

MAY 3 1992

BURRELLE'S

WHAT'S REAL ANYWAY?

Faux memoirs

Best way to have a happy childhood is to make one up

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Little Follies: The Personal
History, Adventures,
Experiences and Observations
of Peter Leroy (so far)

By Eric Kraft
Fiction
Crown, \$22

By MIKE SWEENEY
FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM

Quotations introducing the nine novellas in Eric Kraft's *Little Follies* come from the likes of Vladimir Nabokov, Marcel Proust and Boethius.

This is Sucker Punch No. 1.

Kraft endows his autobiography of the fictional Peter Leroy with a mock seriousness. The delightfully odd experiences of a 1950s childhood in Babbington, the clam cortex of America, are recalled with the kind of style usually reserved for Greek drama and Winter Olympics. Enjoy, but don't take it *too* seriously, all you Proust fans. Sucker Punch No. 2 is the finely detailed photographic plate of memory.

Leroy recalls his life with the eye of a news reporter, but dang-it-all, you can't trust him. He's constantly rewriting his experiences to improve them, with each lie compounding the one before it, until you need a scorecard to tell the real fictional Leroy from the *fictional* fictional Leroy. (Got that?)

Take heart that Leroy, who is more interested in possibilities than in facts, marks the detours in his personal road map with a series of prefaces.

For example, in "My Mother Takes a Tumble," Leroy makes his grandfather a Studebaker salesman (false) as a convenient way to explain why every house on his block had a Studie in the driveway (true).

Then Leroy is stuck with this lie in the subsequent "The Static of the Spheres," in which he and his grandfather spend many difficult hours building a radio in the basement. The story structure requires Leroy to find an appropriate preoccupation for his grandpa, and the Studebaker lie prompts him to reject the old man's perfectly weird TV-time habit of culling cement-filled clams (true) in favor of a game in which he personalizes his potential sales pitch for every Studebaker-less resident of Babbington (false).

Eight of the novellas appeared separately in paperback in the early 1980s; the ninth, "The Young Tars," is new to this Crown hardback collection.

Taken together, they conjure up memories of one's own childhood, even if it had nothing to do with searching for clams or rowing a homemade boat up the Bolotomy River. It's an affectionate look back; childhood never seemed this good the first time.

Throughout it all, Kraft demonstrates his control. How many authors can write dead-on-the-money parodies of a nursery rhyme — in this case called "The Fox and the Clam" — and Shakespeare? The former allows an optimist, a pessimist and some existentialists to reinterpret a childhood story; the latter finds Leroy besieged by three girls who seek the same role in his affections as a way to get the same role in his sanitized, grade-school production of *King Lear*.

At the end, the happy-as-a-clam reader, to quote Lear, might ask, "Is man no more than this? Consider him well."

And then take heart, for the last of the Peter Leroy novellas concludes: "To Be Continued."

Mike Sweeney is deputy features editor of the *Star-Telegram*.