebrates the savor of memory **for the sophisticated palate**."

Boston Sunday Globe

"Readers . . . will find Kraft's **wry style, deep insights into youth and age**, and sly observation of adult behavior **a rare delight**. . . . Anyone who has mourned, or yearned for, his or her younger self will find Kraft **an enchantment**."

Publishers Weekly (starred review)

"The book is an exploration of time, memory, truth, and trust, and Kraft is **a master of dialogue and description**."

Town and Country

"**Splendid writing** about the quirks of adolescence . . . a splendidly vivid exploration of 'sexual pleasure amplified and augmented by the thrill of adventure'—a striding tour through a young boy's mind as he enters what he calls 'that enchanted Glynnscape.'"

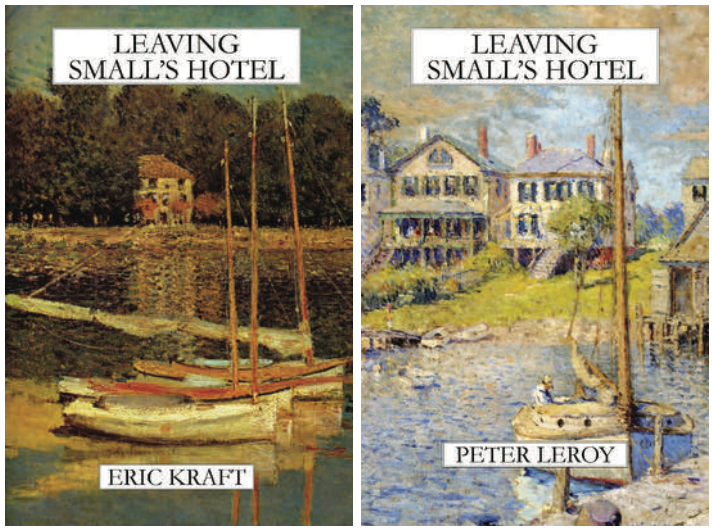
Dwight Garner, *New York Newsday*

"**Nostalgic and very funny and just a little perverse**. . . . Kraft manages, as always, to pass his serious concerns off with the delicate evanescence of a bubble blown from a ring."

Frederic Koeppel, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*

"The plot fuses the pleasures of sexual initiation and going to the movies, the townspeople's memories of an old mansion that burned years before, and Peter's new career doctoring the sketches of Andy [Glynn]'s art students. **Miraculously, Kraft weaves every disparate strand into a tightly knotted yarn.** 'My art is made of recollection, and revision, and wishful thinking,' Peter admits. This is more a boast than a confession, since, as ringmaster of Peter's ever-expanding universe, Kraft has continually scrubbed away the distinction between life and literature. Or, as Peter once put it, 'I have now a fond affection for the idea that all the characters in books live in the same place,' a well-populated town where '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.' That sounds suspiciously post-modernist, but **postmodernism was never so pleasurable**."

Malcolm Jones, Jr., *Newsweek*



Eric Kraft's novel contains Peter Leroy's memoir.

"An endearing history of ex-urban American life that consistently evokes Mark Twain, James Thurber, and their kindred. The result is a compact comic *Decameron*, a deadpan fantasia . . . a minor masterpiece: **one of the most delightful novels of the decade**."
Kirkus Reviews

"Is there a more beguiling writer today than Eric Kraft? In his latest comic novel, he manages to combine two of his work's hitherto disparate modes—the pastoral (à la Wodehouse) and the black humor that runs like a stain through American literature from Melville to Nathanael West—to hilarious effect. . . . **With his customary elegance, Kraft has written a coda to the utopian impulses that lurk in the heart of our century**; this novel will please both fans and readers new to the small, welcoming hotel of the Peter Leroy books."
Publishers Weekly

"*Leaving Small's Hotel* is edgier than most of Kraft's work. . . . The book is **imaginative, clever, and convoluted,** offering a twist in the road Kraft has been building to our collective past. Under the surface humor, Kraft's take on the national experience is thoughtful, disturbing, and unlike that of any other American writer."
Anthony Brandt, *Men's Journal*

"There is a delightful loopiness to the novels of Eric Kraft that no other writer today can emulate. It is a sly charm that makes us think his stories are a good deal simpler than they are. In fact, they are wonderfully complex, multi-layered and multileveled, as carefully painted as Japanese miniatures. . . . The belief has long been held here that Eric Kraft is **one of our best writers**, and *Leaving Small's Hotel* reinforces it. . . . Not since James Thurber has anyone written so delightfully about the foibles of his childhood."
Roger Harris, *Newark Star-Ledger*

"Kraft offers **a refreshingly complex and searching portrait of the writing life**, as well as of a fundamentally strong and warm relationship between a husband and wife assailed by doubt and unhappiness. *Leaving Small's Hotel* affirms once more that when the destination is Babbington (as Leroy's version of Kraft concludes), 'time spent in another place, in another life, is the perfect vacation, the ideal.'"
Mahinder Kingra, *City Paper* (Baltimore)

"From a mid-life crisis of failed dreams and an uncertain future, Eric Kraft weaves **a beguiling, affectionate comedy of love and possibilities**."
Lynn Harnett, *Portsmouth Herald*

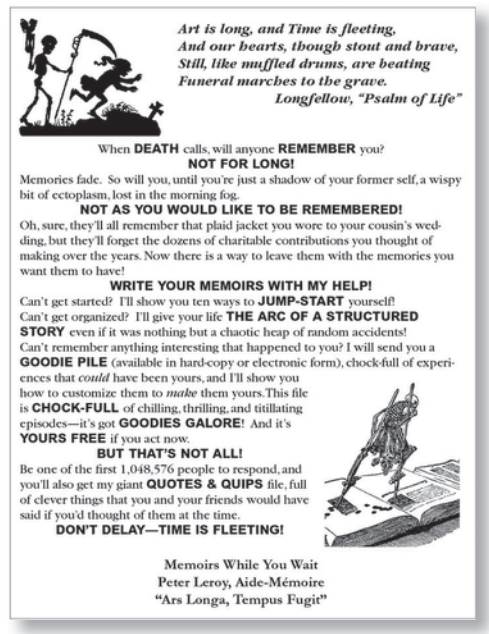
"Funny, deftly structured . . . warm, engaging . . . **just right**."
James Polk, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Kraft . . . has created **a beguiling tale of hope, friendship, memories, and love**. Recommended for all fiction collections."
Robin Nesbitt, *Library Journal*

"[*Leaving Small's Hotel*] is vintage Leroy, or vintage Kraft, and . . . **with Kraft's typical skill, erudition and levity, it broaches the very nature of the human condition** through its winning anecdotes of Leroy's present, and of his remembered and embroidered past. . . . Kraft's imagination, like Leroy's, is endlessly fertile, not merely in its creations but in its connections, as well, so that each apparently innocent anecdote chimes with Kraft's broader theme of the imagined life, of its thrilling, enhancing, and ultimately dangerous connection to the real. There is also much sorrow in *Leaving Small's Hotel*, as its title suggests, and an uncomfortable acknowledgment of the potentially imprisoning consequences of imaginative escape. But **the novel ends on a note of joyous possibility, offering both Leroy and his brilliant creator the freedom to create something new**."
Claire Messud, *Newsday*

"Kraft's tender story of Peter and Albertine—still in love after so many years—is **funny, perceptive, highly readable, and peopled with a cast of characters as intriguing as they are unique**. In the end, it doesn't really matter whether this is Peter Leroy's daydream or Eric Kraft's; either way **this novel is a dream come true.**"
Amazon.com

"**A wonderful matryoshka of a novel**, with at least five stories nested one inside the other . . . the various tales move toward contrasting climaxes **with just the sort of spectacular intricacy that makes a business fail and a novel fly**."
The New Yorker



Eric Kraft's novel contains Peter Leroy's memoir.

"[An] often hilarious bittersweet tale of adolescence recollected in tranquility . . . a kaleidoscopic narrative that's a little like **a marriage of Marcel Proust and Mark Twain**. . . . Peter's determination to explore all the mysteries of environment, heredity, and (especially) sex is memorably expressed. **Glorious stuff.**"
Kirkus Reviews, (starred review)

"A **cheeky, amusing** look at the nature of the entrepreneurial dream. . . . Once Kraft begins to work his clever conceit, this novel emerges as another memorable installment in his innovative series."
Publishers Weekly

"Sentimental, loving, raucous, wise, and great fun, this is simply **not to be missed.**"
Nancy Pearl, *Booklist* (starred review)

"Two-thousand-two-hundred pages . . . and counting. That, by my estimate, is where Eric Kraft's shape-shifting, seriocomic, multi-volume Peter Leroy saga now stands. And with Kraft in such fine form in *Inflating a Dog,* the latest installment, **one can't help wishing Peter's story could continue forever.**"
Michael Upchurch, *Seattle Times*

"Reading Eric Kraft is at times like taking a dizzy tumble into Long Island Sound. As fine a novelist as the Island has produced, Kraft is the buoyant and brilliant presence behind . . . 'The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy' . . . as richly detailed in its way as, and a great deal **funnier than . . . Marcel Proust's "In Search of Lost Time."** . . . Digressions on clamming, the constitution of the soul and Bernoullian physics are tossed off with such verve and humor that the reader feels flattered and privileged to be invited to join Kraft's remarkable, ongoing dance of time and memory."
Richard Gehr, *Newsday*

"A **hilarious** riff on Don Quixote, on the desire for fame, the need for success, the power of fantasy."
Barbara Fisher, *The Boston Globe*

"As books by Eric Kraft usually are, *Inflating a Dog* is simultaneously **delightful, provocative, poignant and deeply satisfying** . . . packed to the gunwales with the incendiary hungers, slippery bravado and rampant uncertainties of adolescence. . . . proves once again that Eric Kraft is a writer of magical verbal and narrative invention. The novel's various threads, its complications of character and plot, its reality-bending notions of showing and telling snap together, finally, with a gentle, inevitable, tear-inducing click. . . . *Inflating a Dog* is downright elevating."
Frederic Koeppel, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*

"A **sprightly, sly, sophisticated entertainment,** light enough to digest in a long summer evening . . . quintessential Kraft, showing his regard for the word-as-object, a thing to be revealed at just the right moment, then left for the reader to examine."
Richard Grant, *The Washington Post*

"The eight volumes of . . . *The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy* constitute **perhaps the most ambitious and rewarding literary enterprise of our time.** . . . *Inflating a Dog* comes across as a deceptively easy read in which expert comic timing belies an enormously important literary project in motion. The clever mingling of fiction and memoir evokes Proust at every turn but does so using a vernacular attuned to contemporary audiences. Even when **you find yourself laughing aloud,** it would be a mistake to take Eric Kraft lightly."
Andrew Ervin, *The San Francisco Chronicle*

"*Inflating a Dog,* the latest Peter Leroy volume, is a novel about physical and spiritual buoyancy. It's about keeping boats afloat and hopes aloft, and how, in one summer of Peter's adolescence, he manages to do both. . . . Kraft's erudite asides and abstract musings are what make *Inflating a Dog* **fascinating and sophisticated reading.**"
Jennifer Reese, *The New York Times Book Review*

"*Inflating a Dog* has a charming plot that works as an overlay for sophisticated meditations on language and storytelling. . . . It sounds simple enough, yet the novel is **wickedly funny and philosophical and weirdly timeless.**"
Kate Bernheimer, *The Oregonian,* Portland, Oregon

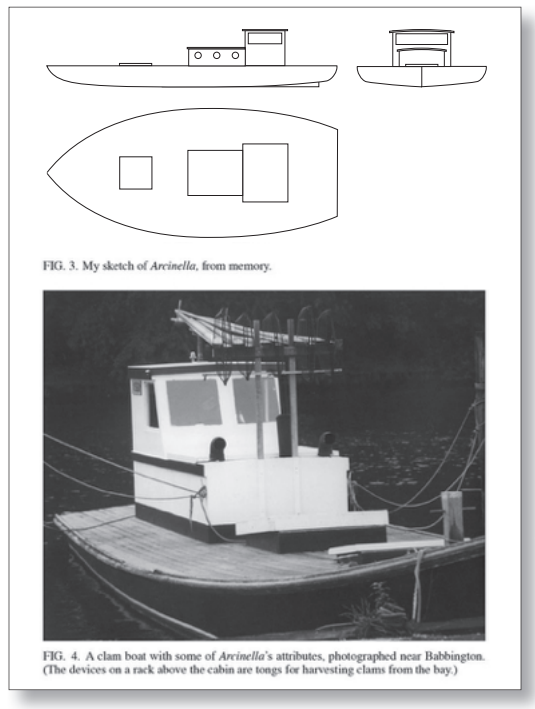


FIG. 3. My sketch of *Arcinella*, from memory.

FIG. 4. A clam boat with some of *Arcinella*'s attributes, photographed near Babbington. (The devices on a rack above the cabin are tongs for harvesting clams from the bay.)

Eric Kraft's novel contains Peter Leroy's memoir.

"Middle age, mortality, and the meaning of life: all are examined with the lightest touch imaginable in this [ninth] in Kraft's ongoing chronicles. . . . Kraft woolgathers with an energy that would shame a sheep-shearer, and overhearing Peter's evening conversations over martinis with the ineffable Albertine is almost as good as listening to Fibber McGee and Molly on the radio again. More of the same, and **may it go on forever**. Mark Twain and Will Rogers would have felt right at home with the Leroys."
Kirkus Reviews

"Riotous fun. . . . Another perfect book by an author with few faults whose works . . . are, among other qualities, great intellectual fun. . . . Those readers who enjoy stretching their minds and admire **dazzling craftsmanship and virtuosity** from an author who writes like no other will find this and the other books by Kraft a welcome and essential addition to their libraries."
Bob Williams, *The Compulsive Reader*

"Kraft steers his engaging protagonist into the thickets of freelance writing as Leroy attempts to fund a series of unusual adventures by helping others write their memoirs. Leroy lives in New York City, where he and his pianist wife, Albertine, maintain a precarious existence short on money but long on compassionate understanding, . . . Leroy's **endearing frankness,** and Albertine's **wry, tolerant wit**."
Publishers Weekly

"Kraft continues the charming and mischievously intellectual adventures of the eccentric writer Peter Leroy . . . in the newest installment in a long-running series relishable for its clever literary allusions (from Proust to Twain), shrewd philosophical satire, and faith in love and loyalty. . . . Peter—whose credo is 'Life, of course, is just the first draft of our memoirs'—is called to jury duty where a clerk presents his own solipsistic theories about memory, veracity, and the nature of the self. And Kraft? He's as **ebullient, canny, and entertaining** as ever."
Donna Seaman, *Booklist*

"Kraft [displays] an uncanny ability to make something from almost nothing. Leroy's life has been unremarkable, or at least not so remarkable as to warrant nine novels (and counting), but Kraft manages to spin one delicate yarn after another by mixing a dollop of plot with observations, asides, **offbeat humor** (including illustrations) and an abiding and **infectious enthusiasm** for this unusual project."
Scott Leibs, *San Diego Union-Tribune*

"Eric Kraft's new novel is not only **funny and smart** but also as devious as a Mobius strip, turning in on itself, doubling back through events that have already occurred, and generally subverting our Newtonian world view. . . . Because he is a master of both **bitter satire and narrative playfulness**, I see Eric Kraft as the love child of Evelyn Waugh and John Barth. . . . Reading *Passionate Spectator*, don't be surprised if you feel as though you're dissolving into its pages, as though the sculptor of the Limo Fountain is yet another character in Peter Leroy's busy mind, and one of the passengers in the limo itself is you."
David Kirby, *St. Petersburg Times*

"A personal journey that is **mundane in detail yet mythic in scope**. . . . The tip of an extensive literary iceberg, *Passionate Spectator* is the [ninth] in a series of novels devoted to Peter. (As with Philip Roth's Zuckerman novels, each installment can be savored independently.) Less a narrative than a gamboling reflection on the ways in which memory shapes supposedly objective history, the novel playfully riffs on Proust and the Nabokov of *Pale Fire*, and its denouement touches on *The Odyssey* and "Jack and the Beanstalk." That the book also manages to entertain the neophyte is a credit to Kraft's **colorful, incisive prose and off-kilter wit**."
Steve Smith, *Time Out New York*

"Whatever he does as a novelist, Eric Kraft will always have my gratitude for one thing: creating what may be **the happiest and least neurotic sex in American literature**. . . . At stake in *Passionate Spectator*, and the Peter Leroy books as a whole, is **nothing less than an assessment of each person's place in the universe**—not just as a memoirist or taxidermist, equally prone to embellishing a preserved and idealized memory, but as a spectator who gives shape to life simply by watching and remembering. . . . Eric Kraft is our passionate spectator, and the world is his crab cake."
Jim Ridley, *Nashville Scene*

"There are few contemporary American works of fiction as **humorously erudite** or **eccentrically ambitious** as Eric Kraft's cycle of novels, 'The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy.' . . . In these convoluted tall tales, Kraft evokes Peter's experience of growing up innocent, curious and horny in Babbington, Long Island, 'Clam Capital of America.' Each installment is tricked out with Glen Baxter-like illustrations, a cornucopia of allusions to Western literature, and a host of narrative acrobatics."
Michael Upchurch, *Seattle Times*

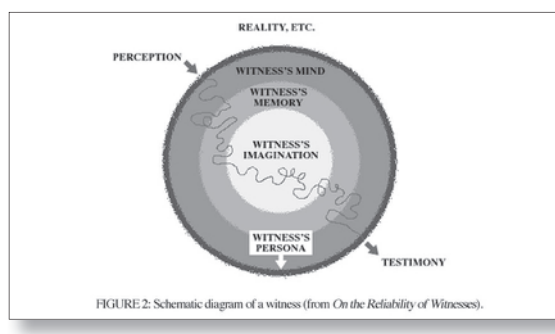


FIGURE 2: Schematic diagram of a witness (from *On the Reliability of Witnesses*).

Eric Kraft's novel contains Peter Leroy's memoir.

