

BOOK REVIEWS



BY LEE PENNOCK HUNTINGTON

Life of A Thoroughly Likable Lad

THE PERSONAL HISTORY, ADVENTURES, EXPERIENCES AND OBSERVATIONS OF PETER LEROY, by Eric Kraft. 1. MY MOTHER TAKES A TUMBLE. 2. DO CLAMS BITE? 3. LIFE ON THE BOLOTOMY. 4. STATIC OF THE SPHERES. 5. THE FOX AND THE CLAM. 6. THE GIRL WITH THE WHITE FUR MUFF. 7. TAKE THE LONG WAY HOME. 8. CALL ME LARRY. Applewood Press, Cambridge, Mass. Paperback, \$4.95 each.

As he sits in his ramshackle hotel on a minuscule island in Bolotomy Bay off Long Island, Peter Leroy can see across the water the town of Babbington, Clam Capital of the World, his birthplace and scene of the youthful experiences he is devoting his days to recalling and writing down. He is finding that memory is not infallible, that time is a fluid element and that what he recollects in his late 30s is polymorphous, as briny and succulent as one of Babbington's famous chowders.

Because "Life doesn't happen all at once," segments of Peter's history are appearing seriatim, some 100 pages at a time, four times a year beginning in 1982. By now a devoted coterie of Peter Leroy addicts awaits each new issue with gleeful impatience. The serial novel has not been much seen in the 20th century, though it was popular in the days of its most renowned producer, Charles Dickens, to whom Peter's creator, Eric Kraft, has been enthusiastically compared.

Kraft, an editor for educational publications who, like Peter, grew up in a seaside communi-

ty very like the fictional Babbington, turns out his installments regularly but with apparently no fixed idea of how many there will eventually be. His audience will surely expand as he continues to record the adventures of Peter, who, at volume eight, is still in grade school.

The critics are already competing to praise, calling the serial "a comic masterpiece" by "a major new humorist," "strikingly new," "riveting and rambunctious." They are finding parallels not only to Dickens but to Proust, Melville and Mark Twain. These are pretty heavy archetypes to live up to, and if Kraft hasn't yet actually made anyone in that pantheon move over, he is undeniably an original, and a delight.

To begin with, Peter is a thoroughly likable lad. He is bright and observant, but also subject to all the anxieties and misapprehensions of childhood. His parents, grandparents, neighbors, classmates, teachers and friends are all marvelously alive, individual, eccentric. What happens to them has all the elements of surprise and inevitability that characterize the human condition, and some of it is so funny you can scarcely turn the pages for chortling. But in presenting his characters in all their banality, looniness and bungling, Kraft does it with a kind of tender respect for the basic dignity of even the most pathetic and obnoxious.

The first number, *My Mother Takes A Tumble*, is qualitatively farcical. In it Peter celebrates his first birthday, but the events of that year chiefly have to do with the bachelor next door, Mr. Dudley Beaker, who contrives a money-making scheme by advertising in the paper as Mary Strong, a "lovely, lonely" young woman looking for sympathetic and

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generous male correspondents. One of the correspondents he hooks is actually Eliza Foote, a sardonic insurance clerk, who signs herself John Simpson; a masterfully florid and duplicitous exchange of letters takes place, and the double scam ends with the correspondents meeting with instant rapport. (Mr. Beaker and Eliza appear in subsequent volumes to great effect.)

Do Clams Bite? chronicles Peter's sufferings when he goes clamming with his grandfather, expecting momentarily to have a vital hunk of his anatomy bitten off (a fear known as pelecypodophobia). These otherwise cherished visits to his grandparents are enriched by glimpses of Great-Grandmother Leroy, who lives at the top of the house in a room filled with coconuts carved to represent members of the family, including the legendary brewer Black Jacques Leroy. In *Life on the Bolotomy*, Peter makes a voyage with his chum Raskolnikov, floating a coffin box upriver "to the source," an expedition inviting comparison with that of Huck Finn and Tom, though it is a distinctly lesser adventure, brief, hemmed in by civilization and marked by fiascos, all of which could easily be proof of the platitude often heard by Peter that "life is like a river."

Two of these volumes stand out for perception and poignancy: *The Static of the Spheres* is a near-perfect picture of how 10-year-old Peter and his other grandfather, drawing on the old man's massive collection of back issues of *Impractical Craftsman*, collaborate to construct a short-

wave radio, a project that requires 46 weekends and comes to an end that may well bring tears to your eyes; this one also contains a meditation on the effect of the pop-up toaster on "the intellectual development of the child who sits beside it, morning after morning, waiting with his plate and peanut butter," an exercise that will form his views of time and its passage. *The Fox and the Clam* tells us how Peter learned to read, with many versions of the *Fable of the Fox and the Clam*; here Peter plays Candide to his cynical classmate Matthew Barber; it is all about happiness and despair and it is exceedingly wise and exceedingly funny.

In spite of occasional excess and humour that verges on the collegiate, Kraft is clearly producing a work of stature. The combination of the satirical and the benign, the gift for parody and philosophical insight, the deadpan comedy and the sly literary allusions, the rare understanding of family relationships and the real concerns of childhood, make this work one of the landmarks of a generation in search of meanings.

When he is in the fourth grade, Peter is given a camera, but for months he goes around snapping relatives and classmates, never daring to insert any film, because he is afraid the results would reveal his ineptitude as a photographer. Fortunately Eric Kraft has put film in his camera and is giving us a series of unforgettable pictures that we can cherish while rejoicing that he promises to keep them coming.