

Hotel Long Island

LEAVING SMALL'S HOTEL, by Eric Kraft.
Picador, 346 pp., \$23.

By Claire Messud

FANS OF Eric Kraft's fiction will need no introduction to its protagonist, Peter Leroy, nor will they require explanations of his fictional Long Island home, Small's Hotel on Small's Island, opposite his native Babbington. All Kraft's devoted readership needs to know is that the latest installment in Leroy's "Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations" is available in bookstores; that it is vintage Leroy, or vintage Kraft, and that, with Kraft's typical skill, erudition and levity, it broaches the very nature of the human condition through its winning anecdotes of Leroy's present, and of his remembered and embroidered past.

This review, then, exists for those as yet uninitiated into Leroy's — or Kraft's — vibrant imagination. Peter Leroy is Eric Kraft's alter ego, conjured by his subconscious one long-ago dozy afternoon in Harvard's Lamont Library; but according to Leroy's introduction, it is Kraft who is the imagined subject, created one winter by the young Peter while sitting on a bench on the Babbington dock. Each claims reality for himself, and why not? Theirs is nothing if not a productive symbiosis. As Leroy explains, "It is a curious kind of partnership, Kraft and Leroy. The usual descriptions — author and character, ventriloquist and dummy, left brain and right brain — are inaccurate and inadequate." Kraft and Leroy imagine each other, and in their imaginings escape the often demoralizing constraints of their everyday lives; but it is Leroy's life, rather than Kraft's, that concerns us here.

Claire Messud is the author of "When the World Was Steady," a novel.

Peter Leroy, on the cusp of 50, lives on Small's Island with his beloved wife, Albertine. Together they run Small's Hotel, a ramshackle establishment with a dwindling guest list and skyrocketing expenses. There, for 15 years, Leroy has worked on his "Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations" — in short, his memoirs. In the 50 days before his 50th birthday, Leroy proposes to read a chapter a night from this manuscript to any guests who are present: It is an enterprise reminiscent of Nero's fiddling, as the hotel crumbles around them and Albertine desperately attempts to juggle Small's mounting costs and failing infrastructure.

Luckily, Peter and Albertine are not alone: Around them swirls a vast cast of characters. From the start, they are joined by the mysterious Cedric R. Abbot — "Call me Lou" — who draws from apparently bottomless resources and takes pleasure in chipping in to keep the hotel going. He brings with him, over time, a vast collection of similarly cheerful do-gooders, whose pleasure in escaping real life lies in their zealous commitment to overhauling the hotel, at no expense to their hosts. Lou becomes the self-appointed bartender and assigns his daughter Elaine to PR tasks; Alice sets about redecorating the rooms, while her husband, Clark, tackles the roof and the boiler; Miranda and Louise take on the catering; Artie is a behind-the-scenes fixer whose endless phone calls resolve broader problems, and Tony T, a 60-year-old '50s rocker, oversees the launch that shuttles visitors to and from the island. Along with these hardworking paying guests there are the hotel's prospective buyers, a series of comical day-trippers with ill-advised plans to turn the island into a military training site, a casino or a water-sports and Jet Ski center.

In the midst of this fantasia of fairy godparents and wicked witches, Peter and Albertine continue to struggle with their own lives. Peter has long been the author of "The Unlikely Adventures of



Newsday / Gary Viskupic

Larry Peters," a book series for young readers; suddenly he finds his contract cancelled. He casts around for alternative money-spinners and settles, briefly, on "Murder While You Wait," a story about a contract killer named Rockwell Kingman, "a twisted mutation of Rocky King, the square-jawed sidekick of Larry Peters"; but this perversion of Leroy's embittered imagination prompts in him fits of self-loathing. Finally, he opts for "Memoirs While You Wait," an enterprise rather

than a story, in which he will pass on his skill for storytelling to the stories of others' lives. Whether this is a business decision or a mania is not clear: At his computer, in between the writing of his own past and that of the fictional Rockwell Kingman, Leroy is also penning the imagined thoughts of his wife — her despair and frustration with Peter himself. Imagination and reality bleed into one another with such persistence

Hotel Long Island

KRAFT from Page B12

that the reader, like Leroy, is forced to accept that the two are indistinguishable.

A further example of this uncontrollable overlap is the radio show "Baldy's Nightcap," to which Leroy listens at bedtime. Baldy is a dummy, and the show is his; his ventriloquist, Bob Balducci, never gets to say more than "Yeah." Baldy and Bob, with their black humor and revulsion at the broader world's misery and violence, are central to Leroy's present narrative — more central than the reader can guess — but they are also central to Leroy's memoirs, a hold-over from the 13-year-old Peter's hermetic life in postwar Babbington, the life conjured after dinner each night in the drawing room of Small's Hotel.

Leroy's early adolescence provides a doubling narrative to the bleaker contemporary scene. In boyhood, Peter is surrounded by a gang of close friends, by the neighborhood parents — including the voluptuous Mrs. Jerrold, after whom he lusts — and by Porky White, owner of the vastly successful Kap'n Klam, a "chain of bivalve-based fast-food restaurants" in which young Peter has a small stake. He is also swept up in American culture's preoccupations of the time, electric eyes, radio transmitters and

building flying-saucer detectors from a kit in *Cellar Scientist* magazine. Caves are dug and spying is undertaken. The boy's Babbington, in an era of Cold War anxiety, is full of resourceful optimism and humor, peopled by generous and gentle characters. But just as the disaster in present-day Small's Hotel proves less dire than it seems, so, too, Peter's youthful idyll is not purely benign: Happy endings come where least expected and fail to materialize where they are taken for granted.

In addition to these overflowing worlds of now and then, the novel bursts with epigraphs galore, citations from Schlegel, Proust, Cervantes, Goethe and Thackeray, to name a few, which resonate outward from Peter Leroy's humble life and link it to the universal. The book is also wittily interspersed with diagrams and advertisements, with the busy stuff of "real" life. Kraft's imagination, like Leroy's, is endlessly fertile, not merely in its creations but in its connections, as well, so that each apparently innocent anecdote chimes with Kraft's broader theme of the imagined life, of its thrilling, enhancing and ultimately dangerous connection to the real. There is also much sorrow in "Leaving Small's Hotel," as its title suggests, and an uncomfortable acknowledgment of the potentially imprisoning consequences of imaginative escape. But the novel ends on a note of joyous possibility, offering both Leroy and his brilliant creator the freedom to create something new.