

## REVIEW

## An Imaginary Heroine on a Kraftian Odyssey

**WHAT A PIECE OF WORK I AM**  
(*A Confabulation*)By Eric Kraft  
Crown; 275 pages; \$22REVIEWED BY  
MICHAEL UPCHURCH

**M**ere superlatives, apparently, are not enough. On the strength of the praise he has gotten from fans such as Armistead Maupin, Andrei Codrescu and an army of book reviewers, comic novelist Eric Kraft ought to be a household name by now. His fictional universe, centered in Babbington, Long Island ("clam capital of America"), is a delightful, Kodachrome-bright concoction of 1950s Americana as seen through the eyes of his obsessive memoirist, Peter Leroy.

In "Little Follies: The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy" and its follow-up, "Where Do You Stop?" Kraft explored the realities and illusions of Peter's world with a dazzling technique and sense of humor. His favorite

trick: to introduce an episode with a preface explaining what really happened in Peter's life and why it had to be changed in the telling in order to get closer to the truth.

That same weaving of truth and fantasy is at play in Kraft's latest offering, "What a Piece of Work I Am." But the focus this time is Ariane Lodkochnikov, the older sister of Peter's imaginary best friend. "In so very many ways," Peter explains, "she made me what I am today, even though I made her up."

The book strikes more sober notes than the others; and without the champagne fizz of Peter's giddy sensibility to help him out, Kraft's narrative pyrotechnics don't have quite the same luster. Still, Ariane makes her mark as an alluring figure in the Leroy/

Kraft pantheon. When the reader meets her, Ariane is that most archetypal of small-town characters — the "town slut," as she puts it. But she isn't happy with the role, just as she isn't happy with her name. After all, Ariane, her Greek namesake, was seduced and then ditched by Theseus after she helped him find and kill the Minotaur.

Determined to escape such a fate and tired of the contempt in which Babbington holds her, she takes any opportunity she can to escape her circumstance and invent a new life. After quitting her job as a clam-bar waitress, she finds work at a classy new beach resort where she has her first glimpse of the glamorous life (as she sees it) and her first surprisingly brutal adult romance.

On the rebound, she scurries home only to immerse herself with near-voyeuristic ardor in the lives of Peter's grandparents. His grandmother Eleanor is dying of cancer, and Ariane latches on to the old couple's mutual devotion as though it might be her lifeline. Together with Peter's

grandfather, she helps enact a fantasy of a sea voyage to Rarotonga that the couple has long dreamed of taking — a ruse that manages to distract Eleanor from her suffering.

Inevitably, that "voyage" must come to an end. Ariane's next move takes her to another plane altogether, as she becomes a kind of performance artist committed to a bizarre, decade-long stage show.

Throughout her life story, Peter Leroy serves as listener and commentator, amplifying her thoughts and eagerly sympathizing with even her most outrageous behavior. Although Kraft's intricate ruminations on the origin and nature of personality threaten sometimes to overwhelm his characters, his investigation of the role that performance plays in finding one's true self can be arresting.

The same is true of his obsession with the intersection of reality and artifice. Harold Arlen's "It's Only a Paper Moon" — with its line "It wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me" —

could easily serve as Kraft's signature tune. He alludes to the song late in Ariane's story, and it captures perfectly the spirit of his fiction.

Except in a few episodes involving members of the cult that springs up around Ariane in her actress phase, it is easy to enter the spirit of oddly persuasive illusion that permeates "What a Piece of Work I Am." The fantasy sea voyage is especially poignant — and typically Kraftian.

"Little Follies" and "Where Do You Stop?" remain his finest achievements and the best starting places for newcomers to his work. The good news is that all of Kraft's works ("Herb 'n' Lorna" and "Reservations Recommended" are the other two) will be out in paperback from St. Martin's next year. Maybe this year's cult author will be next year's publishing phenomenon. Few writers could deserve it more. ■

Michael Upchurch's novels include 'Air' and 'The Flame Forest.'



Kraft