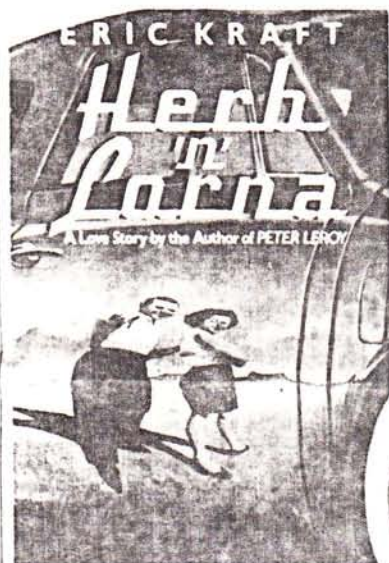


BOOKS



Herb 'N' Lorna
Is the first
full-length
novel by the
most literary
of America's
homey
humorists.

ized. The shift from writing interrelated short stories to one big novel seems to have been a more radical departure for Kraft than it was for Keillor. Keillor simply avoided the issue in the episodic, kaleidoscopic *Lake Wobegon Days*. Kraft attacks the form head on. *Herb 'N' Lorna* is a novel in the traditional—almost a Dickensian—sense.

As with many storytellers turned novelists, the switch has its advantages and its failures. You get to know Herb and Lorna pretty damn intimately in these 300 pages. You get plenty of time to admire Kraft's feel for social history. His historical settings remain extraordinarily convincing in tone and mood as they flow from the 1910s to today.

But you also get some pretty mechanical plot links, some extraneous detail, and long waits between punch lines. The *Peter Leroy* novellas are masterpieces of comic economy, expert shaggy dogs precisely paced to string you along through a single evening's read. *Herb 'N' Lorna* you're supposed to curl up with for a week of evenings, drifting in its lazy stream of history, chuckling here, smiling wistfully there and tugging at your shorts during the naughty bits.

Lorna's story begins in the little mill town of Chacallit, New York. Chacallit is short for "What-you-may-call-it," a name which started out as a pilgrim's joke because they couldn't say the Mohawk name for the place. Even this name kept changing throughout the 19th Century, as the town fathers wooed and accommodated major local employers as they sprang up and faded away. "The place was known at various times as Acme (for Acme Fancy Buttons), Premier (for Premier Furnishings), Hermes (for Hermes Brand Gentlemen's Necessities) and Atlas (for Atlas Gloves & Hat), and only when it became known as Dr. Scott's, New York—for Dr. Scott's Links and Studs—did the townsfolk resolve to go back forever to calling it Chacallit."

Lorna's Uncle Luther invented "coarse goods" around the turn of the century. He was an executive in the town's gentlemen's furnishings trade, and a horny devil, and he put the two together in a secret side business, manufacturing ivory buttons, cuff links, pocket watches and the like which featured miniature erotic scenes. Sophisticated gentlemen purchased them as novelties and as gifts for business associates. *Lorna*, who grew up to be an excellent carver of ivory, was drafted

into the secretive trade as a girl.

Meanwhile in Boston, Herb Piper's Uncle Ben was introducing him to selling Professor Clapp's Five-Foot Shelf Of Indispensable Information For Modern Times—remaindered books, sold door-to-door. Uncle Ben used the books as a cover to sell coarse goods to gentlemen of sophistication. The first coarse good Herb saw was an ivory button with an exquisite portrait of a naked woman diddling. Herb's ears burned, but he saw his career path, and he fell in love with the workmanship.

It was, no surprise, one of *Lorna's* creations. Herb and *Lorna* soon met in Chacallit, but neither admitted to the other their secret connection to the coarse goods trade. In fact, though they eventually married and lived together the rest of their lives, it wasn't until the 1950s that they found each other out.

Kraft exploits all the possibilities for ironic twists. Herb fights in World War I, and receives an unofficial medal from a winking, nodding General John Pershing—an erotic charm carved by *Lorna* while doing Red Cross work, and secretly shipped to Europe to help the doughboys keep up their, er, morale. During the Depression, both Herb and *Lorna* turn to coarse goods for extra income, and each fobs about it to the other. In bed, each fantasizes about acting out some of the exotic postures she carves and he sells, but they restrain themselves, because neither wants to seem too sophisticated or wicked to the other.