"One of the **Ten Best Fiction Books** of 2009."
The Barnes and Noble Review

"A reminder of how entertaining a novel can be when it slips the surly bonds of realism. . . . The effect is **like a happy-go-lucky Nabokov**, with all the road-tripping wordplay and none of the incest. . . . Kraft's affectionately satirical, buoyant language makes *Flying* soar."
Radhika Jones, *Time*

"Beneath its aw-shucks surface, *Flying* is an **ingenious**, at times **dizzyingly self-inverting** assault not only on the truth, but on the concoction of palatable fictions, as well. Its only inviolate god is the human imagination; it's a paean to flight by a boy who never left the ground, except, perhaps, where it counts most: in his mind."
Laura Miller, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Eric Kraft is an oddball, an eccentric, a bit of a genius — the writerly equivalent of a dreamer who puts together weird and wonderful contraptions in his garage. . . . Kraft has made his career out of high-wire performance, **seizing on the merest hint or detail and spinning it into magic**. . . . *Flying* . . . feels like Kraft's grandest achievement since *Herb 'n' Lorna*."
Richard Rayner, *The Los Angeles Times*

"If you were to pick up a hitchhiking Jorge Luis **Borges** and Robert **Pirsig**, or to listen as Thomas **Pynchon** recited *Ulysses* from memory over longnecks on J. D. **Salinger**'s tab, you might catch the flavor of Eric Kraft's work."
Matthew Battles, *The Barnes and Noble Review*

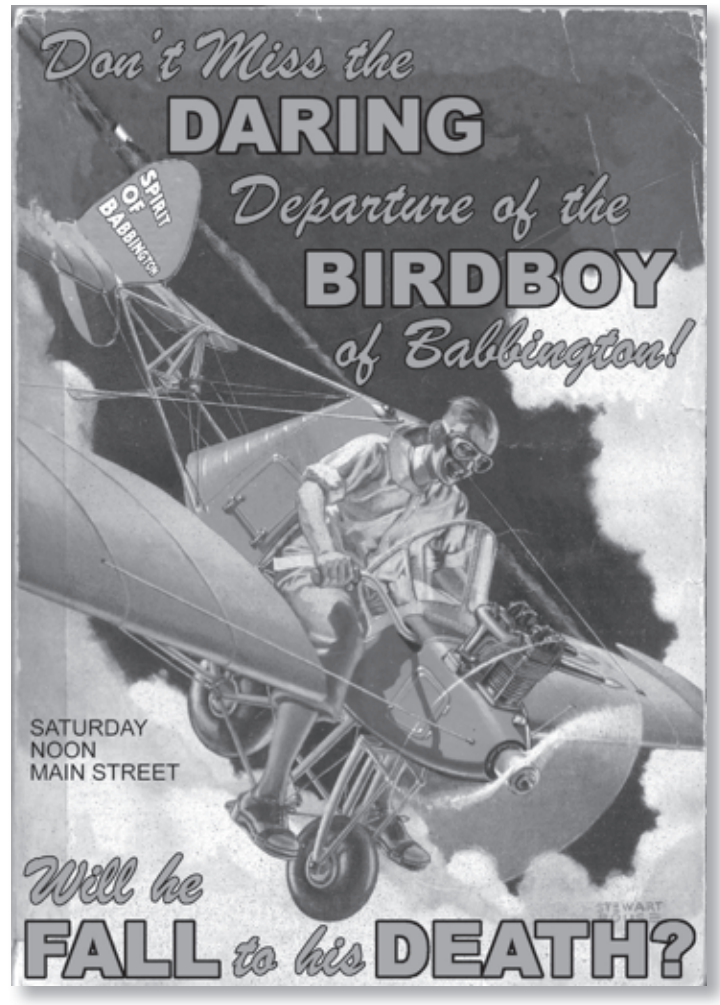
"That rare book that **can change the way you look at the world**. Peter looks at life as if he's seeing it for the first time. If you'll only buy into this, you can find the same joy Peter Leroy finds."
William McKeen, *The St. Petersburg Times*

"Less than 10 pages into *Flying*, having already laughed aloud several times, I was struck by a question too seldom asked when trying out a new author: '**How is it that I've never heard of this guy?**'"
Drew Nellins, *Paste*

"Kraft's comic saga, *The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy,* reaches a celebratory milestone with the publication of the closing volume in the **gleeful and ingenious** *Flying* trilogy. Once again, wizardly Kraft mixes boy-wonder high jinks with metaphysical musings, tall tales, and true love in **a zany, heart-lifting escape from the everyday.**"
Donna Seaman, *Booklist*

"Peter Leroy is both an egoist and an egotist who by all rights should be a crashing bore, but his **curious idiosyncrasies, strange perspectives, and satirical wit** render him fascinating. His ego is held somewhat in check by his wryly brilliant wife, Albertine, and their pithy, erudite conversations resemble those of a markedly hornier William Powell and Myrna Loy. . . . Kraft employs actual and altered illustrations and advertisements from popular science magazines from the 1930s through the 1950s to **hilarious** effect."
Library Journal

"This chunky paperback collects *Flying Home*, the final installment to Kraft's *Flying* trilogy, along with its predecessors to give readers **the full, nutty story of Peter Leroy's solo cross-country "aerocycle" flight 50 years ago**. . . . The simple narrative structure belies the complex way that Kraft interweaves philosophy and science while gently pushing Peter and Albertine toward the big moment of truth. Kraft brings the trilogy to a fitting end, and the collected works comprise **an intricate, intelligent and finely crafted saga**."
Publishers Weekly



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 clamming 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

This review appeared in *The New Yorker* on July 6, 1992.

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 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, shortwave 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," "whoopdedo," 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 Byproducts. 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

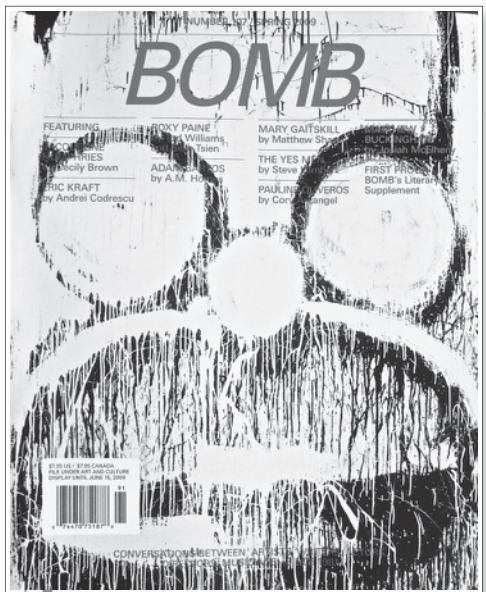
FICTION

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

BY ANDREI CODRESCU

ERIC KRAFT



This interview appeared in the spring 2009 issue of *BOMB*.

I thought *I* had discovered Eric Kraft when reading *Taking Off,* the first in a series about his alterego Peter Leroy. I had felt a little like Peter Leroy himself when something in a comic book or the arse of a junior-high physics teacher prompted him to have one of those startlingly profound adolescent revelations. To my slight disappointment, I soon found out that Kraft had a big fan club out there.

The publication of *Flying*—which gathers all the books in the trilogy that began with *Taking Off,* continued with *On the Wing,* and finished with *Flying Home*—is a great event for Peter Leroy fans. In the third installment, Peter tells the "true" story of his famous flight from his hometown of Babbington, Long Island, to Corosso, New Mexico. We hear Peter's voice as well as that of the older narrator who takes a trip following in his footsteps. The two narrators and their adventures take place in related but dissimilar worlds and time periods, but the mastery of Kraft's storytelling weaves them together in a way that is a piercing meditation on memory, narrative, and myth-making. Critics will draw parallels between Babbington and Macondo, because both García Márquez and Kraft have imagined complete worlds, although there is one major difference: Peter Leroy is as American as Huckleberry Finn and Mark Twain. His epic is a profoundly American story, with all that it entails: cowboys and Indians, flight, derring-do, wilderness encounters, vast geographical distances, and questions about science and faith. Yet what prevails in *Flying* is a gentle defense of childhood and of adolescent dreams.

Kraft is a disarming writer. What weapon does he relieve the reader of? Skepticism. The narrators of the Peter Leroy trilogy are plenty skeptical themselves, so they lighten your burden. You, reader, need not be a skeptic: the American Proust who practices the art of memory, plunges into its depths and

workings for you with a great deal of delight in the operation. What follows is an e-mail discussion of *Flying*, a conversation kept purposefully high-minded by the interviewer for fear that the writer might cunningly, and at any moment, slip into Peter Leroy's skin and start making fun of the questions. He tried. It didn't work. This is a serious talk about writing.
—Andrei Codrescu

Andrei Codrescu: You have this fabulous Proustian hold on details of the past, even as you make it clear that you're inventing some of it, and it's your American delight in the mechanics of memory (and real things) that gives you such a big playing field. Mark Twain lost a lot of money investing in inventions, but Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer's insatiable curiosity about how things work made us all rich. Your protagonist Peter Leroy is very much a kin of those two characters. Is this American thing essential to your narrative mechanics? Or put another way, how is your prose like a homemade airplane?

Eric Kraft: I have to give you two answers. Because this novel is a *false* memoir, I have to answer first for the memoirist, Peter Leroy, and then for myself. Peter's memoirs are like his many inventions and do-it-yourself projects, including the single-seat "aerocycle" that he builds, in that they are assembled from scraps and discards, and held together largely by wishful thinking. He makes the aerocycle from parts of wrecked motorcycles, aluminum tubing salvaged from folding tables and beach umbrellas, and fabric from tents and tarpaulins—and it never gets off the ground. His building mania may be a peculiarly American folly: a can-do attitude resting on a foundation of complete ignorance. My novel is something different from that flightless aerocycle, I hope. I have the advantage over Peter of having learned from his mistakes. His memoir is a *part* of my novel. My contribution runs over, under, around and through his memoir, and if I've been successful, it lifts the whole rickety construction off the ground and into the realm of romance.

Photo: Madeline Kraft.

AC: Is that how you see *Flying*, as a romance?

EK: I'm thinking of romance as Henry James characterized it, as "experience liberated." James described the exhilarating feeling of discovering while you are reading a work of fiction that you are riding in "the more or less commodious car of the imagination" suspended beneath "the balloon of experience" tethered to the earth by "a rope of remarkable length." And then he said that "the art of the romancer is, 'for the fun of it,' insidiously to cut the cable, to cut it without our detecting him." That's me, every time, trying to cut the cable without getting caught in the act.

AC: Is Peter—Leroy, le roy, *le roi*—playing the part of the king in this romance, or is his name perhaps a reference to Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*?

EK: Although Jarry's *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician* plays a part in *Flying*, the name Leroy isn't a reference to *Ubu Roi*. Actually, I've never been an admirer of *Ubu Roi*. *Faustroll* is another matter; when I first encountered it, it infuriated me. I was a student, and I was very, very serious about everything back then. Here was something that seemed like a very dangerous kind of antiliterature, since it was a work of literature, a work as rich and allusive as "The Waste Land," but a burlesque, a kind of elevated buffoonery. It felt like a personal affront, and I found that I couldn't ignore it. Now, although it still annoys me, I can say that *Faustroll* first made me begin to see that humorous art could be as rich a response to life as serious art could be—not for very serious me, of course, but possibly for someone I might invent.

I gave Peter the name Leroy because I knew that his egoism was going to be one of his outstanding traits. Like every other memoirist, he thinks that he rules the kingdom of his past, that in that realm what he says goes, and what he wishes had been can be made to appear to be what was. Here and there throughout his memoirs he appears under several variations of his name. For instance, in the series of adventure books that he read as a boy—not as they were, but as he remembers them or wishes they had been—he is both the bumbling Larry Peters and Larry's square-jawed and much more capable pal Rocky King.

AC: You are one of perhaps three American writers whose joy in writing is immediately apparent and contagious. Your writing makes me happy; it seems to issue from a place of innocence and wonder,

while being about as sophisticated as storytelling gets, meaning that I am thinking about the nature of fabulation at the same time that I can't wait to see what Peter's up to next. Many well-known American writers have made depression, despondency, and anger an ur-ground for their work, and they seem to have the attention of critics. From where I stand, it's a crime. What do you think about the motivation of writers and the expectations of our literary culture?

EK: Well, on the one hand there's the honest howl of anguish, and on the other there's the calculated bit of fashionable fakery. There are *plenty* of people who are entitled to be angry, desperate, and despondent, but then there is that old black *nostalgie de la boue*, and it makes writers who have been treated gently by life wish that life had roughed them up enough to give them some sensational material. They know that, among critics, misery is automatically granted gravitas. So memoirists falsify their lives and novelists skew their fiction in the direction of misery and squalor. They're like the four prosperous Yorkshiremen in the Monty Python sketch who compete with one another for the most miserable childhood memories, one of them eventually claiming that his family lived in a brown paper bag in a septic tank.

AC: The day of the "brown paper bag in a septic tank" school will be over as soon the body-public begins to feel some genuine misery. There is an inverse ratio, I think, between the sloth of the spectating public and the exhibitionism of private wounds. I digress now, but for me, it's a problem in teaching: I assign your books and those by Rabelais, Cervantes, Gogol, Barth, García Márquez, and Gombrowicz, and I get back memoirs of being tied up in a trailer for long years before being sent to get an MFA degree. It's hopeless, I guess, until the fad passes mysteriously away, like leprosy. I don't think there are any great writers who aren't funny, self-mocking, or satirical: I always forget how funny Dostoevsky is, for instance. Which brings me back to the universe of Peter Leroy, a world as detailed and magical as any ever made. Peter is obsessed with flight, with escape. Can you tell me about his evolution in your cycle?

EK: At the start of *Flying*, young Peter has just reached the age when life seems to be elsewhere, anywhere but the place he knows, the town that he's beginning think is too small for him. Throughout his childhood and adolescence, his hometown of Babbington, New York, on the south shore of Long Island, has been the center of his world, and he's been content to have it be so. Now, however, he's got the urge for going. He wants the world, and he wants to fly to it. His dreams of flying and his daydreams of flying are dreams of escape and exhilaration, so building the aerocycle is a youthful attempt to make a dream come

true. His older self, who is telling this story, has come to understand how much his Babbington boyhood enriched him. He has even returned to the town after years spent living in the larger world; his flight has turned out to be a round trip, and the most satisfying part of it is flying home, even if it means facing some home truths about himself. And I, above them both and pulling their strings, sometimes feel that life in the world that our contentious, bullying species rules is not everything that it might be. Sometimes, I just want to fly away, to make my getaway, sometimes so much so that I'm willing to trust my fate to feathers and wax. Where do I fly? To my work. To Peter's world.

AC: There are so many elements that point to a critique of simulacra—for instance, the parody implicit in the narrator's description of Babbington. Even the name of the place carries a tinge of parody. I'm also thinking of Bolotomy Bay and the Bolotomy River—an anagram of *lobotomy*. The townspeople who are intent on preserving the place's historical charms do seem lobotomized, don't they?

EK: If you make an alternative version of something, the alternative is bound to be a comment on the original, and I seem to have a genetic predisposition to comment through

Adaptation of an illustration by Stewart Rouse that first appeared on the cover of the August 1931 issue of *Modern Mechanics and Inventions*, from *Flying*.

parody. The people in Babbington who turn the town into a replica of what they think it was in the '50s are saying that they think it was a better place then, and they seem to think that they can make life in the simulation as wonderful as they suppose it was in the original. I guess they've been lobotomized by sentimentality and wishful thinking.

When Peter looks at the people of Babbington, the result is a gentle satire, I think; a compassionate satire. He does try to understand those people, and he does find that to understand them is to forgive them, at least to forgive their foibles and follies.

By the way, Peter claims that the ancient Native American name for the place is Boiotomy, an obvious anagram of *lobotomy*, but this is more a schoolboy's joke than a grown man's judgment. However, another character in the work, the restaurant reviewer B. W. Beath, is not so forgiving. He is forever reminding the readers of his reviews—which I relish writing—that "most people are idiots," and he clings to the hope that the Large Hadron Collider—the enormous particle accelerator near Geneva, Switzerland—might, when it is finally operational, "create a voracious black hole that will suck the sorry mess mankind has made into its yawning maw."

AC: Not far from the beginning of Peter's (and the narrator's) return in *Flying*, you have a marvelous layered passage that shows off the intricate nature of your story-telling:

I have quite a mental scrapbook devoted to that flight. To be truthful, flight isn't quite the right word; flights would be more accurate, because it was not one continuous flight, though in the minds of most of those who remember it, or think that they remember it, it has come to be a continuous flight. I even think of it that way myself sometimes, as a nonstop flight from Babbington out to Corosso and another nonstop flight back. When I was interviewed upon my return, I tried to be honest about what I had accomplished and what I had not, but the interviewers had their own ideas about what the story ought to be, and nothing that I told them was going to change those ideas, so I began to go along with what they wanted. The account published in the Reporter *was typical, an account that made the flight seem more than it actually was . . .*

An article from the *Babbington Reporter* follows, a terrific sendup of small-town journalism. There are at least five essays here about time and our perception of it, but none of it is essayistic; *au contraire*, it's pure narrative. Then you add the parody, another comment on the transient nature of our reporting. You delight also in diagrams and drawings that illustrate your various ideas, and then you have Albertine, the narrator's wife, "checking" his flights of fancy, with Socratic and good-humored rigor. My question here has less to do with the seeming ease of your juggling so much, but with your training as a writer: how much journalism did you write in the past?

EK: My only journalism experience consists of moonlighting as a rock music critic for *Boston After Dark* (now *The Boston Phoenix*) for a couple of years in my twenties; my day job was teaching English in a junior high school. I thoroughly enjoyed writing music criticism, but after a while I couldn't afford to keep at it—or to keep teaching, for that matter. I began working as an editor of grammar-and-composition textbooks at an educational-publishing company in Boston. The authors whose names appeared on those textbooks didn't actually write much of what was in them; we in-house hacks did. Some of the examples that were presented to students as worthy work were previously published pieces that would be reprinted in the textbook with the permission of the copyright holder. However, the accompanying workbooks, practice pads, tests, and other supplementary materials required far more examples than the budget could afford, so these were created in-house. In a day, I might write an editorial, a straight news report, a piece of a short story that could pass for an excerpt from an entire short story, a personal letter, a job application and résumé, and a couple of advertisements. There was always an element of parody in the work that I produced, though I had to make it so subtle that hardly anyone but I would notice it.

The most demanding and rewarding work was creating bad examples that the students would have to correct. These had to be incorrect or inadequate in specific ways that would make them didactically useful. To show the development of an essay, for example, I would have to create all the drafts as well as the finished essay. Merely saving all of my own drafts wouldn't do because those drafts would not be deficient in the required ways. So, after I had a satisfactory essay, I would have to begin working backward to create false drafts, turning each of the essay's strengths into weaknesses, its virtues into vices, one by one. It was like an OuLiPo game—fun to play, technically demanding, and tremendously instructive. Among other things, I wrote a research paper, which was presented as the work of a high school senior, on the history of the Babbington-to-Hargrove Street Railway Company, a little piece of the personal history of Peter Leroy in which there was, I can say with more honesty than Proust said of *À la Recherche*, not one fact that was not imaginary, including the sources, the footnotes, and the topic itself.

AC: I seem to see many Oulipian elements to your writing. Did you follow any constraints in *Flying*? If you did, I'd be interested in knowing about them, since one hardly finds that in American fiction, as opposed to poetry.

EK: I like to impose constraints on myself during revision.

For example, very late in my work on *Herb 'n' Lorna*, when I felt that the novel was nearly done and that everything was in there that ought to be in there, I went through several passes to tighten it. Toward that end, I set myself the task of making every chapter exactly the same length. It was a way of ensuring that they would be balanced and condensed. The chapters were enriched the way a sauce is enriched by reduction, and the imposed constraint made me focus on the weakest parts. When I delivered the manuscript, with every chapter ending at the same place on the same page, no one noticed.

> AC: The younger and the older Peter are engaged in a delightful discussion of memory, since the younger one exemplifies imagination and actual experience as a potential source of memory, while the older is feeding on the younger to relive things that may or may not have happened. It's a case of narrative vampirism. I find Albertine's character truly fascinating, too: she is a kind of ambassador from "reality," but such an affectionate one, she plays right along. I wonder how you kept these multiplying ideas and characters under control: it's a technical question.

EK: I don't use note cards or timelines or charts or smoke or mirrors. Memory is my essential subject, and I use it as my essential tool. I keep everything in my head. I don't make notes before writing, and I don't keep notes about what I've done. Because I do it all in my head, the process is prone to errors of memory. Over the course of many, many drafts, I correct the errors, or at least I try to turn them into errors that are less wrong in the context of the book and its story and Peter Leroy's entire life. I reread and rework the story and its episodes again and again. This way of working ensures that I will be surprised many times during the work. It guarantees me far more surprises than I would have if I had the whole thing mapped and timed from the start. The errors also lend the work a kind of verisimilitude, maybe even a touch of truth, because they become errors of memory for Peter. Now and then he will make a statement about something that he did or something that happened to him, then pause and say, on the page, "Wait a minute, that can't be right. It can't have happened that way." Those pauses and reconsiderations of his are artifacts of places in the writing where I have paused and reconsidered and revised and rearranged.

> AC: You question a lot of generic conventions. You push the limit with your constant digressions, for instance. They threaten to hinder the plot, but then it all comes together. Do you ever worry that the digressions will overwhelm the story, or is that perhaps something that you wouldn't mind?

EK: What's most important to me is that everything works together by the end—even the digressions. That snap when everything comes together is what I strive for, structurally and thematically. It's one of the things that Peter and I have in common.

> AC: My next question has little to do with words, to which you pay masterly attention, but art (of sorts): there are diagrams and faux newspaper articles and pages of popular magazines in your book—did the computer make this possible, or did you always diagram the impossible in notebooks? (Those should be acquired for a goodly sum, I'd say, by a university library now, before you outprice them.)

EK: The drawings and diagrams are there in part because they lend verisimilitude, since they resemble the illustrations and photographs that would appear in a memoir or autobiography, things that might have come from Peter's boxes of clippings, sketches, and old snapshots. They are also part of my attempt to represent as fully as I can the culture in which Peter lives. To do that, I like to quote from the artifacts of that culture—not only from its books and magazines, but also from its advertisements and ephemera. They also reflect an interest in science and technology that Peter and I share. When I first entered college, I intended to become a mathematician or a physicist, and Peter has a similarly divided set of interests, standing with one foot in the arts and the other in the sciences.

The computer has made including those drawings and diagrams much easier for me because I can't draw. I can trace, though, and tracing became a way for me to make a drawing by revising it in drafts. I would make a drawing as well as I could, and then I would lay a sheet of tracing paper over the drawing and trace the best of it while improving the rest. Then I would treat the traced image as a second draft, and so on . . . For *Flying*, I used Adobe Illustrator to create the wiring diagrams, although I had to make them look as if they had been drawn by hand 48 years ago. So, I printed them, laid a sheet of tracing paper over them, and returned to my old method.

> AC: You seem to approach words in a similar fashion. They're physical to you, material. I can sense that in the anagrams, collages, and substitutions, and in the ways you manipulate type. Where does your approach to words as a physical presence on the page come from?

