

Ariane Is Her Name; the Avant-Garde Is Her Game

Eric Kraft's sultry heroine is full of hope and hopelessly stupid.

WHAT A PIECE OF WORK I AM

(A Confabulation).
By Eric Kraft.
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By Karen Karbo

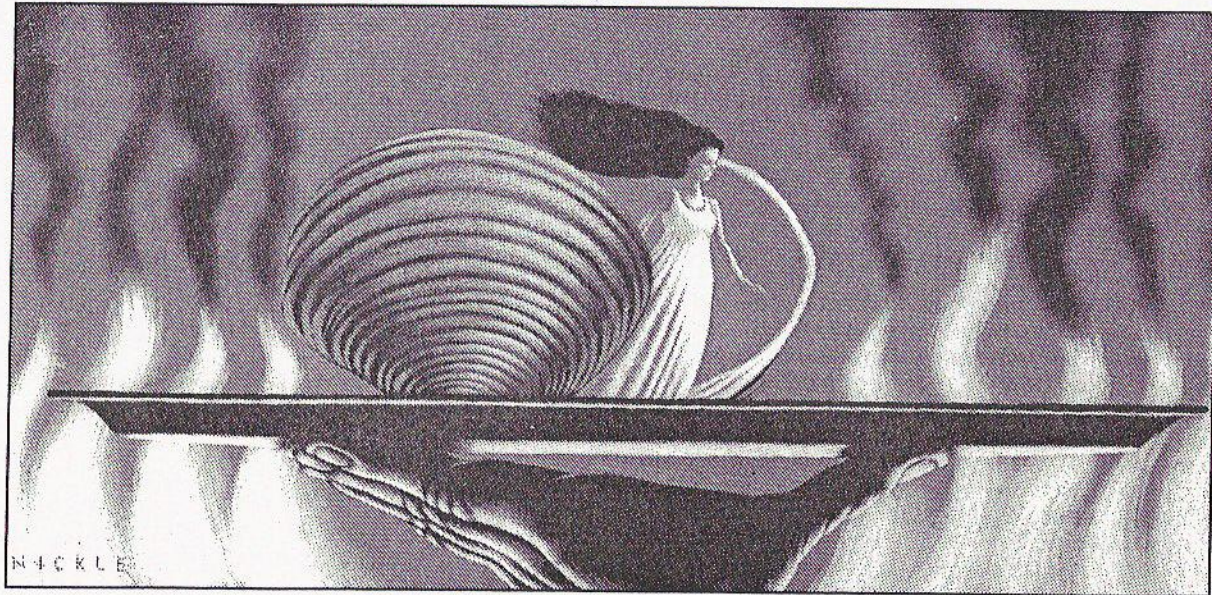
In the preface to his poignant, dizzying new novel, "What a Piece of Work I Am," Eric Kraft — writing as his favorite character, Peter Leroy — explains that what follows is the life story of Ariane Lodkochnikov, the sultry older sister of Peter's imaginary boyhood friend Raskol. Although in "real life" Ariane died in a fire, the narrator, who has pined for her since preadolescence, "provides a fire extinguisher at the critical moment." Thus the imaginary sister of the imaginary friend survives an imaginary fire in order to confess the secrets of growing up female in postwar Babbington, L.I.

In his latest novel, Mr. Kraft has created a heroine as complex as his narrative. Ariane has what used to be called a fast reputation around Babbington, a backwater where the clam is king. When the novel opens, she is working as a waitress at Captain White's Clam Bar, desperate for a change. Mr. Kraft — as evidenced in his previous work (including "Little Follies" and "Where Do You Stop?"), most of which is narrated in Proustian fashion by Peter Leroy — is a master at illuminating the shoals and shallows of a young person's heart. Ariane is full of hope, hopelessly stupid, arrogant, coquettish and sweet.

One day she appears at a still-unfinished local resort hotel in the sort of outfit she thinks a hostess might wear, an inappropriate white nylon evening dress, and winds up landing a job as one of hundreds of waitresses at the Tropicale Grill. After a hilariously disastrous few months, Ariane has her hopes dashed by a love affair with the hotel manager, a square-jawed petty thief named Guy, who eventually has her fired.

All this is revealed in an extended conversation

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between Ariane and the narrator. It's a lip-smacking conceit: Ariane tries to confess the bare facts of her life while Peter, romantic and puppy-doggish, compulsively gilds them. This, of course, is the core of Ariane's problem. Men have imagined her so often that she can't seem to locate the *self* in herself.

After Ariane leaves the Tropicale Grill, she initiates a curious relationship with the narrator's grandfather Jack Leroy, who is nursing his wife, Eleanor, as she quietly succumbs to pancreatic cancer. To pass the sad time while Eleanor dies, Jack, at Ariane's suggestion, takes his wife on an imaginary trip to the South Sea island of Rarotonga. Ariane signs on as a deckhand, coming to Jack and Eleanor's house to cook and clean, to eavesdrop longingly on their conversations and snoop around the house in search of clues that would explain their devotion.

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 the final third of the novel, however, the balance is tipped in favor of the metafictional as our interest in Ariane's personal journey is buried under the weight of an ambitious metaphor, around which the lively people of Babbington are unconvincingly arranged. After Eleanor Leroy dies, Ariane is persuaded to put herself "on display" in a dockside warehouse as a sort of continuing avant-garde theater piece. There, for 10 years, she lives her life, while the pragmatic citizens of Babbington, who were deeply suspicious about the opening of a resort motel, nevertheless seem happy to pay their hard-earned money to watch a local girl sit and do nothing much for hours on end.

Despite this odd turn, "What a Piece of Work I Am" still has some great funny bits, including sly observations of the average person's craving for the limelight, and a few shrewd surprises. More important, the novel's imperfect structure does nothing to detract from the appeal of its premise. 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. □