

Books

Comic ponderings

A 7th grader's journey through unanswerables

■ "Where Do You Stop? The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy (Continued)"
by Eric Kraft
Crown, \$15

by Michael Upchurch

What makes terrazzo "the flooring material most like life?" And when, exactly, does the barbecue season of Babbington, Long Island — "the clam capital of America" — begin and end?

For the last dozen or so years, Eric Kraft has been answering such questions in his fiction.

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" — most of them set in Babbington — and he's as winning a character as any to have appeared recently on the American literary scene.

In Kraft's first full-length novel, "Herb 'n' Lorna," Peter told the story of his blissful grandparents who work in the "coarse-goods business" (constructing miniature erotic novelties with ingenious moving parts). "Reservations Recommended," a grimmer comedy, traced the downward spiral of Peter's childhood friend Matthew Barber, a toy designer and undercover restaurant critic whose marital woes are revealed in his restaurant reviews.

The linchpin of this antic edifice — and the best starting point for those wanting to enter the wonderful world of Kraft — is "Little Follies," published earlier this year and consisting of nine novellas, each accompanied by a preface revealing what really happened in Peter's life and why he had to

change the facts in order to make a more truthful and satisfying story.

"Where Do You Stop?" is the latest installment, and it's a treat.

On one level, it's about a seventh-grade science experiment that winds up taking 35 years to complete. On another, 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 — and all thanks to Miss Rheingold, Peter's glamorous junior-high teacher who can hardly contain her excitement over the mathematical foundations of quantum theory.

Peter, now 11, is hovering perilously on the threshold of adolescence. New worlds of knowledge, sex and social awareness are opening up, and they all appear to be combined in the figure of Miss Rheingold, who throws her science class into a tizzy when she assigns the following questions to answer.

She's the first person Peter ever met who "loved complexity," and her class marks the point in his education when he is first asked to think for himself.

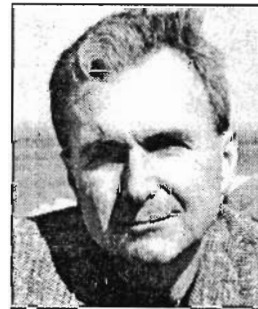
Where does the light go when the light goes out? When is now? What is the biggest question of all? Why are you you? What really happens? And, where do you stop?

She's the first person Peter ever met who "loved complexity," and her class marks the point in his education when he is first asked to think for himself. The thrillingly informal way she sits on her desk and crosses and uncrosses her legs is also a revelation.

Miss Rheingold isn't the only surprise of seventh grade. There are also, for first time, black students in Peter's class from a part of Babbington he never knew existed. One of them, Marvin, shares Peter's



Rick Reason/United Features Syndicate



Eric Kraft

love of words like "epistemology" and "ontology" and has a mother whose handy way with scrap-metal is a perfect match for Peter's grandfather, whose specialty is offbeat inventions (Peter is eager to get them collaborating so they can appear on his favorite TV show, "Fantastic Contraptions").

Outside class, things are just as unsettling. His best friend Raskol's older sister has suddenly become an object of intense erotic allure. And his construction plans for a backyard lighthouse are instantly assumed by Marvin and Raskol to be a rough sketch for a watchtower, thus revealing the way a shift in perception can change the nature of the object

being perceived.

This seeming miscellany of youthful memories is given structure by a fugue-like verbal patterning (as in Marvin and Peter's serendipitously shared vocabulary) and some zanily far-fetched coincidences. The story's sobering vein emerges in its gradual revelation of the racism present in Peter's family and his hometown.

The book is also peppered with odd illustrations revealing why changing class at school is like a game of Chinese checkers, what selective memory has in common with peas and mashed potatoes, and more. All these high jinks are in aid of such profound unanswerables as "Where do you mark the onset of an idea, a discovery?"

And, of course, Miss Rheingold's doozie: "Where do you stop?" (Three and half decades after being asked, a 46-year-old Peter finally comes up with an answer which I won't reveal here.)

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 is a Seattle novelist.