



MICHAEL Z. JODY

It is a sad fact of reviewing that it is far easier for the critic of a book (or probably of anything else for that matter) to sound clever, witty, and sophisticated when he is denigrating the work, than when he admires it. This is especially so for a review of a work of fiction.

That being the case, I was terribly disappointed to read Eric Kraft's novel "Little Follies; The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy (So Far)," since the anticipation of having to sound laudatory and panegyric rather than sharp, urbane, and wickedly funny was nearly enough to make me cry. Try hard as I might for the 440 pages or so of this novel, I could find little to disparage, denigrate, dismiss, demean, or decry.

Having said that (and having thus protected myself from possible charges of being insufficiently odious and hostilely entertaining) I hope you will brace yourself for a review distinguished only by its lack of scathing hostility, scorching criticism, or sarcastic humor at the expense of a hard-working author. That fun stuff will have to wait until my next review.

One Of The Funniest

"Little Follies" is one of the funniest novels I have ever read. It is one of those works that, had I read it on the subway or other form of public

transportation, would have caused me to have attracted sidelong glances from my fellow passengers. The kind of glances which, combined with a visual search for the nearest exit, would be indicative of their frank appraisal of my insanity.

As it was, I suspect that my girlfriend was beginning to wonder. Seldom have I laughed so loud or so hard at a work of fiction.

The "novel" (and I put that in quotes because, apparently, it was

Eric Kraft
"Little Follies"
Crown Publishers
\$22

published as separate stories which easily stand alone) is made up of nine chapters with such evocative titles as "My Mother Takes a Tumble," "Do Clams Bite?" and "The Static of the Spheres." These stories are narrated in the first person by a writer named Peter Leroy, from the vantage or perspective of, one assumes, his early middle age.

Peculiarly, each chapter has a pre-

face in which Mr. Leroy tells us how the story which is to follow differs from how the actual events of his life came to pass: "The next morning, I began writing the story down. I think that I might have been able to complete it very quickly if I hadn't tried to verify some of the facts. When I did, I found to my surprise that I had made up two essential ingredients."



Eric Kraft

Kristine Larsen

Series Of Marionettes

Somehow, this puts an odd and slightly discombobulating torque on reality, forcing the reader to imagine the author (Mr. Kraft) manipulating the invented writer (Mr. Leroy), who is telling us that he has been playing with the actual events which concerned Leroy as a young boy or, in the first story, as an infant.

This creates a metafiction. The created character is himself making up a world. It brings to mind a series

of performing marionettes, each manipulated in turn by a larger one.

What has been created here is the post World War II world of Babington, N.Y. — Long Island? — situated on the shores of Bolotomy Bay. It is a world peopled by the likes of Black Jacques Leroy, Rodney (Raskolnikov) Lodkochikov, a.k.a. Rascal, Porky White, Fat Hank, Lily (Spike) O'Grady, leader of a gang of "crew-cut and muscular" fourth-graders named Biff, Studs, Chuck, and Knuckles and, of course, Rascal's two brothers, Ernie and Little Ernie.

Toddler's World View

Mr. Kraft's stories, told with warmth, humor, and a nearly preternatural understanding of the world view of a 9 or 10-year-old (to say nothing of that of an adult) are charming, reminiscent (for me at least) of all the fears and joys of childhood. Possibly (though wonderfully so), the first story is told through the perspective of an infant or at most, a toddler.

I was sitting in a high chair in the kitchen, gumming a piece of toast, when Mr. Beaker let himself in through the back door, ending the conversation my mother and Gumma were having about the way I ate my toast.

"You see," my mother was saying, "he doesn't like the dry part of the toast much — I think because it hurts his pink little gums and the roof of his little mouth. But he doesn't like the slobbered part much either — I think because it's revolting. So what he does is he turns the toast as he eats it. . . ."

As happens throughout Mr. Kraft's fine novel, even the minutest of actions turns out to be a metaphor for something else. Later we are told that

young Peter's toast-eating style is "something about nibbling at the elusive, ever-receding twilight line of this moment, ahead of which lies an abrasive future, and behind which we leave a messy past. . . ."

A Clammy Chowder

What whales and whaling were to Melville's "Moby Dick," clams and clamming are to "Little Follies." Mr. Kraft informs us a great deal about clams, as well as the art and the tools of clamming. Babbington is one of the clam capitals of the world. The drive-ways are made of crushed clamshells; people use the larger ones as ashtrays; little boys suffer from pelecypodophobia (fear of clams), and read children's fables about the Fox and the Clam.

To borrow one of Mr. Kraft's (or is it Mr. Leroy's?) own similes: As in a fine chowder, the taste and texture of the clams suffuses the book. There are meaty (clammy?) chunks of love and lust and friendship and fear all mixed up in a spicy and voluptuous broth of writing.

As if the marvelous writing were not enough, the book is studded with delicious little chunks of material which are not exactly the novel itself. There are reproductions of ads for clams ("The Chewy Snack in the Sturdy Pack!") placed by the Babbington Clam Council; there are maps of Bolotomy Bay and the Bolotomy River (including a pond called "Andy Whitley's Gall Bladder"); there is an article — with drawings — about an "Adventurer's Bubble," from the journal *Impractical Craftsman*; there is an entire children's story/cartoon called "The Happy Clam," which I must admit made me scream with laughter; there are entire chapters from a series of boy's adventure books written by Peter Leroy, and

much of the first chapter is an epistolary exchange between Dudley Beaker, who, calling himself Mary Strong, a "lonely young woman," has placed an ad requesting correspondents, for the purpose of soliciting money. His first respondent is Eliza Foote, who, feeling pity for Mary, writes back as John Simpson.

Fourth-Grade "Lear"

My favorite chapter is an account of Peter's directorial debut in the fourth grade's production of "King Lear," or more accurately, "the Story of King Lear and His Daughters," "part of a series called Classics Made Suitable for Boys and Girls." Peter, alternately threatened by the 9-year-old Spike, "She was chewing gum, and the muscles along her jaw and temples rippled impressively," and cajoled/blackmailed by the sexy Veronica, who, after playing a sultry game of Clothes Closet with the unsuspecting boy, says, "I wonder what your mother would do if she knew I was wearing your underwear?" must decide upon the casting of Cordelia.

I won't tell you who wins. But I will say that if, as one of Mr. Kraft's characters says, "childhood is like a moment on a mountaintop in the sunshine before we descend into the vale of tears," then this book is a long vacation at the peak.

And oh, hey, I just thought of something nasty, unpleasant, and dis-

paraging I can say about "Little Follies," something which I can use to really skewer it, something that really got my goat and made me gnash my teeth. "Little Follies" was too short.

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Michael Z. Jody teaches creative writing and literature at Southampton College, and can't wait for Mr. Kraft's sequel to "Little Follies," due out soon.

Book Markers

David G. Rattray of Amagansett and New York City, a poet and translator, will read from his work on Sunday at 8:30 p.m., at La Luncheonette, 130 Tenth Avenue, New York City.

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Edward William Stever, who won the Jeanne Voege Poetry Award at this year's Westhampton Writers Festival for the third consecutive year, has published his second book of poetry, "Propulsion," with Writers Ink Press of Centereach. Mr. Stever lives in Middle Island.

POETRY READINGS

Young Poets Recite

Fran Castan will read from her poetry on Saturday at 4 p.m. at the Clayton-Liberatore Gallery in Bridgehampton, where her husband, Lewis

Books in Sag Harbor this weekend.

On Saturday at 6 p.m., James Ruffini, a young New Jersey poet who spends his summers in Montauk, will