

PAPERBACKS Life is a piece of toast

Christopher Hawtree
on the crafty
charm of **ERIC KRAFT**

It is strange how long it can take to cross the Atlantic. For more than a decade, people on the East Coast, and beyond, have been talking about *Little Lies*, a series of nine novellas by Eric Kraft. First mailed to friends, they were then published, singly, by a small firm outside Boston. The series title derives from *Within a Budding Grove*: 'We are all obliged, if we are to make reality endurable, to nurse a few little follies in ourselves.' One might say that the result is as if Proust had written *Lake Woebegon Days*, but this would not quite convey the intricacy of its wit and narrative.

The novellas, each with its own offbeat title, among them *Do Clams Bite?*, *Call Me Larry* and *My Mother Takes A Tumble*, is related by Peter

Leroy, now married to Albertine. She is left to run their old hotel on Bolotomy Bay (purportedly part of Long Island) while Leroy sits upstairs at his computer and recalls a Fifties childhood when Babbington threw upon the clam industry. Not only is each tale prefaced by a note which (perhaps fraudulently) calls into question its authenticity, but here also are such things as old advertisements, maps, fairy stories, encyclopaedia entries, instruction manuals and a slide rule, not to mention the gaudy illustrations from the books read by young Leroy.

All this, freighted by literary allusion, is self-consciousness itself and yet curiously innocent. One readily accepts the bizarre. Early on, there are pages of increasingly-amended typescript: a woman has placed an ad in the personal columns. She seeks a lonely man. Only thing is, she is a man, the deadly Dudley Beaker, and a reply comes from one John Simpson, in fact a woman, Eliza

Foote. Their doubly duplicitous aims make for high comedy without parallel.

Babbington is a byword for chicanery. One is continually reading on two levels, or more, and all the while revelling in an acutely-observed world of vanished artefacts (nostalgia at one remove, in some cases, for many of these never reached England). It's preposterous that children should stage *King Lear* with a feel-good ending, but there is a curiously affecting tone to the cunning means by which one girl angles for the role of Cordelia: all these years later, Leroy tingles in shock and delight at her managing to exchange his underwear for hers, and flashing it at a crucial moment (his mother later mistakes his embarrassment for a wish no longer to undress in front of her).

The series continued with *Where Do We Stop?*, in effect three more novellas turning around the titular question of elementary, awe-inspiring science, a subject touched

on throughout the series, notably in the many sessions with Leroy's grandfather which failed to produce a short-wave wireless. Ever after, hiss and crackle are as potent as any madeline. Tightly conceived, these tales are elastic, never more so than in the disquisition upon toast as a metaphor for life itself – far niftier than anything by Nicholson Baker.

Here is charm without sentimentality, intelligence and emotion, all related by the most steady-handed of unreliable narrators. The only shame is that English readers are, yet again, expected to pay six quid for a small paperback. This volume contains only three of the tales; others will follow, amounting to a price rather higher than the \$22 which Crown (his American publishers) charge for a hardback with all nine between its handsome covers. That is the form in which addicts will wish to have it.

Little Follies by Eric Kraft (Black Swan £5.99)

OBSERVER
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