EK: For a while, years ago, I made concrete poems. I'm not sure whether I will have Peter do this when he reaches his twenties, if I ever manage to bring his young self that far, but if I do, he will discover the same kind of playful relationship with words and type that I did. I used to lay the poems out on foam-core posterboard using rub-on type. They became a meeting place for the graphic and

the verbal, and I still enjoy playing with the appearance of the text on the page, using it when I can to add another layer of meaning, signaling authorship other than Peter's, for example.

> AC: Throughout the novel the writing wallows in artifice. The illustrations also are blatantly artificial. And yet there's an inescapable impression that this is somehow real. How do you reconcile the tension between artifice and verisimilitude?

EK: I think that the reader reconciles them, or struggles—pleasurably, I hope—to reconcile them. If I've done the job well, the tension is something like the tension in the optical illusion known as a Necker cube. It's a wireframe drawing of a cube in which foreground and background seem to change places while one is staring at it. Some viewers can hold onto one interpretation or the other for a while, but then the cube seems to flip again, exchanging its front and back. With Peter's memoirs, the fantastic and the realistic should exist in an indeterminate state like that. Now you believe it, now you don't . . . and now you change your mind.

> AC: I believe that the Peter Leroy cycle has reached, if not the end, then the kind of presence that will always be part of American literature. You made a world. I just want to select one thing, as a provisional conclusion of this discussion, namely, I need to thank you for improving the quality of our travel accommodations. Until my wife Laura got Sally, her beloved rat-terrier, we had pretty decent rooms anywhere we could find them. After Sally, we pretty much had to stick to places considerably rattier than our previous lodgings. Thanks to your redefinition of beloved dogs such as Sally (I won't give away the formula, let each reader find it for herself!) we can now stay anywhere. Who says that picaresque novels make nothing happen?

EK: The dog you're alluding to is named Mister Pfister. Peter and Albertine encounter him—nearly run him over, actually—while they are revisiting one of the places where Peter stopped on his solo "flight" to New Mexico. There they find that a young motorcyclist Peter met on his earlier journey has become a wealthy purveyor of consolation for people who feel that they are suffering from "pre-traumatic stress syndrome," the feeling that something bad is going to happen to them sooner or later. I'm a little worried that you may be suffering a bout of pre-traumatic stress syndrome (or "pre-traum," as pre-traum counselors call it) over the end of the Peter Leroy cycle. Let me offer you some comfort: I assure you that the cycle has not reached the end. After all, in the published work, young Peter hasn't even met Albertine yet. I'm currently working on the story of their meeting. The cycle will continue for as long as I am able to continue it, and my hopes and dreams for it stretch a long way into the future.

> AC: Do you ever feel limited by Peter Leroy? Do you sometimes want to step out of his personal history, or to go beyond it? Or does staying within this one serial novel function as a sort of Oulipian constraint?

EK: The memoirs of a fictional character have very elastic limits. I'm required to include his personal history, of course, but I'm allowed to include anything he has read, heard, thought, or imagined. So he quotes from books that exist only in his world as well as from books that exist in his and mine. He includes in his reminiscences not only his imaginary childhood friend, but also his imaginary childhood friend's sultry older sister, who becomes an obsession. He even has one friend, Mark Dorset, who has begun writing a book called *Risking the Ridiculous*, which examines the motives and methods of the actual author of Peter's memoirs, me. So, if the form is constraining, I haven't yet come close to discovering its limits.

Ad for Daedalus Welding, based on an ad for Hohner Harmonicas that appeared in the September 1937 issue of *Modern Mechanix*, from *Flying*

A Beginner's Guide to Eric Kraft

March 26, 2011 / Posted By: Peter

Eric Kraft is one of my favorite writers, and he's amassed some of the best and most consistent mainstream reviews I've ever seen, but I don't know many other people who have heard of him. Even for those who have, his large and interconnected body of work can make it hard to know where to begin. This post is a modest attempt to remedy that — especially now that his older work is becoming available again in both print and electronic formats. I'll talk about what to read first, how to choose among the rest of his work, and why I think he isn't more well-known.

Where to Start

Kraft's oeuvre begins with nine stories he wrote in the 1980s which are each somewhere between a short story and a novella in length. On the surface, they're all whimsical tales of small-town America in the '50s, centered around a boy named Peter Leroy. Just below the surface, Kraft weaves in various literary references, (often hilarious) undertones of adult sexuality, and a gently cynical view of American society and ambition — but with such a light touch that it never interrupts the narrative or weighs it down.

It's hard to describe these stories any further, except to say that they are easily the most *fun* literary fiction I've read that was published in the last 30-40 years. The material is somewhat like that of Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon stories, but with none of the same ironic distance or occasional smugness. Even the best "serious" fiction today is so weighed down with cultural context and in-group assumptions that it's hard to find a contemporary point of comparison for these nine stories. To find another author who is trying as sincerely as Kraft to connect with *everyone*, you might have to go back to *The Adventures of Augie March*, or even further to Mark Twain, who's obviously one of Kraft's major influences.

These nine stories were collected in one volume called *Little Follies,* which seems to be long out of print. You can often find used copies online, which is how I first read them, but now there are two other options as well: ordering a new edition directly from Kraft's website, or buying electronic copies at the Amazon Kindle or Barnes & Noble Nook stores, where they're now selling for only a dollar each.

If you have never heard of Kraft before, I would encourage you to stop reading here and try one of the stories out. The first, and arguably the best, is called *My Mother Takes a Tumble,* and you can find the online versions here (Kindle) and here (Nook).

If you've been through these stories and are looking for more, or if you're just curious to learn more about Kraft, then read on.

What to Read Next

Kraft's output since then consists of about ten novels (many still in print) that I'd put into three main categories. The first group is longer stories of the same general type as the ones in *Little Follies*, with the young Peter Leroy staying on as a main character. This includes *Where Do You Stop* (1992), *At Home with the Glynns* (1995), and *Inflating a Dog* (2002). My favorite of these three is *Inflating a Dog*, which tells the story of Peter Leroy's mother attempting to start a houseboat restaurant.

The second category is novels that take one or more of the secondary characters from the original stories as protagonists. There's *Herb 'n' Lorna* (1989), which tells the story of Peter's grandparents and how they met; *Reservations Recommended* (1990) (my favorite), which imagines his troubled schoolmate Matthew as a troubled adult in Boston; and *What a Piece of Work I Am* (1993), which follows the older sister of another of Peter's friends.

To understand the third category, you need to know something about the conceit of the whole project, which is that all these stories are framed, narrated and/or introduced by an adult Peter Leroy, who is presented as a dreamy, nostalgic and unreliable narrator, and is largely a stand-in for Kraft himself — just as the town of "Babbington," where most of the above stories are set, is a thinly-veiled Babylon, on the south shore of Long Island, where Kraft grew up.

So: in this third category are the later novels that break down the walls even further between Peter Leroy the protagonist, Peter Leroy the narrator, and Kraft himself. These books generally interweave stories of Peter Leroy's childhood with stories of his contemporary life, which seems to mirror Kraft's own life much more closely. At a few points, they even raise the curtain completely and make brief references to Kraft by name. These novels include *Leaving Small's Hotel* (1998), *Passionate Spectator* (2004), and the *Flying* trilogy (collected in 2009). My favorite of these is *Leaving Small's Hotel*, but all three are more of an acquired taste than his earlier work. Like many writers, Kraft seems to be getting more sentimental with age, and without the context of his earlier work, parts of these books can come across as a little too sweet and sappy for some. On the other hand, if you prefer something with a sweeter, less cynical tone, *Flying* is not a bad place to start (and *The Static of the Spheres* will probably be your favorite of the original nine stories).

Why Isn't He More Widely Read?

I think it's because the reviews, as positive as they are, tend to focus too much on the postmodern aspects of Kraft's work: How much of this Peter Leroy character is really Kraft himself? How honest and/or accurate are his recollections, even within the context of the novel? How "real" are the other characters and their storylines supposed to be? And how are all of Kraft's books connected?

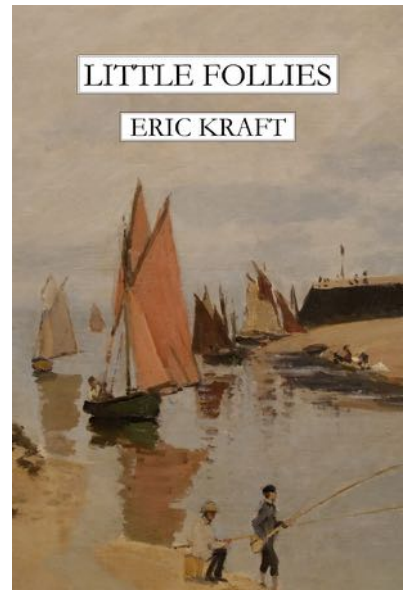
In particular, Kraft's work is often called "Proustian," a reference to Marcel Proust's epic *Remembrance of Things Past*, a 15-year project in seven volumes that deals with many of the same questions around memory, reality and truth.

Stephen Hawking was once told that every equation he included in a popular science book would reduce his readership by half. My theory is that calling a book "Proustian" has approximately the same effect. Most of us have read little or no Proust, and fairly or not, we have a general impression of his famous book as being long, dense and dffcult.

I confess to some doubt as to how many of the people applying this adjective to Kraft have actually made it through Proust's 1.5 million word opus (and I certainly haven't), but there's no question that it was a major influence. And Kraft himself seems very interested in these "Proustian" or "meta" aspects of his work. He includes lots of digressions along these lines in the books themselves, particularly about the unreliability of memory, and he's taken advantage of the hypertext format to build a dizzyingly complex website that adds various other bits of writing, photos and ephemera to all the works, and attempts to knit them together into a complex whole.

Now that I've read everything, especially the books in that third category, I am starting to understand this project a little more than I did at the beginning, but I still see it as an unnecessary distraction for first time readers. You do not need to be interested in the Peter Leroy / Eric Kraft "universe" to enjoy Kraft's books, any more than you need to be interested in Yoknapatawpha County to appreciate Faulkner, or in the Marvel Universe to appreciate the Spider-Man movies. Kraft's stories stand up perfectly well on their own, and their fun, infectious tone makes them a ray of sunshine in the too-often dour and over-intellectual landscape of modern fiction. I hope you'll give them a try.

ON CHRISTMAS EVE, Guppa was bent over his workbench, winding loop after loop of fine varnished wire around a core of purple Bakelite, straining his eyes and his patience. He worked slowly and carefully, and as he worked he counted the windings, muttering the count to himself, repeating and repeating each number so that he wouldn't lose it in the foggy tedium of the winding. I was doing all that I could to help him: first, I was being very quiet, trying as hard as I could not to create any distraction that would make him lose track of what he was doing, nothing that would make him lose count of the windings on the coil; second, I was trying, by smiling a lot and holding my eyes wide, to show how delighted and amazed I was by the work that he was doing. . . .



Eric Kraft's novel . . .

My situation, waiting for Guppa to complete the almost magical transformation of these electrical gadgets, was a lot like that of a child who has put a slice of bread into a toaster and sits, still sleepy-eyed, waiting for the toaster to transform the bread to toast.

Most children do not have a good sense of the amount of work required to build a radio from scratch or of the amount of time required to do it or—for that matter—of the passage of time itself. For most of them, time is like a dotted line, with unequal sections of the line itself (events) and unequal interstices (non-events, the periods of waiting for something to happen that make up much of a person's childhood). I blame this misconception on the type of toaster used in most households: the pop-up toaster. In operating a pop-up toaster, one inserts a batch of bread (usually a slice or two) and lowers it into the toaster. For the child who watches this operation, the lowering of the bread is apparently the last event that occurs for some time, since the string of small events that add up to the toasting of the bread—the real work of toasting the bread—takes place out of the child's sight. Therefore, the toasting itself becomes one of those interstices between events, a nonevent, a period of waiting that varies, both in real and in apparent length, according to the hunger of the child, the thickness of the bread, and random fluctuations in the voltage of the electrical service to the toaster. When the toast pops up, the child at last witnesses another event, which terminates the period of waiting for something to happen.

What effect, we might ask ourselves, does the pop-up toaster have on the intellectual development of the child who sits beside it, morning after morning, waiting with his plate and peanut butter? Bread goes in as bread and comes out, after an interval, as toast. Put in bread. Wait. Get out toast. Surely, the child who watches this happen over a period of time comes to think of bread as *either* bread or toast, to think of time as discrete intervals, and to think of being as being in some one form or in some other, with intervals of waiting, intervals between states when, apparently, nothing happens. Such a child would ask his grandfather to build him a radio (that is, lower the bread into the toaster), wait for some interval, and then expect his grandfather to hand him a radio (that is, expect the toast to pop up). When they grow up, these children are immediately attracted to the quantum theory, digital watches, and electronic calculators.

I was not such a child, because Gumma and Guppa did not have a pop-up toaster. Their toaster was a chrome-plated metal box about as long as three slices of bread lined up side by side. At each end of the box was a slot a little higher than the height of a slice of bread and a little wider than the thickness of a slice of bread. Inside the box was a tunnel through which the toast moved from the left end of the toaster to the right. Along the bottom of the tunnel was a set of toothed rails linked by an armature to a motor. The motor made the rails raise the toast, move it a short distance to the right, and set it down again on the stationary base rail. On either side of the tunnel were resistance wires that provided the heat to toast the bread. Little by little, as the bread marched through the toaster, it browned; that is, it became toast.

Now here comes the best part. The manufacturer of this toaster, clearly nobody's fool, had provided a small circular window in the side, so that one could watch the rhythmic rightward shuffle of the slices of bread and their progress from bread to 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.

During the forty-six weekends that I had so far spent with Guppa in the cellar working on the receiving set (not counting the time that we had spent pumping the cellar out and drying its contents after the flood in November), my sense of the passing of time had developed to a point where, although it may not have been as acute as my sense of sight, it was at least as sharp as my sense of smell.

AT HOME, in my parents' house in Babbington Heights, in the corner of the attic that was my bedroom, I had, on a table beside my bed, a small Philco radio. It was made of cream-colored plastic. The radio had seen years of use on somebody else's bedside table before I got it for my room. Over the years, the heat from the bulb that lighted its dial had discolored and cracked the plastic in a spot along the rounded edge of the top, right above the dial. On winter nights, when the attic was cold, I would bring the radio close to me, onto the bed, under the covers, and rest one hand on the warm, discolored spot while I listened.

Of all the programs that I listened to on that radio, I can remember only one clearly: one about a boy about my age who lost everyone who was dear to him—his mother and father and grandparents and a clever younger sister with a voice like a flute—in a shipwreck, and was left alone, entirely alone, on an island somewhere warm and wet and windy, and called out for them in the night, calling against the persistent, overpowering sound of the wind and the sea, and listened in despair for the sound of their voices through the crashing surf and howling wind. I huddled in my bed, with the blankets pulled over my head, and trembled when the sound of his voice and the wind filled the little cave that I had made. This program so terrified me that I wanted to cry out for my own parents, to run downstairs for some comfort from them, at least to reassure myself that they were still there, but I couldn't run to them because I was listening to the radio at a time of night when my mother didn't allow me to listen, since the programs that were broadcast at those late hours were, she had told me often enough, the sort of thing that scared the wits out of young boys.

Though I remember only that one program, I can remember as clearly as a memorized poem or a popular song the susurrous and crackling static that accompanied everything I heard on the little radio. Over the course of time, this insistent sound has pushed its way from the background of my radio memories to the foreground, and the private detectives, shipwrecked travelers, cowboys, bandleaders, and comedians who once were able to shout over it now call out only faintly and indecipherably, like voices calling against the roaring of the sea and the wind.

Then Guppa bought a Motorola console radio as a Christmas gift for Gumma, and at once the Philco became a pedestrian radio. The Motorola had several bands, and it could pull in programs from places so far removed from Babbington that their names alone, printed at intervals along the dial, were enough to bring to mind notions of places so remote and exotic that I had to work to convince myself that they were real places, places where people worked, slept, ate meals, listened to radios. It was as if the Motorola were more worldly, more sophisticated, more knowledgeable than the Philco, as if the Philco were naive, untraveled, because it knew only Babbington and the surrounding towns and cities that everyone knew. Not only could the Philco not detect the signals from far-flung places, but it seemed to me that the little radio was ignorant of the notion that these places even existed. . . .

IT WAS NOT UNUSUAL for Eliza and Mr. Beaker to look after me for an evening when I was spending a weekend at Gumma and Guppa's. For many years, they would stay with me on Saturday nights while Gumma and Guppa went out to play bridge with friends.

I was, throughout my childhood, required to take a bath sometime between dinner and bedtime, and Eliza took on the responsibility of bathing me when she and Mr. Beaker were taking care of me on one of those Saturday nights during my earliest years. Mr. Beaker left this responsibility to her gladly, and he would spend my bath time in the living room, smoking his pipe and reading. Eliza invented a number of bathtime games over the years. My favorite of these was making soapsuds landscapes. We would work up a lather of suds in the tub together, enough so that the suds covered the water entirely. Then, moving and shaping the suds with our hands, we would create a landscape around me. . . .

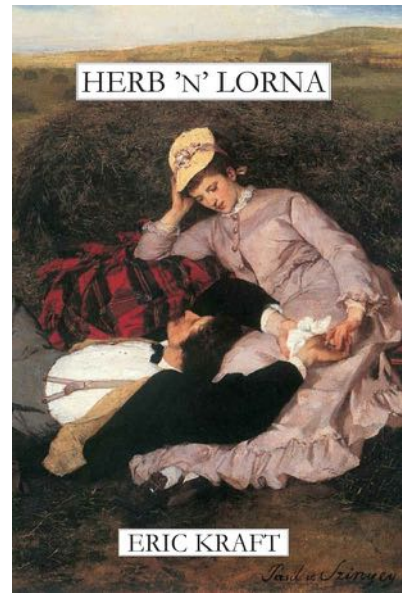
As I grew and aged, the pleasure that I took in soapsuds landscapes and Eliza's other bathtub games began, as one might expect, to shift from the aesthetic to the erotic. . . .

FLUSHED AND GIGGLY, Eliza and I returned to the living room after my bath and settled ourselves in front of the new radio.

Eliza turned the radio on, and she began twisting the dial, exploring for signals. For much of the time while she explored, she was between stations, and the living room was full of the noises that lie between stations on a radio dial, noises that are drowned out when we come upon a strong signal. Some of those noises come from within the receiver itself, produced by the operation of the receiver's circuits, noises from within the machine. Other noises come from outside the receiver. The sources of some of those are local, familiar, homely. These may, for example, be produced by the ignition systems of passing Studebakers or by the motor in a refrigerator or by a toaster. The sources of others, however, are distant, exotic, intriguing. These may, for example, be produced by stations too far away for a clear signal to reach us, stations calling from God knows where, with voices as weak as that of a boy calling against the wind. Or they may originate in electrical discharges from the sun, from other stars, other galaxies: the pervasive and indecipherable, eternal and inestimable noise, the static of the spheres.

. . . contains Peter Leroy's memoir.

FOR YEARS, I tried to avoid writing this book. If the choice had been mine alone, I would never have written it. Recently, however, events beyond my control forced me into writing it and forced me, in the writing of it, to confront a moment that ranks high among the unsettling moments of my life, the moment that, I think, marked the end of my overextended egocentric period and so, perhaps, the end of my youth: the moment when I learned that my maternal grandparents were involved in—virtually the creators of—the animated erotic jewelry industry.



Eric Kraft's novel . . .

The discovery came—actually it was forced upon me by two informants—on the day of my grandmother's funeral, three years after my grandfather had died. That morning, May Castle, my grandparents' friend of longest standing, gave me a box, inscribed to me in my grandmother's hand. Inside the box were twenty-two pieces of erotic jewelry and erotic sculpture. With them was an account, just a few words, written by my grandmother, of my grandparents' involvement with erotic arts and crafts. I read it quickly, breathlessly, but I had many things to attend to that morning, and I didn't have much time to think about what it meant before I left for the Episcopal church, where the funeral service was to be held.

