

Book Review

September 6, 1992

Much Ado About Miss Rheingold

WHERE DO YOU STOP?

The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy (Continued).

By Eric Kraft.

Illustrated. 181 pp. New York: Crown Publishers. \$15.

By Walter Satterthwait

READERS of earlier volumes of his memoirs will recall that Peter Leroy and his wife, the enchanting Albertine, live in and own Small's Hotel, which is situated on Small's Island, across Bolotomy Bay from Babbington, L.I., the Clam Capital of America. While Albertine deftly handles the day-to-day business of the hotel, Peter busies himself upstairs with his "Personal History." The first nine installments of this enterprise — published originally as individual paperbacks, but recently bound in an omnibus hardcover entitled "Little Follies" — take the younger Peter up to the age of 10. In "Where Do You Stop?" Peter, now 10½, enters the heady reaches of seventh grade.

Peter the Younger is a child of remarkable precocity, but this is hardly surprising, since Peter the Elder, by his own breezy admission, tends to fabricate much of what he "recollects." As he says in his preface to an earlier installment, "Surely this is one of the motives behind any fiction: the desire to correct the errors of the past." Imagination betters memory, invention amends history. Peter is not so much re-creating his childhood as revising it, creating it — and, of course, himself — anew.

At the close of "Little Follies," several important

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questions remained unanswered. What exactly was the relationship between Peter's mother and Dudley Beaker, the next-door neighbor? In the cosmic scheme of things, just how important is that succulent bivalve, the clam? And who was the beautiful dark-haired girl lying on the blue sloop that bobbed that sunny summer day on the Bolotomy River? Was she the young, pre-Peter Albertine? Or was she Lucinda Peters, wisecracking sister of Larry Peters, the hero of the boys' adventure series that our narrator reads so passionately?

These particular questions are not touched upon in "Where Do You Stop?" — happily, for now the reader can continue, in subsequent installments, to seek out their answers. 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.

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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.

It's a lot of stuff to play with. But play with it, in fact, Peter does.

Well, in fact there is no *in fact*, because Peter

Leroy, who has grown up to become "Roger Drake," fictive author of the Larry Peters adventures he loved as a child, is himself a fiction. He is an invention of the crafty (and presumably real) Eric Kraft. It is Mr. Kraft who is at play here, and in the very best sense of the word. The Peter Leroy books are delightful because Mr. Kraft takes such shameless delight in writing them — and in romping about with words, ideas, time, plot, expectation and character.

Literary echoes reverberate down the corridors of "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy" — Sterne, Melville, Mark Twain, Proust, Borges, Nabokov, Gabriel García Márquez — but they reverberate lightly, whimsically. Mr. Kraft is his own man, with his own somewhat loopy agenda. He writes an elegant, supple, uncommonly precise prose that glides, silk-smooth, from pathos to parody, from slapstick to sentiment, from the mysteries of moonlight on Bolotomy Bay to the mysteries of particle physics. Toward the end of the new book, he creates several scenes involving Peter and Ariane, the sultry older sister of Peter's best friend, Raskol. Each vignette is a perfectly balanced blend of slightly edgy comedy and shrewd observation; and each is also extraordinarily sexy. The unattainable Ariane is breathtakingly desirable, and Peter's desire — the awful, ecstatic ache of preadolescence — is rendered so artfully that it becomes almost palpable.

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. □