

The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy: A Serial Novel

by Eric Kraft

Apple-wood Books, \$4.95 per volume, paper.

A popular story among literary and history buffs—perhaps apocryphal but probably not—goes like this: In 1841 an unusually large crowd jammed a pier in New York, waiting for a particular ship from England to dock. The ship was barely within sight and shouting distance when the one overwhelming question of the moment rang from the crowd: "Is Little Nell dead?" The answer came back that, yes, the heroine of Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* had indeed expired in the last episode, which was part of this ship's cargo for America. The reaction was instantaneous and heartfelt; the crowd burst into tears over the loss. Although they were mostly strangers to one another, Dickens's world was one they had shared—episode by cliff-hanging episode.

There is not that much of a leap from Little Nell's death to the burning question of several years ago: Who shot J.R.? All the attention that surrounded the most famous episode of *Dallas* or the end of *M*A*S*H* was not just media hype but the inherent bond that develops between a serial and its followers. The experience of a serial is that of a common, contained world. It is a shared event. Everyone is reading or watching the same episode within the same time frame. No one can skip ahead until the next installment comes out. And that level of containment is important, for it provides the serial with its basic subtext: We are all in this together.

When the invention of the printing press brought reading as entertainment to

the lower middle classes, serials became literature as popular art. Thackeray and especially Dickens elevated the form to more encompassing levels while retaining its crowd-pleasing aspects. (And even Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, a masterpiece not noted for its mass appeal, was issued in seven volumes.) Eventually, though, serials fell out of favor as literature, their immediacy and entertainment value co-opted by the new waves of popular art—movies and television.

But there are current signs of a serial revival, although for a smaller, even more contained audience. The major harbingers are alternative newspapers, from the *Pacific Sun*—which first ran Cyra McFadden's *Serial*—to, locally, the *Reader*, which is currently running its third straight serial, seemingly making it the only publication in the country so committed to what was once considered a dead art form.

Outside of the newspaper business, however, there exists only one bold publishing experiment with the serial form, namely Eric Kraft's *Peter Leroy* books. Published about every three months, each 96-page book explores some aspect of the life and memory of Peter Leroy, a fictional character who grew up in the 1950s in Babington, Long Island—the Clam Capital of the World.

Leroy is the first-person voice of these whimsical stories, and he sends the reader looping back and forth through time, Proust-style, triggered by the sight, sounds, and smells somehow associated with a clam instead of a madeleine. Each book (there are seven now, with number eight due any day) is self-contained, yet each one builds on the others, creating—if you read the whole series—a multilayered resonance of the lives of Leroy and his family. An example is Peter's memory of his grandfather, Guppa, finishing the radio he's been building for Peter after 828 hours of labor "discounting the time that he had spent pumping the cellar out and drying its contents." It doesn't work, of course; the coils are backwards or something. When Peter slips the earphones on, he hears "a sound like wind through willow trees, the rustle of the hanging branches of a weeping willow, the sweep of the branches along the ground. Winding through this was a deep and indecipherable murmur, like the voices of my parents and Guppa and Gumma when I had heard them talking together at night, years before, when I lay in my crib."

Peter's anecdotes and stories (my favorite is the hilarious lonely-hearts swindle in volume one) are sentimentally affectionate, cleverly funny with a wry, slant-sighted way of looking at things. The result is unique, at times a little strange, but, ultimately, vastly appealing—a sort of cross between Proust and Garrison Keillor, with a little Marx Brothers thrown in.

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A promotion line for the *Peter Leroy* books reads, "Because life doesn't happen all at once." Indeed it doesn't, and therein lies the appeal of a serial: It moves like life—off on tangents, seemingly at times without reason, intensely passionate here, skating with boredom there. The nuances can be recounted (as they are in any novel), but the true scope, the pattern and measure of it all, comes from the experience of living it. And only a serial, as Eric Kraft so tellingly proves, puts us all into a common, contained world together.

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