Sitting in a pew at the church, half attending to the service, I began to consider my new knowledge. You can imagine how it affected me. It shook me. Not only had I never known anything about this interest of my grandparents', but the whole notion was so far removed from my idea of them—their personalities, their interests, their talents as I supposed I understood them—that I couldn't even imagine where it might fit. Eroticism, I realized with some embarrassment, had never played an important part in my mind's eye's version of my grandparents' lives. How I had misjudged them! I had belittled them, diminished their lives in a way that I wouldn't have wanted mine diminished. Eroticism certainly played an important part in *my* life; how could I have been so thick-headed and arrogant as to ignore the likelihood that it was as important—or, to judge from the evidence they had supplied me, even more important—in theirs? I was ashamed of myself. I was also flabbergasted. I was struck, with a suddenness and force that felt like a physical blow, by the realization that even now I was wrong in my understanding of them. I had, in the course of an hour or so, come to think that eroticism had "played an important part in my grandparents' lives." That couldn't be anywhere near the truth. If what my grandmother had suggested in her note was true—and the carvings she had included testified that it was—my grandparents had played a leading role in the development of the erotic imagination of their times! It was much too much to handle all at once, at such a time. It was as if my grandmother had in her posthumous letter introduced me to two people I had never met before, people who had been hiding inside my grandparents, people with genitalia. Who were these people? Why did my grandmother want me to meet them?

When I was a child, I called my grandparents "Gumma" and "Guppa." Originally, the names were just mispronunciations of "Grandma" and "Grandpa," of course, but as time passed they became terms of endearment, and I continued to use them long after I was able to say "Grandma" and "Grandpa" clearly. I shifted, uncomfortably, to something like "Gram" and "Gramp" for a brief time during adolescence, when childhood leftovers embarrassed me, but I soon returned to "Gumma" and "Guppa," and once back never strayed again. I think that underlying my persistent use of my childhood names for them was an assertion that my grandparents were, and would always remain, the Gumma and Guppa I had known when I was a child. My Gumma was large and soft, generous, enduringly pretty, pleasant, devoted to the domestic arts, the provider of huge beige-and-white meals—biscuits, boiled onions, chicken, cream sauces, and potatoes prepared in a thousand ways, the best of them a German potato salad that filled the house with the pungency of vinegar and bacon—an amateur logician and mathematician, occasionally a repairer of jewelry, a reader of best-selling novels, mostly historical ones. My Guppa was small and quick, apparently always either amused or puzzled, a talented and hard-working salesman, a tireless home handyman, an amateur inventor, a happy tinkerer. Now, after so many years, and after it was too late, Gumma was, it seemed to me, asking me to get to know them as someone else entirely, as what other people called them: Herb and Lorna.

Someone nudged me. My mother. I looked at her. She nodded ever so slightly. What did that mean? Had she discovered, from my expression, what I had been thinking? Did she know about the jewelry Gumma had left me? Had she, perhaps— She nodded again, in the direction of the pulpit, and gave me a little nudge. The eulogy. Of course. The eulogy.

I got up. I mounted the pulpit in a fog. I looked around at the congregation of mourners. Who among these friends, relatives, and acquaintances knew the truth? Was I the only one? Or was I the last to know? I took my remarks from my pocket. I read them. I had written a little catalog of my grandmother's kindnesses, as I knew them. When I had written it, I had worried that it would be too much for me to read without breaking down. Now I found that I couldn't concentrate on it. I read, but I wasn't paying attention to what I was reading. My eyes were on the paper, but my mind was on the animated copulations of tiny ivory men and women.

HERB'S UNCLE BEN GRINNED and reached into his pocket. He brought out something that he quickly concealed with both hands. He held his hands out, one cupped over the other, hiding and protecting something precious, as he might have held a tiny bird. Slowly, he opened his hands. There, cupped in Ben's hands, was the world's first piece of animated coarse goods.

Herb burst out laughing. "Gosh!" he said. "Will you look at that workmanship!"

Ben's prototype was a crude piece of work. The two wax figures were badly modeled, thickset, lumpy, graceless. The mechanism was nothing more than a pair of heavy wire forms joined by a loop (not unlike the link swivels that Lorna once fashioned) and kept apart by a tiny coil spring. A crank turned a cam against the wire on which the man, the upper figure, was molded, and the action of the cam provided the jerky up-and-down motion that was all the animation of which the couple was capable. The act they performed was crude and basic. . . .

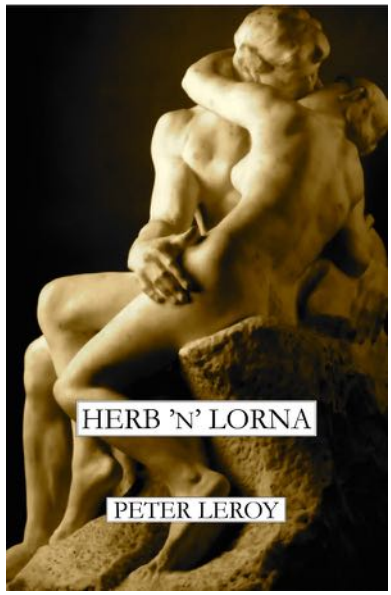
"It needs work," said Ben. "I know that. I don't have the talent to do anything better than this. But you do. You do, Herb. You're mechanically inclined. This kind of thing—much better than this, mind you, but this kind of thing—could be very successful, Herb. It could fit into a little case, like a pocket watch. It could go onto a chain just like a watch. Or it could take the place of a fob. Or maybe it would just be something a guy would carry in his pocket. The stem could make it work. You'd turn the stem instead of this crank, and—well, you see what I'm getting at, don't you?"

"Yes," said Herb, his mind already occupied with a set of interesting ideas prompted by the clumsy little couple. "I do."

Ben's idea was a good one, and Herb saw that it was immediately. Animated coarse goods could sell for much higher prices, at a much greater margin of profit, than static carvings. Herb worked night and day for a week to produce a more successful prototype.

Painstakingly, he cut the figures apart at the elbow, shoulder, hip, and knee joints and across their abdomens, so that he could achieve more versatile and fluid movement than Ben's figures had been able to manage. As far as it was possible to do so, he concealed the articulating mechanism within the figures, which required him to drill through the arms and legs and to carve cavities in the figures where his tiny wires, cables, and pulleys could be concealed. The challenge to his ingenuity was exhilarating, much more so than designing the expandable shelves or the secret drawers or devising a repair for the mess-kit cup handles had been, and Herb took great pleasure in the work. In a week, he had finished, and, on the whole, he was pleased. Ben was overjoyed. . . .

. . . contains Peter Leroy's memoir.



LORNA WAS SURPRISED and suspicious when, on the day after her reunion with Herb, Luther asked her to come to his office at the mill, but her curiosity was aroused by Luther's conciliatory attitude. She agreed to go because she wanted to find out what Luther wanted from her.

"Lorna!" said Luther, rising from his desk and rushing to greet her. "Sit down, Lorna. I want to show you something." He waved her toward the leather wing chair in front of his desk. He settled himself in his own chair, paused for dramatic effect, and lifted the top from a small box on his blotter. From the box he produced Herb's animated couple. He held the object out for Lorna to examine.

"Why, Uncle Luther!" she exclaimed.

"Spring seems to be advancing in your cheeks, Lorna," said Luther. "We'll be in high summer in a moment."

"Who made this?" Lorna asked. She took the gadget from Luther.

"That's not important," he said. "Turn the little wheel at the side."

Lorna gave the wheel a turn. "Oh, my," she said. There was admiration in her voice, and Luther was encouraged. "Who carved these figures?" she asked.

"Originally? Gerald Hirsch, I'd say," said Luther.

"You're probably right," said Lorna. "They look like his work. Who on earth performed the—ahhh, modifications?"

"To tell you the truth," said Luther, "I don't know. It wasn't anybody with any talent in that line." He smiled and brought the tips of his thumbs and index fingers together. "Clumsy work," he said, "but a brilliant idea, and a fine, fine job mechanically. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," she said. She twisted the wheel again, slowly, while she observed the little copulating couple from various angles. They enchanted her. In part, they won her over with their fluid agility and their cunning construction, but most of all, a small gesture won her: a gesture that Herb had supplied by shaping one tiny pulley with an eccentricity, the slightest little bump, like the lobe on a cam, so that at one point in the performance the man brushed his lips against the woman's cheek. It was a tiny gesture, one that Lorna had to see several times before she could be sure that it wasn't accidental, that it wasn't caused by the way she held the figures or the way she turned the wheel. When she satisfied herself that it happened every time, with the precision of all the other gestures and exertions that composed the performance, when she was certain that it was intentional, that whoever had made the little couple perform had considered this sign of affection an essential part of the performance, she was charmed.

Matthew has had far, far too much to drink. The wise thing, as soon as Jack finishes his lobster, would be to say his goodnights, get into a cab with Belinda, and head for home, but he's a drink or two beyond reason, and he seems to be having such fun, they all seem to be having such fun, they all seem so clever and talented, that Matthew doesn't want the group to break up. He wants them to come back to his place. At a couple of points in the evening he has almost spilled the beans about being B. W. Beath, and he knows, somewhere in the back of his mind, that if he persuades the whole gang to come to his place for a last drink, he's sure to tell them, and then he'll stand out even within this superior group.

Eric Kraft's novel . . .

"Listen," he says a little too loudly, "as soon as Jack finishes that lobster, let's go back to my place for a cognac. I just bought a great CD of old Coleman Hawkins stuff. 'Body and Soul'? Perfect for cognac sipping. And I want you to see my place, and my view."

They make their way outside in four styles of wobble; only Jack walks with certain steps. The fierce wind, funneled by buildings, makes them hug themselves. Cabs are waiting at the door, since Flynn's is a perfect spot to find fares to downtown hotels. Jack steps up to the first one, opens the door, motions Effie and Richard in, and calls out to Belinda and Matthew, "Come on. We can all fit. Belinda can sit on my lap. Come on, come on."

He slides in and pats his lap. "Come on, Belinda. Matthew can sit in front." Belinda grins and shrugs and settles herself on Jack's lap. Matthew opens the front door. The cabdriver, a woman, says, "I can't take five. I can't do it. One of you has to get out."

Matthew looks back through the plastic partition. It's all laughs and good times back there. He has the impression that they aren't even aware that the cab hasn't started moving. He knocks on the plastic. Everyone looks at him.

"She can't take five," he shouts.

Jack makes a rubbing motion between his thumb and forefinger, and he mouths the word *money*. He looks at Matthew as if he should know that money's the answer.

Matthew has never done anything like this. He has never offered a bribe for a favor, for special treatment, never tried to get a rule bent, never even slipped a maître d' a folded bill to get a table. He wonders if it works, if it will work now. He takes his wallet out and looks into it. *How much?* He pulls out a ten. He looks at the driver.

"Here," he says.

She takes the bill, flips the flag down, puts the cab in gear, and drives off. Matthew feels absolutely wonderful for about a block and a half, but then he begins to wonder whether he could have gotten her to take them for *five* dollars. . . .

By the time Matthew has brought out cognac and liqueurs, he has the feeling that each of them has come to the independent conclusion that coming here was a bad idea, but none of them wants the evening to end on a wrong note, so they are all making a big effort to try to enjoy it.

He stands beside Jack at the windows, looking out at the lights.

"You have a great view, Matthew," says Jack. "Must be the best view of the *get-toe* available. You ought to invite the black folks up, let 'em see how good they look from a distance."

Matthew laughs uneasily. He wonders what Jack thinks about the whole question of race now that he's a *rich* black guy.

"Okay," says Jack. "Let's have a drink and put on some music and put out the lights and look out over the city and watch the cops hassle my people."

Matthew pours and Belinda hands the drinks around. The story of Jack's missing lobster is told again. Richard mimics Jack's looking for it under the plates of food. Belinda asserts that she and Effie could have talked the people at the next table out of one of theirs. Jack snickers and rubs his hands together and vows to get even somehow in his commercial. Matthew chuckles and says, "Don't worry, I'll get even in my review."

"Are you writing restaurant reviews?" asks Effie. . . .

"Oh, it's no big deal," Matthew says. "I write for *Boston Biweekly*. Restaurant reviews. 'The Epicurean Adventures of B. W. Beath'?"

"We read that!" say Richard and Effie almost simultaneously.

Matthew could hug them.

"Oh, I can't wait to see what you say about Flynn's," says Effie.

"I can't wait to see what you *remember* about Flynn's," says Jack.

They begin to go. There are visits to the bathrooms, the getting of coats. Matthew gathers glasses, begins cleaning up in a desultory way. Effie helps. Around the corner from the kitchen, where they're out of everyone's sight for a moment, Effie kisses him, quickly, impulsively. It isn't much of a kiss, but it is a kiss, and when she pulls away and looks at him, something lively flickers in her eyes and she repeats the kiss, just another peck, but a kiss.

Then suddenly everyone's at the door, and then out the door, waiting for the elevator. Belinda's leaving, too, and Matthew doesn't ask her to stay. He's not too drunk to know that he's too drunk for sex. He might as well save himself the humiliation of failure. She blows him a kiss and says she'll call him in the morning, and they're gone. Matthew weaves in the doorway for a moment, and then he shuts and locks the door and goes to bed.

"Are you ready, Matthew?" calls Belinda from the top of the stairs.

"Shall I close my eyes?"

"No, no. I want to make an entrance."

So it's clothing, Matthew thinks. *A dress, probably, something daring that she wouldn't ordinarily buy herself. Good. Great.* He has often wished she would wear something slinky now and then, and this is the perfect night for it.

She steps into view at the top of the stairs wearing a white fur coat. She stands there a moment, with her hands in the pockets, striking a model's pose, making cat's eyes, sucking her cheeks in. Then she begins walking down the stairs, vamping.

The coat is startling. The skins are dyed mink, sewn in such a way as to create the effect of vertical stripes, white on white, and the collar and cuffs are ermine, softer and fluffier than the mink, with the slightest hint of black at the tips of the hairs. It's a staggering, breathtaking coat.

Belinda lets her face relax; it assumes a look that says, "Haven't I done something silly?"

"I got it on sale," she says. "I'm not going to tell you what it cost. I won't even tell you what it *would* have cost."

Belinda takes Matthew's arm, and they walk down the steps. The cabdriver, who has been watching for them, gets out of the cab—it would be fair to say that he *leaps* out of the cab—and comes around to open the door. This has never happened to Matthew before in his life. The driver begins sweeping at the seat with his hand, and saying something in so low a voice that Matthew can't be quite sure what it is, but it sounds to him like "'Scuse me, 'scuse me. Sorry, sorry. Dirty, dirty." Matthew and Belinda get into the cab, astonished. They look at each other, raise their eyebrows, struggle to keep themselves from laughing.

"If he were wearing a cap," Matthew whispers, "he would have touched it. And if he weren't bald, he would have tugged his forelock."

Dolce Far Niente is in the area where Belinda works, an area of spanking-new office buildings housing young companies engaged in microelectronics, computer software, genetic engineering, and any number of things involving lasers, many of which are offensive. Matthew looks around. "This whole section of town is all so new," he says. "What was here before—I mean, before all this?"

"Almost nothing. It was just a blank between two highways."

"Oh, yeah," says Matthew, recalling. "The only thing I remember about it is a lot of trucks. This is amazing. Last year it was a parking lot, now it's Houston."

He has the uneasy feeling that in one of these handsome buildings strange microscopic beings, the like of which have never been seen on earth before, are at this moment engineering their escape from a petri dish. *Do genetic engineering outfits use petri dishes?* he wonders. *Do they raise their manufactured microbes on agar, or are agar and petri dishes hopelessly out of date?*

"Do genetic engineering outfits grow their creatures in agar?" he asks. "In petri dishes?"

"What?" says Belinda. "What on earth makes you ask that?"

"I—" It seems too much to explain. "I don't know. I just wondered. Probably not. They've probably engineered some new stuff to feed the newer stuff. Something bred to be eaten. The perfect diet. Salvation of the planet. Feed the starving. Allow more breeding."

"Wow. Is it my coat that got you onto this?"

"What?"

"My coat made you bring up the subject of hunger?"

"What? No! Oh, no, not at all. I love your coat. You look spectacular in it."

The restaurant is in a building that used to be a service station for the trucks that were kept here. It seems a small and frightened thing, cowering in the presence of the towering. It has been decorated, inside and out, at great expense, to look like a ruin. Here and there are artful imitations of patches of peeling stucco, baring brick beneath. One window has been painstakingly painted with some clear goo to make it look as if there are bullet holes in it. Just inside the door a safe stands crazily, one corner embedded in the floor as if it had fallen from a great height. A section of one interior wall has been torn away along a jagged line, the vacancy covered with glass, so that the plumbing and wiring and heating ducts show. It reminds Matthew of his apartment.

Belinda's coat has done something to her; she strides into the restaurant with an assertiveness that Matthew has never seen in her before. . . .

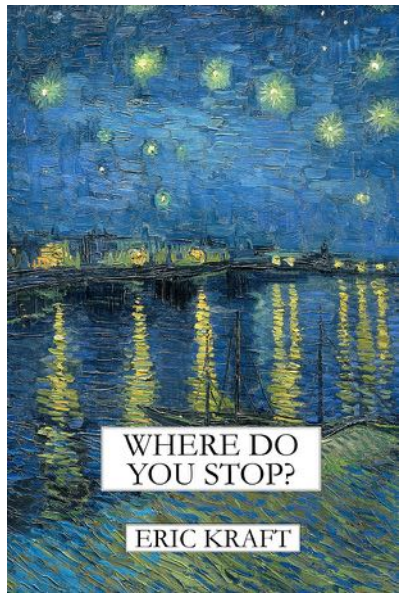
"Let me check the coat," Matthew says. He realizes that he has said "the coat," not "your coat." He slips it off Belinda's shoulders and is startled to discover that her dress has no back. Black crepe falls from Belinda's shoulders in languid folds to an arc below her waist. *Catenary arc,* he thinks. . . .

He checks the coat. The young woman who is both coat-check girl and greeter takes it from him as if it were a child and smiles in a way that seems to suggest that if there are fur coats like this one to be had, she might be interested in seeing more of Matthew. He is, he realizes, almost certainly a victim of wishful thinking in so interpreting that smile, but he gets a nice lift from it anyway.

. . . contains Peter Leroy's memoir.

When I found myself bored, when I didn't know what to do with myself, when I was a little on edge and needed to find or devise a way to relax, or even when I was just looking for a way to pass the time, I sought inspiration in junk.

Most of the time, I found it there. The ready availability of intriguing materials is, I think, a spur to creation more often than the arrogance of artists allows us to admit. Fortunately for me, I lived in a family where there was plenty of intriguing stuff around. They regarded any supposedly useless thing with the attitude that its true, deep, hidden, or overlooked utility would be revealed—eventually. This attitude was summed up in the words they muttered when they tossed the thing into a corner of the cellar instead of tossing it into a trash can: "Never can tell—might come in handy someday." For me, these things already had their uses, since they were fodder for my browsing.



Eric Kraft's novel . . .

I have said it before: so much depends on chance. There I was, down in the cellar, poking around in the junk, when I came upon something intriguing: the remains of an old windup record player. Thank goodness, it had no amplifying horn, no pickup arm, no needles. If it had, I would never have seen it as raw material; I would have seen it as a record player, and I would have been blinded by that perception of it. I might have tried to fix it, and I might have filled the afternoon with the effort, but I would probably have failed and emerged from the experience frustrated, diminished by failure, possibly scarred for life. Instead, thanks to the providence that had dictated the evisceration and amputation of certain record-playing essentials, I saw only an engine, just something that would make something else rotate. Its life as a record player was over, but there was a vital spark in the old gadget yet. All I had to do was discover its true, deep, hidden, or overlooked utility.

The thing as I found it was, essentially, this: a motor driven by a spring that the operator wound with a large crank (see Figure 1). The motor was mounted vertically inside an oak box, with the shaft emerging from the top of the box. Mounted on the end of the shaft, outside the box, was a platter, covered with green felt. The record was supposed to spin on this platter, of course. Mounted farther down the shaft, inside the box, was an intriguing trio of metal balls. The adjustable orbiting balls acted as a governor, a limiting device. Their original purpose had been to allow the operator to keep the platter spinning at the 78 rpm of old shellac records, so the range of adjustment was kept short, just a narrow band at the center of the machine's possible range of speeds. The original purpose didn't interest me, though. I wanted to see the machine spin at its extremes, so I began dismantling the governor.

By removing the adjusting screw entirely, I could make the platter spin much faster than it was ever intended to spin, and by doing away with the trio of balls I could make it spin faster still, quickly enough to catapult small objects from its rim. I tried this for a while, shooting things across the cellar and marking record distances on the floor, but I quickly reached the catapult's practical limits, and the record player vibrated so violently that it seemed likely to shake itself to death, so I gave that up. More intriguing was the opposite extreme. With longer screws I could slow the machine down. When I'd inserted the longest screw that would fit, driving the top collar down against the bottom one, I thought for a moment that I'd slowed it as much as could be done, but a little thinking showed me the next step: longer arms, bigger balls. It was the work of a happy hour to attach three dowels to the platter, each with a rubber ball at its far end. . The whole arrangement reminded me of the electrified model of the solar system kept in a glass case in the hallway of the oldest of the elementary schools in town. At the center, symbolizing the sun, was a naked light bulb. That, I saw, was what my gadget needed—a light.

