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Leaving Small's Hotel

Eric Kraft

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Author: Eric Kraft
Publisher: Picador
Pages: 356
Genre: Fiction

By [Mahinder Kingra](#) | Posted 12/9/1998

Over the course of five novels and nine novellas, Eric Kraft has created a thoroughly convincing, if comically askew, alternate reality centered around the fictional Long Island town of

Babington and the memories of his literary alter ego, Peter Leroy. An obsessive and self-admittedly unreliable (even willfully fraudulent) autobiographer, Leroy narrates imaginary stories about his childhood with an unlikely and entirely successful mix of wistfulness and humor. By repeatedly alerting readers that what they have before them is a fabrication, Kraft explores how fiction can so powerfully transform--and yet so effectively convey--truth.

In *Leaving Small's Hotel*, his latest Peter Leroy novel, Kraft turns his metafictional musings toward the question of why the writer feels compelled to imagine other lives and other worlds. To mark his 50th birthday, Leroy elects to read one chapter of his new autobiographical work, *Dead Air*, each night for 50 nights in the lounge of the hotel he and his wife Albertine own and operate on an island in Babington's harbor. Small's Hotel ("The Little Hotel Without a Slogan") has fallen on hard times, and Albertine hopes a unique literary event will attract paying guests. Much to Leroy's surprise, curious tourists do appear, including one--Cedric "Call Me Lou" Abbot--who decides to stay for all 50 nights.

In several ways, *Leaving Small's Hotel* is a departure for Kraft. *Dead Air*--the book-within-the-book--has an uncharacteristically downbeat ending. At the same time, Kraft provides more details about the adult Leroy's life than usual, particularly about his marriage to Albertine and their financial troubles. These "present-day" sections are punctuated by misplaced and deliberately unpleasant outbursts of anger directed by a mysterious radio-talk-show host at the depth of human misery and depravity. And in the novel's clever preface, Leroy acknowledges the existence (albeit imaginary) of one Eric Kraft--"a useful fiction," he tells us--and laughs at Kraft's fanciful belief that Leroy is the literary avatar rather than the other way around. Kraft makes an appearance at novel's end as well, walking along a beach and rewriting the book's last lines. In between the adult Leroy wrestles with the life he has chosen as a writer (even as his childhood self learns the consequences of his actions).

This novel has a melancholy, autumnal feel. The cancellation of Leroy's series of bizarre Hardy Boys--like adventure stories, the hotel's increasing dilapidation, and the mounting stack of unpaid bills lead Leroy to assess his career, his marriage, and his life. What, he asks, have his writing and his frequent flights from "the painful world of time and place" cost him and his wife? Kraft offers a refreshingly complex and searching portrait of the writing life, as well as of a fundamentally strong and warm relationship between a husband and wife assailed by doubt and unhappiness. *Leaving Small's Hotel* affirms once more that when the destination is Babington (as Leroy's version of Kraft concludes), "time spent in another space, in another life, is the perfect vacation, the ideal."

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