Hiding our fantasies, dreams and secrets even (or especially) from those we love is Kraft's central theme. With the invention of coarse goods he's come up with a deft, classic metaphor. As plot devices and stem-winders the little deceptions and near-revelations get pretty worn out by the time his tale is done, but that may be less their own fault than that of Kraft and his sometimes excessive use of side-plots and incidental characters. We get to know a little too much about too many people and events, which drift us off into eddies of plot and tide pools of history that should have just glided by.

Then again, you can understand why Kraft left it all in, because some of the nonessential sidebars are pretty funny or endearing. There's Mrs. Stolz, the widow who sells them their first house, only *Lorna* doesn't have the heart to ask her to move out. So she lives in a little room under the stairs, behind a secret panel in the book-

shelves, which opens on a spring lock when you pull out a dummy copy of *The Thousand And One Nights*. The spring lock uses the same technology as the famous coarse-goods pocket watch, which springs open to reveal a copulating couple. Herb 'n' *Lorna* never mention to each other that they notice the resemblance.

There's Herb's love of tinkering, which eventually reaches the "critical point" where a "salutary distraction" becomes "fiddling around." For an elderly man who's had a stroke and can't get a grip on his house keys, Herb rigs up a system that pops open the front door when you yank on what looks like a loose nail in the frame. The old man's wife is so impressed she tells the whole town. A local thief lets himself in and cleans them out. There's Herb's invention of a sliding tray you set inside your kitchen drawers. As you open the drawer it lifts the knives and forks where you can easily reach them. Unfortunately, if you open the drawer all the way it dumps the knives and forks on the floor.

Kraft's explication of the urge to tinker is a good example of his style. "Just think of all the happy guys across America who are passing this moment making the chips fly with powerful and noisy routers. If asked by a neighbor, 'What the hell are you up to, making all that racket?' they don't have to be so frank as to say, 'Oh, just fiddling around.' They justify the time they spend in their cozy workshops by making signs for the homes and cottages of their neighbors, thereby demonstrating their generosity and, quite frequently, their reckless disregard for the plural and possessive forms of surnames."

That's just the sort of homey, witty observation you'd expect from a Keillor, a Sheppard, a Bob & Ray. Kraft distinguishes himself from those humorists in that he's the most "literary" of them, the most likely to ground his satire in reality, and the least likely to exploit whimsy and nostalgia for their own sake. And then there are the naughty bits, which in their literary, whimsical and nostalgic way are pretty naughty, all right.

Peter Leroy fans will be forgiven if they succumb to a touch of nostalgia themselves when reading *Herb 'N' Lorna*. But if it moves more slowly and meanderingly, it's still a warm book, a charmer, with its reasonable share of wit 'n' wisdom.

Wit 'N' Wisdom

A Memory Artist Spins His Tales

BY JOHN STRAUSBAUGH

Herb 'N' Lorna
By Eric Kraft
Crown, 310 pages, \$17.95

IT WAS ONLY A MATTER OF time before a commercial publisher picked up on Eric Kraft. For several years he'd been developing a rabid critical following for his series of *Peter Leroy* novellas, published as a quasi-serial novel by a small Boston press, Applewood. When Garrison Keillor became a household name, Kraft's future was ensured. Kraft's stories are very much the East Coast's retort to the Lake Wobegon saga.

Like Keillor, Kraft is a memory artist. Like Keillor's narrator, Peter Leroy is a Baby Boom Everyman, evoking the mythical lost innocence of small town America in the 1940s and 50s. Both are also shaggy dog artists. While Keillor's comical godfathers are Bob & Ray, and Kraft's is probably

Jean Sheppard, they're still carrying on the tradition of cracker-barrel storytelling that has been the root of much American humor since at least Mark Twain.

Sure, there are significant differences. Peter Leroy's small town America is Babbington, a clamming town on the Bolotomy Bay of Long Island. Where Lake Wobegon is pure corn from the heartland, Babbington teeters at the rim of the continental shelf. Babbingtonians can be as whacky and silly and as prone to whimsy as Wobegonians, but they tend to be a bit more real or really cracked. Where Keillor's gentle satire softens life's hard edges with warm fuzzies, Kraft's writing is more sardonic, sexy, smart-ass and, well, more East Coast.

Herb 'N' Lorna is a full-length Peter Leroy novel under one cover, a cradle-to-grave epic about Peter Leroy's maternal grandparents. In fact, it's about finding out that his grandparents were the secret geniuses behind an obscure American folk art called "coarse goods"—miniature erotic charms and figurines. A friend of the family fills him in at his grandmother's funeral. Thus begins his climb in a slightly twisted family tree, the premise of the book.

It's a premise with all sorts of comic potential, which may not be fully real-