I thought of trying a small table lamp, but my mother spotted me sneaking it out of the living room, so I had to settle for a flashlight. I taped the flashlight to the platter, wound the motor, and released the brake. Watching the spot of light moving around the walls of the darkened cellar, I realized that I had here the essentials of a lighthouse. I had wanted a lighthouse of my own for years. Now I was halfway there. I had the mechanism. All I needed was the shell, the housing, the lighthouse equivalent of the record player's cabinet. That couldn't be hard to come up with. Next to what I had already accomplished, it ought to be a snap. I didn't see any reason why, with some help, I couldn't build a lighthouse in the back yard in a couple of days. Of course, I would need my father's permission. . . .

It would be best, I reasoned, not to announce my intention to build a lighthouse, o claim that I had something else in mind, something more modest. I asked permission to build a shack.

"A shack?" said my father.

From something in his voice, I realized that I had chosen the wrong word.

"Well," I said, "not a shack, a hut."

"A hut?"

"A fort," I tried.

"A fort? What kind of fort?"

"More like a clubhouse," I said.

"Oh!" he said. "A clubhouse. Sure. Why not?" . . .

I suspect that my father expected me to build, no matter what I called it, an eyesore, because he allowed me to build it only if I built it where it would be hidden by a grove of bamboo.

MISS RHEINGOLD showed us a movie called *Quanto the Minimum*. It was developed, or at least sponsored, by the telephone company, and it featured a tiny cartoon character, Quanto the Minimum himself, who explored the constitution of matter as it was then understood.

As I recall, Quanto was an impish sort, sarcastic and even a bit nasty. He seemed always to be telling us, the captive audience, how stupid or ignorant we were. This abuse started right off the bat, when Quanto stood with his little hands on his cartoon hips and said right at us, "Hey, kids, I'll bet you think you're really something, don't you? Ya-ha-ha! Well, get this—you're really mostly nothing! Just wait till I get through here. You'll find out that you're mostly empty space. Ya-ha-ha! Come on! Come on along with me! I'll take you on a remarkable voyage of discovery—from the farthest reaches of the universe to the tiniest heart of the tiniest atom—from the vastness of your ignorance to the tiniest little twinkling photon of enlightenment, which is really about all I can realistically expect to pass on to you with the budget they've given me to work with. So hang on! You're in for some surprises. You're about to find out that most of everything is nothing."

Quanto did take us on a remarkable voyage, as he promised, but he was a difficult guide to follow because his style, like Miss Rheingold's, was discontinuity. He jumped from one topic to another with no more transition than saying, "Wow! That was really something. Aren't you excited? I am. I'm really excited!" Then, *foom*, off he'd go. He seemed to whiz right off the screen and rocket through a radioactive blue miasma for a couple of seconds, eventually reappearing in another location, calmer, a little worn out, breathing heavily, his snazzy red outfit torn here and there, to tackle the next topic. "Whew!" he might say. "That was quite a ride. Where are we? Ah! Alamogordo. Wait till you see this."

We saw many things, a fascinating jumble: an atomic bomb blast flipping battleships like toys in a tub, solar flares lashing out like the whip my favorite movie cowboy carried, a Tinkertoy lattice that represented the molecular structure of some crystal or other and made chemistry look like lots of fun, and more. We learned a word that all of us went around using whenever we got half a chance since it was such a pleasure to say. It began with a funny buzzing, hissing, and shushing, generated a lot of saliva along the way, and its ultimate syllable made my mouth a cavernous space in which a howl resounded. This wonderful word was *Zwischenraum*, the word Quanto used for the empty space that is most of everything, the nothing that permeates and separates it all.

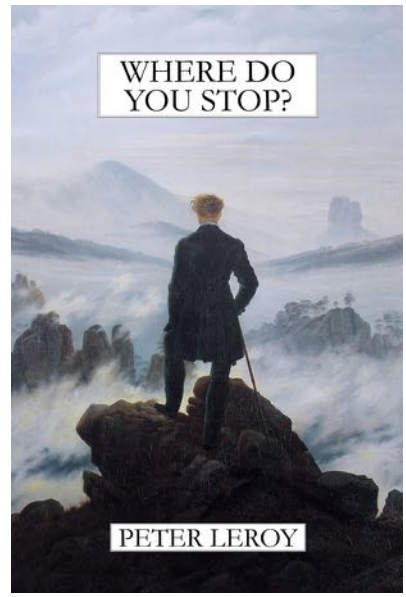
Among all the marvels in *Quanto the Minimum,* however, the universal favorite was a demonstration of the mousetrap model of a fission reaction. In this demonstration, a Ping-Pong table was covered with mousetraps, densely packed, but set at angles to one another, so that the model wouldn't seem to be regularizing matter too artificially. All of the mousetraps were cocked and ready to spring, and resting on the wire bail of each was a Ping-Pong ball. An announcer appeared at the side of the Ping-Pong table. Quanto leaped onto the screen, said, "Keep your eye on this guy," and leaped off, laughing. The announcer waved his hand toward the Ping-Pong table, taking in its entire magnificent array of cocked traps and ready balls, and said in defiance of all logic, "*This* is Uranium 235."

Then he went on to explain some things he seemed no clearer about than we were. He seemed to keep losing the distinction between the Ping-Pong ball he was holding as the Ping-Pong ball it actually was and the neutron it was meant to represent. Whenever he said that a neutron was used to bombard the Uranium 235 he made a dart-throwing motion with his hand, suggesting that the bombarding process was a heck of a lot like dart throwing, or at least that was the impression it left on most of us. When he had finished his taxing explanation, he said, "And *this* is the result," and with coy insouciance tossed the ball into the array of traps.

Wow.

What resulted may or may not have been a good demonstration of what occurs during nuclear fission, but I am certain that I will never see a more vivid demonstration of an idea that my parents had tried to hammer into me back when I was just a kid, before I took up junk browsing as a pastime, whenever I became bored on rainy vacation days and pleaded with them to mitigate my boredom with a new model airplane kit or a dozen comic books. What they said—and this Ping-Pong ball experiment so spectacularly proved—was, "You don't need model kits and comics to have fun. You can have a lot of fun with the things you find around the house if you just use a little imagination." Definitely so, provided you could find a few dozen mousetraps and Ping-Pong balls.

. . . contains Peter Leroy's memoir.



The film ended. The fluorescent lights stuttered and flickered into life.

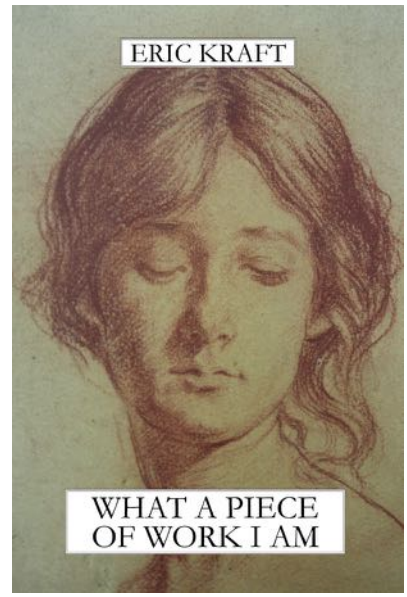
"We just have time for a few questions," said Miss Rheingold.

Hands shot up all over the room. Miss Rheingold beamed with pleasure and satisfaction.

"Bill?" she said.

"Can you use just regular mousetraps, or do you have to get that model 235 they were using there in the movie?"

It took Miss Rheingold a moment to recognize what a depth of misunderstanding underlay this question. When she did, the corners of her mouth dropped. "Oh," she said, or perhaps she just moaned. The bell rang.



Eric Kraft's novel . . .

DURING THAT TIME in Ariane's life, when she was working at Captain White's and hanging around Corinne's and living up to Tootsie Koochikov's reputation, I stopped spending afternoons with her at her house—her parents' house, that is—ending a practice that we had begun when I was eleven. I missed those afternoons. We would sit in the dark room where the television set was kept, and we would watch the afternoon movie together. I would try to snuggle up to her while her attention was focused on the screen. Nothing much happened between us—nothing physical, that is, but my little preadolescent heart beat faster as the distance between us diminished each afternoon, and I developed a keen sense for the signals of cinematic structure, with my longing and eagerness growing as the film approached its climax. I developed an especially keen understanding of the *anticlimax,* because in that part of the movie, while the loose ends were being tied on the screen, her interest in the story would fall away, she would yawn and stretch and look around, and discover, with amusement and mock annoyance, how close to her I had inched, and she might, if it was a very lucky day, give me a playful punch, or a wink, or even throw her arm around my neck and squeeze me in a momentary headlock to show me how well she understood the desires that I thought I was managing to hide.

In the long cinematic hours that I spent trying to get close to her, she wore, most of the time, a look that I remember as soft. I saw a gentleness and something like serenity in her face, her cheeks, her eyes, but sometimes, when she was displeased, she would turn on me a look that was harder. There was an edge to her then, and sometimes, in her eyes, I thought I saw something flinty, almost nasty, and sometimes I thought—I feared—that she might be laughing at me, even mocking me, toying with me. She may have been, but I don't think so. I think that she was cursing her fate. Consider the circumstances. I was just a kid, content to be defined by my context rather than my self, and she was beginning to try to think of herself as *someone*, as a personality that was portable, strong enough to resist its surroundings and remain almost constant wherever she might take it. Just what that personality might be, who that someone might be, she wasn't sure. At that time, I think, she was trying to become a sophisticated young woman. She watched the movies to discover potential selves, but when the movie ended she would yawn and stretch and look around, and what would she find beside her? A little boy. Me. Six years younger. A child. Grinning. Inching up on her. All but drooling. What did I expect of her? What did I think she was going to do for me? Did I expect her to treat me like a boyfriend? I had my fantasies—as she must have known, as she must certainly have known. Surely they showed.

That was when, and why, I would see the softness leave her. I could see her face harden, like the clay I left on the windowsill of the art room to dry before I painted it. In a remarkably short time, that softness was completely gone. I stopped going to see her, to watch television with her. We were no longer suitable companions. . . .

"Basically," she said, "I wanted to get it over with. I knew there would be quite a scene when I announced that I was going to be working at the Seagull's Perch or the Bayview Resort Motel—or whatever they were going to call it."

"I suppose your parents might have felt awkward about the idea of your working at a place that would be catering primarily to tourists, to outsiders. You know—I can see that it might have seemed belittling to them, as if their girl were becoming a servant, serving the rich." She gave me a puzzled look. "It might have seemed a debasement of the dignity of the family," I suggested, "a class distinction imposed upon them." She looked as if she wasn't sure whether to take me seriously or not. "The have-nots waiting table for the haves, the proletarian workers once again getting screwed by—"

Her eyes lit up and she pointed a finger at me. "*Now* you're getting warm," she said. "I knew that my father was sure to think that no matter what they called the place, Sunrise Cove or Moonlight Bay, it was a *motel*. And as far as he was concerned a motel was the functional equivalent of a whorehouse."

"Still," I said, "you stepped right out—"

"Yes, I did."

"—walking with that handsome stride, whether you were eager to deliver the news or just eager to get it over with, and since the outfit you had made for yourself was snug, closely fitted to your firm young body, and because the nylon fabric you had chosen was stretchy and slippery, your determined and eager stride made the dress cling, with each and every one of those eager strides, to the musculature of your youthful nates and thighs."

"Wow! Do you actually *know* any of this, or is it all just wishful thinking?"

"I know! I do! I was riding my bike to your house that day, to see Raskol, and I saw you walking along. You had never looked more desirable. Oh, you were an adolescent's dream! I ached from the lack of you."

"Come on."

"Don't you remember my being in the kitchen when you made your announcement?"

"No."

"Well, you were preoccupied, I guess."

"Maybe. I may have been worried about my family's reaction, but I was determined. I wanted that job."

"I HADN'T been in any of the guest rooms since those nights when I had visited the place before it was finished. It was a queer feeling, to be in those rooms. It got to me. When I was in someone's room, alone, with someone else's aura all around me, I felt—don't laugh at me for this—I felt influenced by the other person. I even felt attracted to—him—her. There was something about entering the room, slipping into the room, that was like putting on someone else's clothes, even—I know this sounds mystical and spooky—but there was something I felt that was a little like trying on someone else—period."

"Did you—like it?"

"Yes. I did. And that was *not at all* what I had anticipated. I had expected to find the whole experience repulsive. I mean, when I was at home and had to help my mother with the laundry, I could hardly stand to enter my brothers' room—and the *worst* thing was having to touch my brothers' clothes. Sometimes even my *own* dirty things disgusted me."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. I'm tempted to say, now, that the dirt on my clothes—"

"—the exfoliated flakes of skin, the dried sweat—"

She turned the corners of her mouth down and stuck her tongue out: a comical look of repulsion, of offended sensibility. I laughed.

"I'm tempted to say," she said, "that my own dirty clothes repulsed me because the me who was being repulsed wasn't the me who had soiled the clothes."

"What?"

"You heard me. I don't know. I'm not sure about this, but it's something I've begun to think about—the idea that I've been leaving a trail of old selves behind me, people who used to be me, strung out behind me in attitudes that are no longer mine—"

"—like pages in one of those flip books you used to get, where a little cartoon character is in a slightly different position on every page."

"Yeah."

"Or like people left behind at turnings in the labyrinth."

"Yeah, that too. Anyway. I don't want you to think that I'm getting too weird. I'm not sure that I believe what I just said. I'm still thinking about it. So. There I was, standing alone in a room that someone else had soiled. That was the way I felt about it. I thought of it as soiled, like dirty clothes. But I hadn't anticipated that I would also find it fascinating. I hadn't given any thought to the fact that people's things would be there, that their lives and their selves would be so completely on display."

She smiled. She stood. She walked to the end table and took a cigarette from her pack, lit it, took a drag.

"On display," she said. "An interesting term. An interesting concept. It's the backside of privacy—to be on display. That was the feeling I had about these people whose rooms I slipped in and out of, and from my point of view it was accurate. Their things and their secrets—*some* of their secrets anyway—were on display, for me to see. No. No. Wait. I forgot. I have to make a distinction here. For some of these people, most of them, their secrets *weren't* on display, because *I* didn't *count* as an audience. I was nobody, so nobody saw their things, so their privacy was preserved. These people would leave a great deal of themselves out and on view—and never even thought about it. They kept many things *hidden*, too, of course, but that was more because they thought I might *steal* them than because they didn't want me to *see* them. If they could have been sure that I wouldn't take anything, they probably would have left *everything* out, where they could see it, where I could see it. Then there was another group. They surprised me. Perhaps they won't surprise you. These were the people who left things out *so* that I would see them."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. Women who would lay their best dress out on the bed for the maid to see. Men who left their underwear lying on a chair for the cute little maid to see. Men who would leave a package of condoms on the bedside table for the maid to see. But I don't want to talk about that now. Let me save it for later, if I get to it at all. I want to go back to that first day, the first time that I was in one of the guests' rooms, alone."

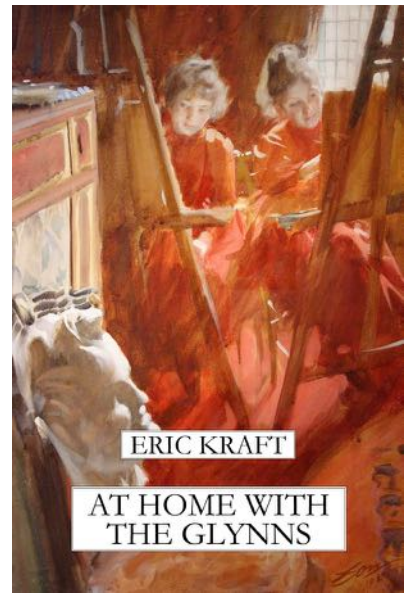
SHE SWUNG the door open and looked in. The light coming through the venetian blinds cast sharp shadows on the bedspread, shadows that slipped over the edge of the bed, fell onto the floor, and vanished. Somewhere, perhaps in the bungalow next door, a radio was playing. Ariane had her cart of cleaning products and supplies with her. For a moment she stood in the doorway, beside her cart, not moving. She had no particular desire to do anything. She felt that nothing had worked, and nothing was going to work. She had begun to suspect, on the way from the storeroom to this bungalow, that Guy had no real interest in her, that he had maneuvered her into working as a maid for the good of the resort, for the sake of his own position.

She walked into the room and let herself sink onto the edge of the bed. She tried to will herself not to cry. Then, something on the mirrored vanity caught her eye. It was a pair of earrings, left there, apparently carelessly. They were reflected in the mirror of the vanity top and again in the mirror on the wall. They seemed enormous.

Ariane got up and crossed to the vanity and picked them up, hefted them in her hand. She brought the back of her hand to her brow and held it there, limply drooping, with the earrings in it, and checked herself in the mirror.

. . . contains Peter Leroy's memoir.

ONE DAY I was in the cafeteria at the new junior high school, making my way along the steam table in a line with the other scholars, collecting the various components of my lunch: half a pint of milk in a waxed cardboard container shaped like a cabin in the woods; two slices of white bread; a square pat of butter on a square of white cardboard with the edges bent up to make a little tray, with a square of thin translucent waxed paper stuck to the top; one slice of roast beef as thick as a nickel, marbled like a topographic map, gray as the sheet of cardboard around which Spotless Cleaners folded my father's Sunday shirts, with gravy; mashed potatoes, also with gravy; and those Troubled Titan peas. A woman in a hair net dished the peas out onto my plate lukewarm and wet. The pea water, gray-green like the peas themselves, spread instantly, making an island of the mashed potatoes, mingling with the gravy.



Eric Kraft's novel . . .

Of the many things that puzzled me about school, one was that the common sense so prized in society at large in those days never seemed to penetrate the doors of the school building. Watching the pea water and the gravy interswirl, I wondered why the divided plates that my family used on picnics were not used here in the school cafeteria, where they were really needed. Finding myself wondering along those lines, I thought of suggesting the use of divided plates to one of the ladies in the hair nets, but I decided against it, because the time that I'm recalling was a time when young people generally kept their mouths shut.

Occupied by my thoughts, I took a seat at a table that was otherwise unoccupied and set my tray on the table. I was observing the spread of the pea water when Margot and Martha Glynn arrived and sat on either side of me, Margot on my right and Martha on my left.

"Are you right- or left-handed, Peter?" asked Margot without preamble.

"Well," I said, "I write with my right hand but I throw a ball with my left, so you could say I'm—"

I paused slightly, because I enjoyed the word I was about to say and was proud of the skill it summarized.

"—ambidextrous."

"That's good. Ambidextrous is good," said Margot.

"But those are useless skills," said Martha.

"Yes," said Margot. "What about rolling peas?"

"Rolling peas?" I had the feeling that a joke was coming.

"Try it," said Martha. She picked a pea from her plate with the tip of her spoon and let it roll onto the table between us. Margot did the same with one of hers.

"Now rest your finger on that pea," said Margot. "Martha's, too."

I put my index fingers on the peas.

"This one," said Martha, taking the middle finger of my hand and placing it on her pea. Margot made the same change on her side.

"Just rest your finger there lightly," Margot cautioned. "Don't squash the little thing."

I did as she said.

"The same over here," said Martha.

"Good," said Margot. "Now let's see you roll the peas around a little."

Cautiously, I began to move my fingers on the peas.

"Close your eyes," said Martha.

I closed my eyes, and I found that that helped. The peas seemed larger, more easily manipulated. I had a better sensation of the feeling of each pea against the finger pad that rested on it. I seemed to acquire a sense of the difference between the skin of the pea and the mush it contained, to understand the tensile limits of the skin, the edge of the danger of rupturing it, and the resistant resilience of the ball of mush within. I became a little bolder, rolling the peas a little farther, a little faster—and the right one got away from me.

"Don't get cocky," said Margot. "Just move them around a little. Don't try to impress us."

"You've got to walk before you can fly," said Martha. "Try again." Humbled, I moved the peas gingerly, maintaining control, moving them ever so slightly, just keeping each pea on the central ridge of my finger pad, never rolling so far that the pea would slip away. . . .

"Faster over here," said Margot.

"And slower over here," said Martha, "but with longer strokes."

"Okay, let me see. I—oops—I—"

"He squashed mine," said Martha. There was in her voice a note that I wouldn't have expected. I might have expected her to be annoyed with me, or I might have expected her to be amused, but she was—and this was unmistakable—disappointed.

"What do you think?" she asked Margot.

"He can do it if he concentrates," she said. "I really think he can."

"Practice at home."

"Practice at home?" I asked.

"You have peas at home, don't you?"

"Sure, but—" I had intended to say that I wasn't allowed to play with my food, but when I looked into Margot's doubting, inquisitive eyes, I saw that such an objection was inappropriate. I looked at Martha and saw the same thing in her eyes.

"But?" she asked.

"Well—why?"

They looked at each other. They looked at me.

"Just to please us," said Martha.

ROSETTA GLYNN greeted me at the big wooden door when I returned on Saturday afternoon. She wore a look that I recognized: the look of someone with a story to tell, sizing up her audience with bright, curious eyes. . . .

She took a seat at a round table that still held the remains of lunch. No one else was around.

"Have something," she said.

She waved her hand across the table and finished the gesture by letting her hand fall limply onto a cigarette pack, which she lifted as if it were considerably heavier than the cigarette packs my parents had around the house. She took a cigarette from the pack, and while she went through the business of lighting it, I took a roll from a pile of several on an earthenware platter. The roll had an unfamiliar shape. I took a bite. It had an unfamiliar flavor.

"Mm, this is good," I said. "What is it?"

She exhaled and squinted through the smoke. An odd look came over her face, part grimace and part smile, a look of grudging reminiscence, as if she couldn't keep herself from remembering, though she would really rather not.

"Well," she said, and shrugged, "it's a roll. . . . To you, it's a roll." She looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

"Uh-huh," I said.

"But it's more than that, you know," she added, and she winked and waved away some of the smoke. "Much, much more." She paused. "To me—to me, it's hope." . . .

She got up from the table with a weary sigh and went to a cupboard over the sink, where she got a fancy bottle with a circular body. I tried to read the label, but the words all seemed to be misprinted or backward, and the largest word was nearly obscured by an elaborate drawing of vines. As well as I could make it out, it seemed to say SLIVOVITZ, but that didn't match any words I knew, so I assumed that I was wrong. From another cupboard, she got a tiny tumbler, no bigger than a shot glass, but thin and fragile and delicate and ladylike. She returned to the table, set the bottle and the tiny glass down, sighed, smiled a queer, funny, endearing twisted smile, shook her head, sat, uncorked the bottle, filled the tiny glass, and set the bottle down beside the glass.

Then, apparently on impulse, she took another roll from the platter, broke it in half, and held the halves to her face. She drew a long breath, inhaling the aroma of the roll.

"Smell it," she said.

I did as she had done. The aroma was wonderfully rich and yeasty, almost too much for me.

"That's *hope* you smell," she said. She put the roll back on the platter and said, "I'll tell you why I say that." She lifted the glass, took a sip, and said, "We had to get out, of course." She looked for some sign of understanding from me. "You know," she said.

I didn't, but I nodded and said, "Mm."

"The Fascists," she said.

"Oh!" I said. "Yeah." I knew who they were, in a way. They had been the bad guys in the war comics, the official enemies of our tribe, before the Gooks, Chinks, and Russkies came in.

"Yes, yes. That's why. The Fascists. Andrew—but of course he wasn't Andrew then—was a marked man, a very comical man, very funny. He was a cartoonist then, you know. A caricaturist. He was very popular—very, very popular. He was even in a nightclub, as an entertainer. He would go around and make pictures of people—not just the way someone would go around and sell you cigarettes or take your photograph. No, he was a performer, with a spotlight on him. Such a big man, you know."

A smile, a sip.

"He had a pad of paper mounted on a board that he held in the crook of his arm—like this—and in a hole in the board a pot of paint. Black paint. One big brush. And he would make his pictures with big gestures—like this—big swooping gestures. His pictures often appeared in the papers, too. Very often. People always laughed, even the people he drew. They were *flattered* to have him make their pictures. They were happy to join in the laughter at themselves because—because they were—*people*. We like attention, you know, *people,* and we know how ridiculous we are. It's one of the ways you can spot us. You catch us laughing, and you know we're human." She leaned toward me through the smoke. "It's a dead giveaway," she said.

She poured a little more into the tiny tumbler.

"Then those Fascists came in," she said. "Andrew made such comical pictures of them all—those Fascists. For the papers, you understand. And then, pretty soon, *they* ran all the papers—those Fascists. And they didn't want to look comical. So he made his drawings for the walls. Huge."

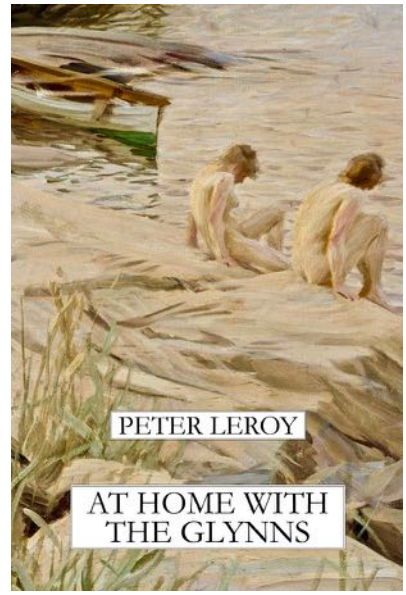
She looked up at the stone wall and swept her hand to indicate the grand size of Andy's caricatures and shook her head at the inadequacy of her gesture. I thought of the scaffolding in the studio and the enormous size of the painting he was working on. "Uh-huh," I said. "I understand."

"Good," she said. "Huge caricatures, and more comical than ever. He painted by night. And he signed his pictures with a little drawing of a bat."

She took a sip. "Well, you know, there was a price offered, a price offered for him, for 'The Bat.' Money, you know. When money is offered, you would be very surprised how cheap you can buy someone. How cheap it is to buy a betrayal. Trust comes dear," she said, "but treachery is cheap."

She took a sip. There was a long silence. I had no idea what she was talking about, so I had no idea what to say.

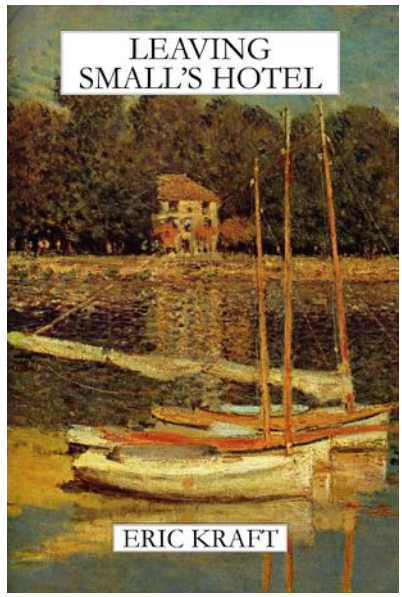
. . . contains Peter Leroy's memoir.



I WAS UP EARLY the next morning, as always, but when I entered the kitchen I found Cedric "Call Me Lou" Abbot already there, chatting with Suki, the cook, and making himself a breakfast sandwich from the meat loaf in the "leftovers" refrigerator.

"Good morning!" Lou said when I walked in. "Coffee's almost ready." He was smiling, but that didn't change my conviction that he was a grumpy guy, because I have learned that many a grumpy guy will smile in the company of strangers.

"Morning," I mumbled, hoping that Lou would conclude from my mumbling that I was one of those people who do not like to converse before they have had their coffee. I turned quickly toward the door and said, "I'll go see if Dexter brought the papers," employing the same significant mumble.



Eric Kraft's novel . . .

"Swell idea!" said Lou, who apparently had no ear for a significant mumble. "I'll come along." He followed, carrying the sandwich. Together, we headed down the path toward the dock. Along the way, I decided, after a quick survey of my personal history conducted while walking with my head down, my eyes on the ground, and my hands in my pockets, that Lou was probably the first person I had ever heard actually use the word *swell,* or, if I was wrong about that, certainly the first person I had ever heard use the word *swell* so early in the morning.

"This Dexter," Lou asked, "who's that?"

"Dexter? He's our mailman, paperboy, delivery service—"

"Hardworking fellow?"

"Hardly working, as we say around here. He does some fishing and some clamming, except on days when he would rather not, and on his way out to the bay he drops off our mail and our newspapers—"

"—except on days when he would rather not," said Lou, chuckling.

"Right," I said, not chuckling. "I have come to suspect that Dexter does not like delivering our mail and newspapers."

"And why have you come to suspect that?" asked Lou.

"I have come to suspect that because Dexter does not exhibit any apparent desire to see that the goods actually reach us. He brings his boat within what seems to him to be flinging distance of our dock and then from that distance he flings a plastic bag in our general direction. Sometimes he puts enough effort—technically, we call it 'oomph'—into the fling to get the bag onto the dock, and sometimes—"

Lou and I had reached the dock. We stopped there and stood in silence for a moment, looking at a plastic bag floating just out of reach.

"Sometimes he does not," said Lou, chuckling.

"Yeah," said I, not chuckling.

I stretched out on the dock and began trying to snag the bag with a boat hook while Lou ate his meat-loaf sandwich. After a short while Lou said, "What a great morning!"

I twisted my head around and looked up at him to see if he was being sarcastic. He didn't seem to be. He pointed to the bag of papers and mail and said with a smile, "Looks like it's sinking."

"Oh, yes, it is," I said. "It is sinking, slowly but surely."

"Why don't we start up the launch and go out and get it before it goes under?"

"Why don't we?" I said with a sigh. "I'll tell you 'why don't we.' Because after a damp night—and last night was a very damp night—the engine tends to be a little reluctant to start, and also because the launch leaks, and before I leave the dock in it I like to pump it dry so that I've got a better chance of staying afloat for the duration of my journey."

Lou clapped me on the back heartily, as grumpy guys will when they are desperate to hide their gloom, and, pointing toward the bag, said, "It's not going to sink between here and there. Tell you what—why don't I get into the boat and you just shove me out in the direction of the bag while you keep hold of the line, and then pull me back in after I snag the bag?"

"Swell idea," I said, and that was what we did. Then we carried the dripping bag between us all the way back to the hotel and began laying the things out to dry. When Albertine came into the front hall, she found it covered with newspaper.

"'What fresh hell is this?'" she asked.

"It's the paper," I said, "and the mail, and the magazines."

"And it's all over the whole damned place?"

"Just the ground floor," said Lou, beaming.

He handed me a limp envelope and the letter that had been in it. "This doesn't look like the kind of thing you'd want lying around for everyone to see," he said.

He was right. It was a letter from the publishers of *The Unlikely Adventures of Larry Peters*, a series of books for children or young people or "pre-adults" that I had been writing for years, and the news was not good. "In the face of a continuing decline in sales," they wrote, "we have decided with extreme reluctance to write *finis* to the series." There was no mention of a wake with open bar, hot hors d'oeuvres, and a jazz band.

"Oh, this is swell," I said. "This is just swell."

I SUFFER from a couple of forms of inherited mental illness that have been passed along on both sides of my family for generations. We get the idea that we can do things that a moment's reflection ought to tell us we cannot, and we are easily sidetracked.

To give you just one example: once, when I was about twelve, I got the idea that I could build a tape recorder. I had come into possession of a recorded tape, but I had no means of playing it and didn't have enough money to buy a tape recorder, so I decided to build one.

Not only did I suppose that I could build a tape recorder, but I expected to be able to build it out of common household junk. If that seems unlikely to you, then you have never come across a copy of *Impractical Craftsman* magazine. I think it is safe to say that this magazine has been responsible for more wasted hours of labor in the basement workshops of America than any other single cause.

I walked to the drug store to get the latest issue. It had just arrived, but the stock boy hadn't put it on the rack yet. Men with nothing better to do were lined up at the coffee counter, waiting, staring into their cups with the empty eyes of the desperately addicted. I took a stool at the end of the line. When the stock boy emerged from the stockroom with a bundle of magazines in his hands, the men rose and followed him. So did I.

"All right, all right, stand back," the boy said. He removed the last few dog-eared copies of last month's issue and began, slowly, putting this month's in its place.

The cover offered to show one how to "Build a Photo Enlarger from War Surplus Bomb Sight!"

I wasn't going to be sidetracked by that. I had already tried to go into the photography business, and once was enough. From a company that advertised in *Impractical Craftsman*, I had ordered a Deluxe Developing Kit and E-Z Darkroom Instructions. To give myself something to do while I was enduring the pain of waiting for the kit to arrive, and to recover its cost, I advertised myself as an expert in photographic services. I had a Little Giant printing set from another enthusiasm, another ad. With it, I printed some flyers, and I distributed them throughout the neighborhood.

When the kit and instructions arrived, I set up a basement darkroom (omitted here are details concerning additional costs for materials not supplied in the kit and the expenditure of considerable labor, the need for which was never mentioned or even implied in the advertisement, unless I somehow misunderstood the meaning of "E-Z") and picked up a roll of film from my first customer, Mrs. Jerrold.

I'm sure you have already guessed the outcome. I worked on her pictures for an afternoon, and then I gave up. I put the results, such as they were, into an envelope, walked to Mrs. Jerrold's house, and knocked on her back door.

"I have your pictures," I said when she opened it.

"Oh, good!" she said. "I can't wait to see them. There should be some nice shots from our vacation."

"Yeah, there probably were," I said.

"'Were'?"

"Not all of them came out."

"Oh."

"A couple of them came out."

"A couple?"

"And some of them came out partway."

"Oh."

"There was a really good one of you in a bathing suit," I said with genuine enthusiasm.

"'Was'?"

"Yeah. I was trying to get it just perfect, but at first it was sort of too light, and then it was still too light, and then it was a little too dark, and then it was black."

"Oh," she said. I could see her disappointment in the furrows that formed on her forehead and the way she pouted her lips. For a moment I thought she might cry.

"It's all my fault," I said.

"Don't be silly," she said, tousling my hair and trying to assume the air of a woman who considers the self-esteem of an adolescent boy who has a crush on her far more important than mementoes of the only family vacation she will take all year. "I'm a *terrible* photographer. *Most* of my pictures don't come out. I'm sure you did the best you could, the best *anybody* could, and besides, *everybody* makes mistakes."

"Yeah," I said.

"How much do I owe you?"

"Oh—no charge."

"I must owe you something."

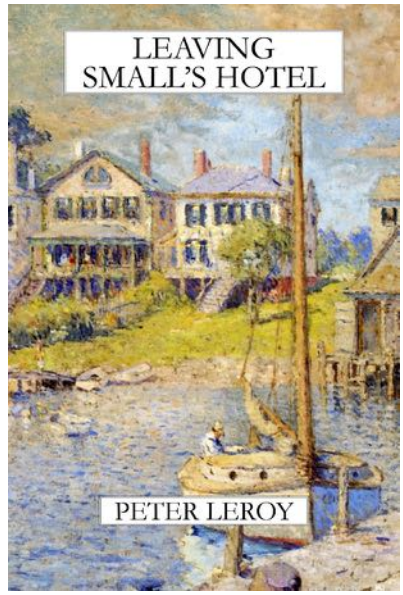
"No, no. We only charge if the whole roll comes out. That's our policy."

I closed up shop. From then on, I entrusted all my developing-and-printing work to Himmelfarb's photography shop, in the heart of downtown Babbington.

The equipment remained in the basement, but it began a shuffle toward the farthest corner. All the equipment abandoned in the cellar—the gear for my mother's failed projects, my father's failed projects, and my failed projects—shuffled miserably, humiliated, into the corners, where it accreted in heaps.

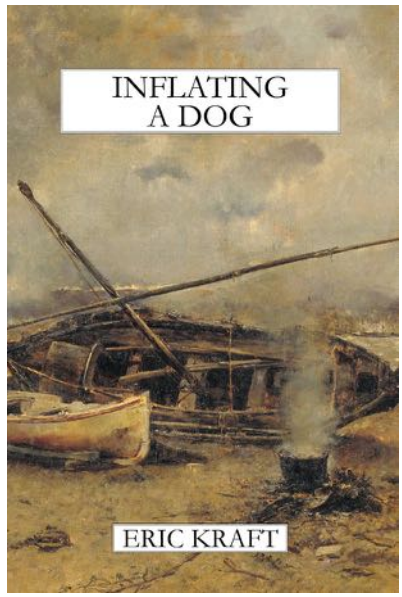
There were no plans for a tape recorder in *Impractical Craftsman* or the other do-it-yourself magazines. For a moment I was tempted by the idea of building the enlarger, since I knew that we had a surplus bomb sight in the cellar left over from my father's attempt to build a theodolite and make big money in surveying, but *Cellar Scientist* magazine had plans for a flying-saucer detector, and I decided to build that instead.

. . . contains Peter Leroy's memoir.



ABOUT A MONTH after Dudley Beaker's death, his wife, Eliza, telephoned me and said that she would like to see me. She had, she said, a proposal that she would like me to consider.

A proposal? A proposition? I was on my bicycle in a minute. Riding southward, I speculated about the proposal Eliza intended to make. I was a thirteen-year-old boy, so I fervently hoped that the proposal would have something to do with sex. It seemed not impossible to me that Eliza might want me to provide her with a sexual outlet now that Dudley was gone. She would propose a sophisticated and civilized arrangement. I would assure her that I would be more than happy to comply, that I would gladly provide her with any sexual services that she cared to teach me to provide.



Eric Kraft's novel . . .

She interviewed me in the living room. It was, as I recall, early afternoon. She was wearing something cream colored, silk, possibly thin enough for me to make out the outlines of her underwear, but I can't be certain about that, because I find that when I bring the women of my past to mind, their clothing has become far finer and sheerer in memory than it ever was in fact, and I can see lovely bits of them now that I know I never saw then.

She was drinking a cocktail. I'm sure of that.

"Do you want anything?" she asked.

At thirteen? I wanted everything.

"Some lemonade or something?"

"Well—I'll have whatever you're having."

She raised her eyebrows, gave a little laugh, and got up. She took a cocktail glass from a cabinet, and she filled it from a shaker on a sideboard.

"This will be mostly water," she said, "but you can tell your friends that you spent the afternoon drinking martinis with a merry widow."

I tried it. It seemed strong to me. "Mmm, delicious," I said.

"Let me explain what I have in mind," she said.

"Okay," I said, trying not to seem too eager.

She sighed and lit a cigarette.

"I'm going abroad for a few weeks," she said, shaking the match out, dropping it into an ashtray, removing the cigarette from her mouth, exhaling. "Overseas. To Europe."

"Oh." This was a surprise. Europe. She wanted me to join her for an extended stay in Europe. Of course. She understood that I had always been attracted to her, and she had developed an attraction for me, but Babbington was no place to carry on a liaison with a boy considerably less than half her age. On the other hand, from what I'd heard Europe was just the place. This would be a great opportunity for me. I would learn a lot from Europe and from Eliza. I would be richer for the experience. I would have stories to tell when I returned. I would stand out from all the Babbington boys who had never traveled through Europe with Eliza. Patti Fiorenza would notice my European patina, my worldly air, savvy and cynical demeanor, my *je ne sais quoi*. It would be wonderful.

She knocked the ash from her cigarette. She said, "Peter, I want to offer you a job."

"What is it?" I asked. Translator seemed a possibility, since I had started taking French. I didn't have much of a vocabulary yet; I'd have to get to work.

"I'd like you to take care of this house for a while," she said. I felt a great disappointment, as you might expect. *Arrivederci, Roma*. So long to Germany. Farewell to France.

"Are you interested?"

"I'm not sure," I said, honestly. It wasn't nearly as attractive an offer as traveling through Europe, kissing and cuddling our way across the Continent in first-class railway compartments.

"Well, let's discuss the duties and responsibilities and the remuneration."

I liked "remuneration." It sounded much classier than "pay," and it sounded like more money.

"Uh-huh," I said.

"Peter," she said, "what's happened to you?"

"Happened to me?"

"You don't seem to have anything to say. You've become awkward and hesitant, as if you were dull-witted, but I know you're not a dull boy. You—ahhhh—I see."

"See what?"

"You've reached the awkward age, haven't you?"

"I guess so," I said. It was true. I often seemed to get in my own way. I sometimes tripped over my own feet as if some prankster had tied my shoes together, and my thoughts sometimes tripped over one another and tied my tongue.

"Well," she said with a knowing smile, "it doesn't last forever." She got up, keeping her glass, and said, "Come on—let's walk through the house and I'll show you what I want you to do."

My duties as she outlined them wouldn't be many. I would have to check the house daily, water some plants, dust and vacuum regularly, and keep the lawn mowed and the weeds down.

"The key to the back door is under the mat," she said. She paused and looked me over. Then she decided to add something.

"Don't *break* anything, and don't do anything that will ruin my reputation."

"Like what?" I asked.

"You know—no parties, no seducing teenage girls, no plying them with drink, no playing the bachelor playboy just because you have the run of the house."

She winked at me, and I winked back. All of those things sounded like great ideas to me.

THERE WAS AT THAT TIME a vogue for combining everything one might want in a particular area of interest or endeavor into "one handy package," and the cult of miniaturization had already begun. Devotees of the backyard barbecue, for example, instead of buying separate tongs, fork, spatula, and similar implements could instead buy the Hand-e-Que, which combined tongs, fork, spatula, spoon, skewer, and salt and pepper shakers in one handy package. In the supermarket (actually, at that time, the grocery store) one could buy Box o' Supper, a box that held a bag of macaroni, a can of cheese sauce, a can of peas, a can of brown bread, a small package of cookies, a couple of paper napkins, and a short stack of antacid tablets. In cynics, Diogenes would have been everything one could have wanted in one handy package. In sexpots, it would have been Patti Fiorenza.

I was obsessed with Patti. She was a year older than I, which meant that she was fourteen. She had many admirable qualities. I might mention her pretty face, her quick mind, her sparkling personality, her winning smile, or the cooing voice in which she sang backup for the Bay Tones, the Four Plays, the Half Shafts, the Glide Tones, and the Love Notes.

Patti possessed, to a degree unmatched in the experience of Babbingtonians until that time, a quality that was then called "sex appeal." She had an amazing little body, tiny but breathtaking. That tiny body was bursting with the promise of sexual gratification. From the long view of fifty-six, I see that Patti was the walking, talking embodiment of a hoary old fantasy, the child-woman, sexually a woman, but in so many other ways still a child, but what I remember from that time was the impression I had that under the right conditions I could pick her up and put her in my pocket, hide her in a shoe box under my bed and take her out and play with her under the covers at night.

Imagine a day in the spring, that first warm and brilliant day that takes everyone by surprise. Let's say that, after school, Patti decides to take a walk downtown to get a milk shake. She sits at the counter in the malt shop and drinks a chocolate shake.

Old Eben Flood, just a week shy of eighty-six, finds that he has developed an almost uncontrollable urge to lick the chocolate from Patti's lower lip, and to keep himself from licking her he begins whistling "The Happy Wanderer."

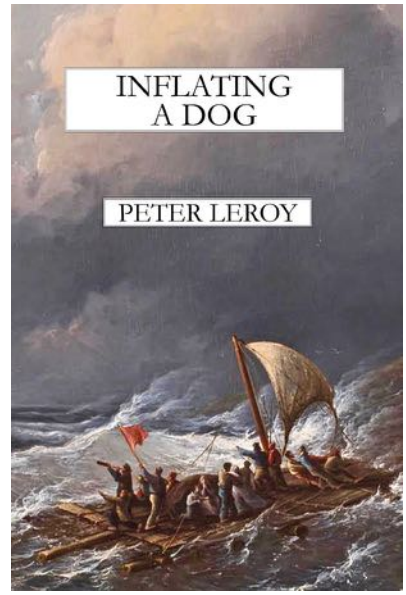
Mrs. Dorothy Inskip, a respectable matron, president of the Ladies' Village Improvement Society, finds that she can't stop staring at the beautiful buttocks of this girl so pertly perched on a counter stool. To prevent herself from giving in to a desire to touch what she admires, she rushes from the shop; outside, she collides with Harrison Barker, the president of the First National Bank of Babbington, an old flame, a flame that hasn't flickered since she was Patti's age, but a flame rekindled on the spot, a flame that will bring to the seven quiet and wrinkled years that Harry and Dotty still have ahead of them a warmth greater and more perdurable than either of them could possibly have imagined when first that flame was lit.

When Patti pays the soda jerk, young Frederick Lawson Stillwell, his hand shakes, and his lips move in a silent prayer that he manage somehow not to surrender to the vast catalogue of impure thoughts inspired by the salacious way she chews her gum, that he not be led into temptation by the wanton way her little hips swing, and that he not be made to turn from the straight path and follow her out the door and wherever on earth she might choose to lead him. By dropping to his knees as soon as she's out the door he manages to keep himself from following her, but he discovers in another minute to his horror that he's praying that she'll come back, so to purge himself of this devilish perversion he whips out the pocket-size discipline he carries to keep impure thoughts at bay and spends a few satisfying moments mortifying his flagitious flesh. Years later, when he has finally given up trying to fight the fire that burns within him, he will found the Little Church of Perpetual Passion at the southernmost end of Bolotomy Road, and on "Flagellation Fridays," his disciples will join him in flailing at themselves and one another.

Patti, meanwhile, has left the shop and stands in the sunlight at the corner of Bolotomy and Main. It's such a nice day! Instead of heading directly for home as she had intended, she spends the rest of the afternoon strolling willy-nilly, wherever fancy takes her, here and there, all over our little town. By nightfall, the town can scarcely think of anything but her. We are all drunk on Patti Fiorenza. Some of us are leaning against our porch posts, smoking, yearning for her, others lying in our bedrooms, sweating, with Patti on our minds and our hands between our legs.

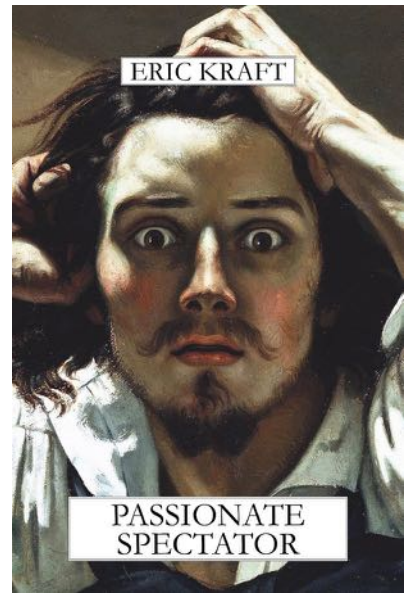
As the night comes on, all Babbington falls into one great orgy of desire for her. All over town, we pet and paw one another, or toy with ourselves, while visions of Patti dance in our heads. We take our pleasure from her, and in our collective fantasy we enjoy her every which way that night, every one of us who saw her walk by, the men and the women, the old and the young, the fit and the feeble, all of us pushing and pulling and thrusting and slipping and sliding our way toward a rippling wave of pleasure that shudders through us all, trembles from one end of town to the other, a shudder strong enough for Patti to feel it at home, in her bed, where she lies alone, and mistakes the tremor of our pleasure for her own, for she has succumbed to her own sweet charms. She soughs, and stretches, and sleeps, and dreams. So, at last, do we, and we dream of her, every sort of sexual pleasure in one handy package.

. . . contains Peter Leroy's memoir.



THE NEXT AFTERNOON found me lying on a chaise longue, scanning the sunbathers with my miniature binoculars. I was looking for Corellians.

Earlier, in the morning, while breakfasting on strawberries and cream on the terrace in front of the Albatross, I had read an article in the *South Beach Buzz* about these Corellians. They are followers of Massimo Corelli (no relation to composer Arcangelo or novelist Marie), who believe that life on earth was created as a laboratory experiment by beings from a planet "in our galaxy but not in our solar system." According to the *Buzz,* the Miami chapter (fifty strong) would be meditating daily on the beach. I was curious about these Corellians. I wanted to infiltrate their number and observe them to see if I could find out why they believe what the *Buzz* said they believe.



Eric Kraft's novel . . .

The people closest to me, right beside me, almost too close for comfort, were passing the time smoking and glaring at one another, which might count as meditating. *Are they Corellians?* I wondered. I decided on the direct course of investigation; I would ask them.

"Excuse me," I said. "May I ask you a question?" I presented my card, which said, simply, B. W. Beath, Passionate Spectator.

They examined it closely, first turning it this way and that, apparently to confirm beyond doubt their original impression that it was a card, and then reading the name and job description in an accent that led me to ask, "Are you German?"

"Yes, we are German," said the young son. "We are a family on vacation. We are here to 'soak up the sun.'"

The daughter, who was soaking up the sun in an attractive, even provocative, manner, flashed her eyes at me, smiled, and displayed her tongue stud.

"Explain this, please," said the father, showing me my own card.

"Ich bin ein leidenschaftlich Zuschauer," I said, "if I remember my high-school German correctly."

"Ein Spion?" asked the boy eagerly.

"No, no, not a spy, just an idle watcher."

The father of the group glanced uneasily at his wife and daughter, then fixed me with the stare of one who would like to have me clapped in irons.

"Well?" he said, in a tone that impugned my motives.

"May I just ask you one question?"

"You have already asked us a question," said the boy. "You asked, 'Are you German?'"

"Ah! You're right," said I. "Sharp lad."

"What is the question?" asked the father, clearly eager to have me ask it and then get on with the forced march to the dungeon and the rack.

"Are you Corellians?"

"No!" boomed the father. "We have already told you that we are Germans."

"Let me put that another way," I said. "Do you think that life on earth was created by aliens as a laboratory experiment?"

The father's eyes popped. "Sir," he said, with ominous calm, "I ask you to leave us alone."

"Yes. Certainly," I said, and retired to my chaise.

In a moment, the boy's shadow fell across my eyes. I looked up to find him holding my card.

"May I ask you, sir," the boy said, turning the card toward me so that I could read it, exactly as his father had, but without the threatening note, "does one have to go to university for this?"

"It isn't necessary," I said. "You can just go to SpeeDee Print on Collins Avenue and get some cards printed."

Two young men on personal watercraft came flying up out of nowhere on their way to some other nowhere. "My sister and I would like to pilot powerful personal watercraft," the boy shouted, "like those fortunate bastards out there, but Father considers them a frivolous waste of money and gasoline, so we are condemned to sit here in the sun like plums becoming prunes."

"I dislike prunes," I remarked.

"I dislike prunes very much," said the boy.

Our attention was diverted by an enormous woman who arrived just then and spread on the sand a towel too small to hold her. She was wearing a black one-piece bathing suit but immediately rolled it from the top down, reducing the top to a black hoop around her hips and revealing great spheroid masses of herself. She then tried to loll. In the attempt, she twisted, turned, grimaced, and grunted.

The boy and I observed her in silence for some time.

Failing to find a position that would fit all of her onto the towel, she at last gave up lolling and began to read instead. She had brought with her in a large canvas bag a thick paperback book, well worn, called *The Vampire's Vacation*.

"You have the card," I said to the lad. "Why don't you ask her if she's a Corellian."

He walked over to her towel and said, "Excuse me, madam. Are you a Corellian?"

She squinted at him and said, with a little laugh, "No, I'm Catholic. Why do you ask?"

"I was wondering whether you believed that humans were put here as part of a laboratory experiment."

"I guess you could put it that way," she said, with a fuller laugh. "I hadn't thought of it like that, but I suppose that is what we believe. Eden, and all that."

The boy didn't know where to go from there. He turned and looked to Mentor for guidance. I waved him back to my side.

When we were outside, walking along Ocean Drive, I said to the duke, "Just curious, your grace, but where are we going?"

"Where are we going?" said the duke. "Ho-ho-ho."

"Ha-ha-ha," said I, "but seriously, where are we going?"

"Well, we are proceeding to the unveiling of the Limo Fountain. And we have arrived," said the duke.

In the plaza at the entrance to the hotel Shangri-La-La, klieg lights swept the sky, crisscrossing above a massive something draped in white fabric. Arranged along one side of the drapery was a crew of models and musclemen, ready to remove the wrap when the time came.

The duke and duchess took a long step up onto a platform, where they stood before microphones and television cameras.

"Good evening, everyone," said the duke, in a voice so assured that it silenced the crowd at once. "If you listen to 'Drivin' with the Duke and Duchess' on Smooth Radio 109, you already know us, of course. I am the duke and this is my duchess."

"Howdy, y'all," said the duchess.

"It is our very great pleasure to welcome you to the unveiling of the Limo Fountain and to introduce you to the woman of the hour, our dear friend Ivy, the artist known as I-V-Y."

This occasioned laughter and applause. I joined in both.

Ivy blinked at her audience and said, "I'm amazed so many of you showed up."

Nervous laughter, mingled with puzzled murmurs.

"I want to say something about my work," she asserted. She cleared her throat and said, "'Those who have no experience of wisdom and goodness, and are always engaged in feasting and similar pleasures, are brought down, it would seem, to a lower level, and there wander about all their lives.'"

"You got that right," said the duke.

"'They have never looked up toward the truth, nor risen higher, nor tasted of any pure and lasting pleasure. In the manner of cattle, they bend down with their gaze fixed always on the ground and on their feeding-places, grazing and fattening and copulating—'"

"Amen, sister," shouted someone in the crowd.

"'—and in their insatiable greed for these pleasures they kick and butt one another with horns and hoofs of iron and kill one another if their desires are not satisfied.'"

"'Hoo!'" said the duke.

Ivy let a moment pass, then added, "Plato. *The Republic*. Pretty cool, huh? Prescient, right? . . . Right?"

"Right!" called a few voices from the crowd.

"What else?" She consulted her digital assistant. "Oh, yeah. I was going to say something about kitsch, because that's the other thing my work is about. See, the essence of kitsch is motive. It's the willingness to go for effect rather than truth. To move an audience rather than saying something. To appeal to the heart and not the head."

"You're losing them," warned the duke.

"Oh, yeah. Hey, sorry I'm getting so technical here."

"Why don't you just let the work speak for itself?" said the duchess.

"I think I'll just let the work speak for itself," said Ivy. "Let the veil be rent asunder!"

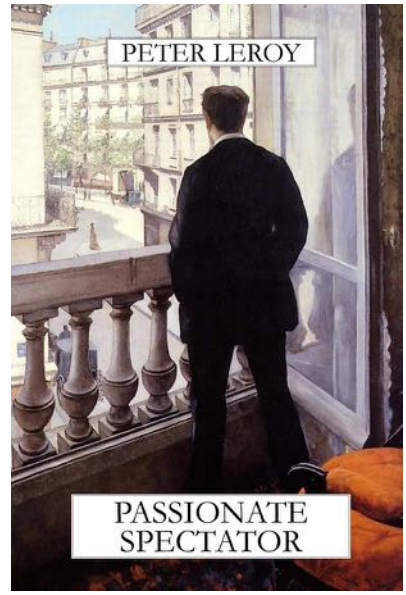
"Ahh, in just a moment," said the duke, rushing to interpose himself between Ivy and the microphones. "We'll be rending the veil asunder in just a moment, but first I want to make sure everyone knows that immediately following the unveiling, reproductions of the Limo Fountain will go on sale in the boutique to my right." He indicated a tent.

The duchess leaned closer to the microphone and called out, "Strapping lads, haul away!"

The oiled beefy boys hauled with choreographed effort and choral grunts, and the drapery began to slide along the hidden contours of the work beneath it, until it reached a critical point and slid with a sailcloth sigh to the plaza pavement. The fountain stood revealed.

It was a stretch limousine rampant, rearing as a steed does in an equestrian statue, its massive haunches flexed, hind tires compressed under the weight, its long back bent, its foretires pawing the air, its hood and front bumper drawn back liplike, its grill teeth bared. Mist sprayed from its radiator cap like steam from the nostrils of a straining steed. A kink in the exhaust made it resemble a stallion's pizzle, and water arced in a fine stream from it. The limo was peopled with fat figures, made of stacks of balls, like bronze snowmen, leaning from windows and rising like prairie dogs from a multitude of openings in the roof: the driver leaning from his window, swatting the limo's flank with his driver's cap, urging it on; a drunken frat boy spewing bronze vomit down the side below one window; a bronze pop diva standing up through a sunroof, waving to her fans, one strap of her tiny dress fallen, revealing her right breast; a baseball player, a hockey player, and a hip-hop gangsta brandishing the tools of their trades: a bat, a stick, an automatic; a prom king tearing the wrapper from his queen; a developer, a potentate, a candidate, and a judge, stuffing bundles of bronze bucks into one another's mouths; and below them, in the shadow of the limousine, a herd of indistinguishable little figures, of indeterminate sex, scrabbling for the bills and coins that were falling from the passengers' hands and pockets and dribbling from the exhaust, where a bronze likeness of the artist herself squatted, smoothing with her bare bronze hands rough metal to shape the back bumper.

. . . contains Peter Leroy's memoir.



MY FRENCH TEACHER, Angus MacPherson, must have noticed the downcast look that I wore throughout his class—a particularly knotty one on the uses of the subjunctive—because he stopped me on my way out the door and said, with a look of concern, "Peter, you seem a bit—how do you put it—down in the dump."

"Dumps," I said.

"Yes, that's it, the dumps, 'down in the dumps.' But why should it be so? Here in Babbington there is but one dump, unless they are hiding another from me. Are they? Is there a dump known only to initiates in a secret society of refuse and rubbish?"

"Um, no," I said. "I don't think so."

"Then one must be down in the dump, not the dumps, and that is where you seem to be. Why is that, Peter?"

"I've been rejected," I said.

"Ah! An affair of the heart! Of such sweet pain the teenage years are full to overflowing, I am afraid. Doubtless you will experience rejection many times. 'Learn young, learn fair; learn auld, learn mair.' In my own case—"

"It was more like being rejected by a college."

"How time flies! 'There's nae birds this year in last year's nest.' Are you after leaving us for college already?"

"No. Not yet. But I was hoping to spend the summer in New Mexico at a summer institute for promising high school students."

"Ah. That's a lot to parse all at once. An institute, you say?"

"Yes."

"What would that be? Not an institution, certainly? Not a house for the mad, I hope?"

"No, no. It's just—I guess it's—well—I don't exactly know what it is. A kind of summer school."

"Glorified by the name of Institute. I see. For promising high school students, you said?"

"Yes."

"I'm fully familiar with high school students, after trying to teach them to conjugate irregular verbs these past eight and twenty years, but I'm a bit less certain about what *promising* might mean."

"I think it means students who show promise."

"Students who show promise? What do they promise?"

"I guess they promise to get better—improve—do remarkable things."

"Do you consider yourself a promising student?"

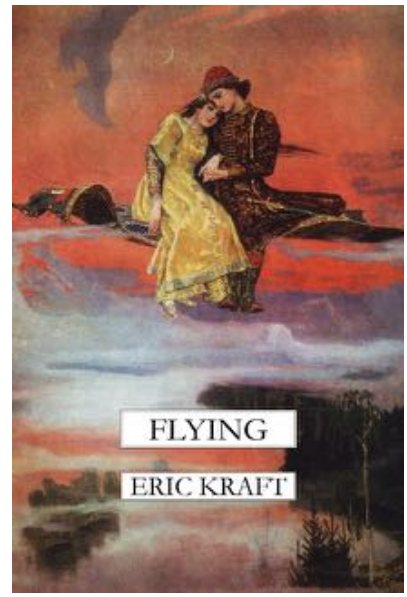
"Yeah. I think I've got promise."

"You think that you are likely to do remarkable things?"

"Well—I hope so."

"'Him that lives on hope has a slim diet.' What do you hope to do that's in the remarkable class?"

"I—um—I don't know—I—"



Eric Kraft's novel . . .

"Not a promising beginning," he said.

"I'm going to build an airplane out of parts of old motorcycles," I asserted suddenly.

"Now that is a promise! I see that you are a promising lad after all. So, with your being such a promising lad, why did the Institute for Promising Lads not accept ye?"

"Oh—my application was late—and I didn't mention anything about building the airplane."

"Hmmm. I see. Well, 'nae great loss but there's some smaa 'vantage.' With the loss their having passed you over, the advantage is that you are, I suppose, available if other institutes come looking for recruits?"

"Sure—but—"

"Yes?"

"I'd like to go to one that's held in New Mexico. I've kind of got my heart set on going to New Mexico now."

"And 'where the heart yearns to go, we mun go or die in the attempt,'" he murmured, mostly to himself, while he began rummaging through some papers on his desk. "Let's see—I've got a notice from the Institute for Future Œnophiles—but that's in Paris—and there's the Institute for the Study of Callipygian Women—but that's on the island of Martinique—and—ah!—here's the Faustroll Institute of 'Pataphysics—in New Mexico."

"What?" I blurted hopefully.

He held a clutch of papers toward me. They were notices from the administration about scheduling final exams.

"Oh," I said, managing a smile. "It was a joke."

"An attempt to get you out of the dump." When I was on my way out the door, he said, "Peter, does it really require an institute to get you to New Mexico?"

The answer was, I decided, yes. Something as solid as an institute would be required to justify my going to New Mexico—to justify it to my father, who retained full veto power over any travel that might take me farther than the next town.

I summoned a council of friends. We met in a booth at Kap'n Klam, Porky White's clam bar.

"Go to the Faustroll Institute," said Matthew.

"There isn't any Faustroll Institute," I said.

"Your father doesn't know that," he said.

Reader, I wish you could have seen those young heads rise, buoyed by the possibilities that Matthew had placed before us.

"We'll need letter of acceptance," I said.

"I can do that," said Marvin. "I can run off some Faustroll Institute stationery in the print shop."

"Great," I said. "And now I'm going to have to get Mr. MacPherson to tell me what the Faustroll Institute of 'Pataphysics is supposed to be."

WE SWUNG OFF THE INTERSTATE, following the sign directing travelers to the town of Olivia. The sign was unusual. It pointed in separate directions for tour buses, for deliveries, and for passenger cars. At the end of the off-ramp for passenger cars, we approached a toll gate.

"Two?" asked the toll collector.

"There are two of us," said Albertine, "but isn't it a little odd to charge tolls by the person?"

"It isn't a toll," the collector said with the weariness of one who has had to deliver the same explanation many times. "It's admission."

"Admission?"

"That's right. It isn't a toll, and I am not a toll collector. It's admission, and I am a sales associate in the Admissions Department." She pointed to the plastic tag pinned above her left breast. It said Amanda, and below that it said Sales Associate.

"I've never been asked to pay admission to a town before."

"Olivia isn't just a town," Amanda explained. "It's a museum. The Town of Olivia is the Museum of Olivia."

"Olivia who?" asked Albertine.

"Just Olivia," said Amanda. "Having her own museum and all, she has attained the rarefied status of single-name international celebrity. That's the way the brochure puts it."

"I've never heard of her," I said.

"Still," said Amanda, "she has her own museum, and I'd be willing to wager that you don't."

"Well, no," I said, "I don't, but there is a caricature of me on the wall of a restaurant—"

"You see," said Amanda, "before Olivia came along, this town had been shrinking for as long as I can remember. I watched my friends grow up and move away, even saw members of my family move away. It was getting to be a very lonely place. We were on the verge of just disappearing, but then one day Olivia drove into town. She was just passing through, like you, but she was enchanted by the prospect that she, a woman named Olivia, might live in a town named Olivia. That's the way she puts it in her introduction to the brochure. She says she was 'enchanted by the prospect.'"

"What a surprising and fortunate coincidence that she should happen upon a town named Olivia," said Albertine.

"Well, of course at that time the town was named Gadsleyville," said Amanda, "but nearly the whole damned place was for sale, so Olivia saw the opportunity and she seized it. She began buying up bits and pieces of us, and pretty soon she petitioned the town council to have the name changed to Olivia, so there she was and here we are."

"Her destiny has been fulfilled," Albertine offered.

"I wouldn't say it's been fulfilled just yet," said Amanda. "The mansion is still under construction, and the museum is likely to be under construction forever. So it remains a work in progress."

She leaned toward us and lowered her voice.

"Confidentially, just between us, Olivia turned out to be a bit of an eccentric."

"No," said Albertine with convincing surprise.

"Among the many exhibits that your pass will admit you to is the Gallery of Coins Found on the Sidewalk," said Amanda. "You see, when Olivia was just a girl she found a nickel on the sidewalk. Olivia picked up that nickel, and that night she put the nickel under her pillow, and while she was lying there in bed fingering the nickel, she asked herself how many nickels she might find in her lifetime. She didn't put it quite that way, of course, because she was just a young girl, but that was the question that formed in her mind. By morning she had a plan: she would save all the coins she found in the street for the rest of her life. Formulating a lifelong plan like that demonstrated remarkable foresight for one so young. That's what it says in the brochure: 'remarkable foresight for one so young.' Will that be two day passes, then?"

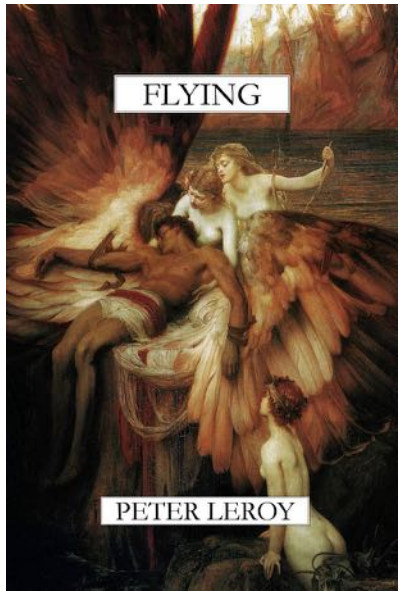
"What else have you got besides coins found on the sidewalk?" asked Albertine.

"Well, there is the Gallery of Discards. Before you dismiss that as trash, I want to emphasize that discards covers a lot of territory. Most of us would think of trash when we hear the word discards, and you will find trash in the Gallery of Discards, but you will find much more than that. See, Olivia, once she decided that someday there would be a Museum of Olivia, instead of throwing anything away, she threw it into the collection. It's all there, her personal mountain of discards, categorized, arranged, and displayed. We take all the major credit cards. Is it going to be two day passes?"

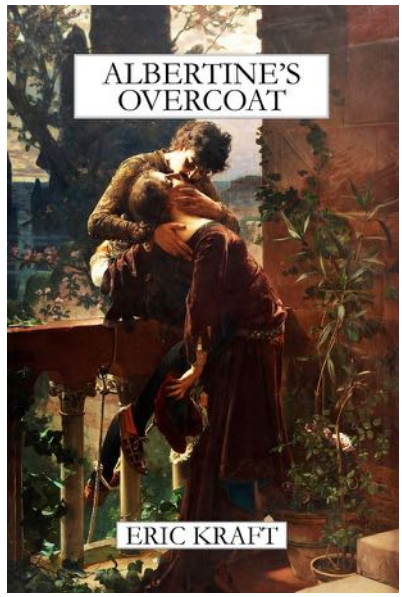
"I'm not sold yet," said Albertine. "What else have you got?"

"There's the Gallery of Bad Thoughts. What can I say? It's scary. That's what I'll say. You can try that one if you like. I've never made it past the first room. That was scary enough for me. I've heard tell that it gets a lot worse the farther in you go. You have to ask yourself how a woman like Olivia could come up with such nasty ideas. Like it or not, she was a child of the culture and she is a woman of the world. That's what the brochure says: 'a child of the culture and a woman of the world.' So she blames everybody else for her nasty ideas, that's the way I read it. That's what I hear her saying. Well, I never had any ideas like that. You wouldn't find a Gallery of Bad Thoughts in the Museum of Amanda. If there were a Museum of Amanda. Listen, I'm not supposed to do this, but since you're first-time visitors, I'll give you two-for-one. What do you say?"

. . . contains Peter Leroy's memoir.



> The *I* in any sort of autobiography, whether ten-volume memoir or barside anecdote, is any man's chief and continuing work of fiction.
>
> Quincy, in Vance Bourjailly's *Confessions of a Spent Youth*



Eric Kraft's novel . . .

I SUPPORT the Leroy ménage by assisting people in writing their memoirs, and if they haven't the time or patience to produce a memoir, even with my assistance, I'll ghostwrite it for them. I'm a hack. During my hackworking hours I hide my shame behind a front of professionalism.

The telephone rings.

I answer with crisp professional efficiency: "Peter Leroy."

"I want to talk to Dominic."

"There is no Dominic here."

"What happened to him?"

"I can't say."

"You mean you're, like, sworn to secrecy?"

"No, I mean that I don't know."

"I get you. You didn't see nothing. You didn't hear nothing. You don't know nothing. Right?"

"Right," I say, adding, mentally, "more or less."

"Geez," says the caller with a sigh, "I never thought Dominic was into anything that would get him—ah—you know."

"I know nothing."

"Yeah. Right. I hear what you're saying, but—ah—let me ask you something."

"Shoot."

"'Shoot'? Boy, you're a cool one. Nerves of steel."

"That's me. What do you want to ask me?"

"Do you fix TVs?"

"No, I don't. You are probably trying to reach Peerless Television Service and Repair, but this isn't Peerless Television Service and Repair. When I rented this apartment, I seem to have gotten their old number."

"Oh. Oh, I see. I see! I got the wrong number."

"Actually, you got the right number, but the number you got is no longer Peerless's number."

"So nothing happened to Dominic?"

"Not that I know of."

"But you're getting his calls?"

"I am."

"That must be a real pain in the butt."

"Not yet, but I can see that it has that potential."

"So, tell me this: how come you answer the phone like that—'Peter Leroy'?"

"It sounds more professional than 'Hello.'"

"Oh, yeah? Professional? What's your profession? What do you do? I mean, since you don't fix TVs?"

"I write. I'm a writer."

"Mysteries?"

"Memoirs."

"Memoirs! So you're one of those guys who pretends that he had a childhood of misery and deprivation when he actually grew up in an affluent suburb with both parents, four grandparents, and a sweet sister in an atmosphere of privilege and comfort?"

"No."

"You mean you're honest?"

"Not quite. All memoirists lie."

"Hey, at least you're honest about that."

"Right. I'm honest about the lying I do."

"Honesty is your shtick. Hey! That could be your slogan: 'Honesty is my shtick.'"

"Maybe I'll use it."

"Yeah, well if you do, I hope you credit me. Anthony Leopardi. Tony."

"I certainly will, Tony. After all, honesty is my shtick."

"Man, I wish you repaired TVs. It's hard to find an honest TV guy."

"What about Dominic?"

"Yeah, Dominic was one of the good ones. He was not fast. He was slow, in fact. But he was honest."

"Don't rush into the past tense. He may still be around. I don't know that Peerless doesn't exist. All I know is that they don't have this number anymore."

"That sounds like the end to me. 'Requiescat in pace,' you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I do, but before you give up, I suggest you try Information."

"Ha! You mean Directory Assistance. It's not Information anymore, and calling Directory Assistance is not the experience that calling Information once was. When I was young, I used to entertain fantasies about Information operators. I used to call and ask for a number just so I could envision a Venus with a headset, sitting at a switchboard with her long legs crossed, one tiny run in her stocking, inching its way up her thigh—"

"Tony," I say, "excuse me for interrupting, but have you given any thought to writing your memoirs?"

"Me? Nah. I'm a talker, not a writer."

"That's where I come in! You talk! I write. With my assistance, we could turn your Information Angel fantasy into a publisher's dream—and I think you'll find my fee more than reasonable."

"'More than reasonable'? I've heard that before. I'm surprised that a guy who claims that honesty is his shtick would try to sucker me in with 'more than reasonable.' I'm sure your fees are much more than reasonable! No thanks!"

He hangs up, but his laughter seems to echo down the dead line.

IF YOU'VE BEEN IN LOVE, you know how it is: you can't stop thinking about the object of your affection. I couldn't stop thinking about the dark-haired girl, and I couldn't stop talking about her, either. I seemed to have to talk about her. I had to give voice to what I felt for her. I had to have her in the air around me. If I'd been a wiser boy, I would have used a diary as a way of giving myself the nearness of her, or I would have written some poems, but I wasn't a very wise boy, and I was giddy with the desire to talk about her, the need to talk about her. I had to find an audience, someone who would listen to me talk about her, if only so that I wouldn't look like a raving lunatic, wandering starry-eyed around Babbington muttering to myself. At first, I thought, or felt, that almost anyone would do, and I imagined turning to my friends and family. As I thought of them, individually, and experimented with speaking to them in the laboratory of imaginary solutions, I began to discover how inappropriate each of them was as an audience for my reveries.

My father?

I could imagine myself saying, "Dad, I've fallen in love with the most wonderful girl in the world."

"Oh, yeah? Well, don't do anything I wouldn't do." Leering look. Wink. Followed by day after day of torture. "Hey, just kidding, just teasing you, just having a little fun."

Every one of his prejudices, every source of his broad-based bigotry would inspire a nasty fake fear for my future, a phony worry that the wonderful girl might be a racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, or political threat to the happiness of the son of Bert Leroy.

My father would never do. Not in a million years.

My mother?

"Mom, I've met the most wonderful girl—"

"Oh, Peter! You think you're in love! This is dangerous, very dangerous! Tell me, does your heart race when you think of her?"

"Um, yeah."

"Oh, that's very, very dangerous! She's probably not the right girl for you. You fall in love too easily. You're like me that way."

"Mom, this girl is—"

"I've never approved of any of the girls you've been infatuated with."

"Really?"

"Never."

"Not even Patti Fiorenza? You like Patti."

"Oh, I like her. But I don't approve of her."

"Oh."

"And I wouldn't choose her as a girlfriend for you. She's far too—well—experienced. I wouldn't be surprised if this girl you think you've fallen in love with is—experienced—too. Oh, Peter, I'm so worried for you. You're so young, so inexperienced, so—"

My mother wouldn't do, either.

One of my grandmothers? One of my grandfathers? A close friend? Someone older, someone I considered wise? Someone like my French teacher, Angus MacPherson? Mr. MacPherson! Now there was a possibility!

"I can't get her out of my mind, Mr. MacPherson. I need someone to listen to me while I talk about her."

"'They that love most speak least,' Peter."

"I don't think that's true in my case. My mind is so full of her that I'm even talking to myself."

"'He that talks to himself speaks to a fool.'"

"You've told me that before, but—"

"'Empty barrels make the most noise.'"

"Have a heart, Mr. MacPherson! I came to you because I think you're a wise person. I hoped for a little wisdom from you, not just old saws and platitudes."

"All right, Peter, here is a bit of wisdom: 'Love is the only door out of the dungeon of self.'"

"That's another old saw, isn't it?"

"It is, but 'Many an old saw still cuts sharp and true.'"

"That's another—"

"No, it isn't. It's a new saw, original with me."

Mr. MacPherson wouldn't do, either. Talking with him would become talking about love itself, the idea of love, the consequences of love, the history of love, the language of love, and, eventually, talking about talking about love. There wouldn't be any room for the dark-haired girl in all that talk.

Then, suddenly, with all the suddenness of a summer storm, I found myself thinking of Cyn (short for Cynthia, pronounced "sin"). I approached her while she was standing near her school locker. "Cynthia," I said, "I want to ask you something."

"It's about that girl, isn't it? Albertine."

"Albertine? Who's Albertine?

"She's the dark-haired girl."

"How do you know that I'm—ah—interested in—a dark-haired girl? How do you know that this Albertine you're talking about is the right dark-haired girl?"

"How do I know that you're—ah—interested in a dark-haired girl? Peter, you have been going on about that girl for two weeks."

"Am I making myself ridiculous?" I asked.

She put a gentle hand on my arm and said, "Poor boy, you must be very far gone to give me an opening like that. I'll let it pass."

Then she walked away. Just turned and walked away.

I gave up trying to find someone to whom I could divulge the secrets of my yearning heart, but I did learn something from the experiment: all the world may love a lover, but no one wants to listen to him.

. . . contains Peter Leroy's memoir.

1962 One cold winter afternoon, while dozing over a German lesson, Kraft discovers the central character of the *Personal History*, the muddleheaded dreamer Peter Leroy.

1963 Kraft marries his muse, Madeline Canning.

1969 Kraft begins accumulating cartons of notes about Peter Leroy and his world.

1972 Kraft stops writing *about* Peter Leroy and begins writing *as* Peter Leroy.

1976 Kraft establishes the Babbington Press, which publishes some of Peter Leroy's juvenilia—*Larry Peters Is Missing* and *Larry Peters, Child No More*—and "Large and Unsolicited Fiction," a manifesto or prospectus for the work to come. He begins mailing to friends pages that look like excerpts from a published work, as if several volumes were already sitting on a shelf.

1982 Apple-Wood Books, a small literary publisher in Cambridge, Massachusetts, issues the novellas *My Mother Takes a Tumble, Do Clams Bite?, Life on the Bolotomy, The Static of the Spheres, The Fox and the Clam, The Girl with the White Fur Muff, Take the Long Way Home,* and *Call Me Larry* as individual paperbacks.

1986 Warner Books reissues *My Mother Takes a Tumble, Do Clams Bite?, Life on the Bolotomy,* and *The Static of the Spheres* as individual paperbacks.

1988 Crown publishes *Herb 'n' Lorna* in hardcover.

1989 E. P. Dutton publishes *Herb 'n' Lorna* in paperback.
Hodder & Stoughton publishes *Herb 'n' Lorna* in hardcover in Great Britain. Scepter publishes *Herb 'n' Lorna* in paperback in Great Britain.

1990 Crown publishes *Reservations Recommended* in hardcover.

1991 Scepter publishes *Reservations Recommended* in paperback in Great Britain.
Ediciones Destino publishes *Reservations Recommended* in paperback in Spain, as *Mesas Reservadas*.

1992 Crown publishes *Little Follies* and *Where Do You Stop?* in hardcover. (*Little Follies* combines the eight novellas earlier published by Apple-Wood Books with a ninth, *The Young Tars*.)

1993 Ediciones Destino publishes *Herb 'n' Lorna* in paperback in Spain, as *Herb y Lorna*.

1994 Crown publishes *What a Piece of Work I Am* in hardcover. Black Swan publishes *Little Follies* in Great Britain in three paperbacks, as *Little Follies, Sweet Miseries,* and *Wishful Thinking*.
Ediciones Destino publishes *What a Piece of Work I Am* in paperback in Spain, as *¡Qué estupenda soy!*

1995 Crown publishes *At Home with the Glynns* in hardcover. Picador USA publishes *Little Follies, Herb'n' Lorna, Reservations Recommended, Where Do You Stop?,* and *What a Piece of Work I Am* in paperback.
Voyager publishes *The Complete Peter Leroy (so far),* Kraft's hyperfiction linking *Little Follies, Herb 'n' Lorna, Reservations Recommended,* and *Where Do You Stop?* through annotations written by Mark Dorset, who is a character in the work.
Eddiciones Destino publishes *Little Follies* in paerback in Spain, as *Pequeñas Locuras*.
Black Swan publishes *Where Do You Stop?* in paperback in Great Britain.

1996 Picador USA publishes *At Home with the Glynns* in paperback.

1997 Shinchosha publishes *At Home with the Glynns* in hardcover in Japan.

1998 Picador USA publishes *Leaving Small's Hotel* in hardcover.

1999 Picador USA publishes *Leaving Small's Hotel* in paperback.

2002 Picador USA publishes *Inflating a Dog* in hardcover.

2003 Picador USA publishes *Inflating a Dog* in paperback.

2004 St. Martin's Press publishes *Passionate Spectator* in hardcover.

2005 Picador USA publishes *Passionate Spectator* in paperback.

2006 St. Martin's Press publishes *Taking Off* in hardcover.

2007 St. Martin's Press publishes *On the Wing* in hardcover.

2009 Picador USA publishes *Flying* (combining *Taking Off* and *On the Wing* with *Flying Home*) in paperback and ePub.

2010 Amazon Encore reissues *Herb 'n' Lorna* in paperback and ePub.

2011 With Kickstarter funding, Kraft launches the *Persistence* project, beginning development of a multimedia fiction within the Personal History.

2012 Brilliance Audio issues *Herb 'n' Lorna* as an audiobook.
CorLeonis publishes *Herb 'n' Lorna* in paperback in Hungary.

2016 Kraft completes the manuscript for *Albertine's Overcoat*.
The *Persistence* project reaches version 1.8.

“He began by creating landscapes; then he created cities; then he created streets and cross streets, one by one, sculpting them out of the substance of his soul — street by street, neighborhood after neighborhood, out to the sea walls of the wharfs, where he then created the ports . . . street by street, and the people who walked them or gazed down at them from their windows . . . He began to know some of the people, at first just barely recognizing them, but then becoming familiar with their past lives and their conversations, and he dreamed all this as if it were mere scenery to delight the eyes . . . Then he traveled, with his memory, through the country he’d created . . . And thus he created his past . . . Soon he had another previous life . . . In this new homeland he already had a birthplace, places where he’d grown up, and ports from where he’d set sail . . . He began to acquire childhood playmates, and then friends and enemies from his youth . . . It was all different from what he’d actually lived. Neither the country, nor its people, nor even his own past were like the ones that had really existed . . .” — Fernando Pessoa, *The Mariner*

Eric Kraft grew up in Babylon, New York, on the South Shore of Long Island, where he was for a time co-owner and co-captain of a clam boat, which sank. He taught school in the Boston area for a while, moonlighting as a rock music critic for the Boston Phoenix. Since then, he has undertaken a variety of hackwork to support the Kraft ménage and the writing of *The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy*, a large work of fiction composed of many interconnected parts. Its parts are the memoirs and collected works of a fictional character, Peter Leroy, who tells an alternative version of his life story; ruminates upon the nature of the universe and the role of human consciousness within it; holds a fun-house mirror to scenes of life in the United States; and explores the effect of imagination on perception, memory, hope, and fear. Kraft and his wife, Madeline, have two sons, Scott and Alexis. He has received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts; was, briefly, chairman of PEN New England; and was awarded the John Dos Passos Prize for Literature.

website: www.erickraft.com

email: eric@erickraft.com