

Making hay with biting clams

LITTLE FOLLIES: The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy. By Eric Kraft. Crown. 448 Pages. \$22.

A series of books that takes the clam as its totem animal, and even manages to make metaphorical hay with it, has got to be on to something.

"Do Clams Bite?," the second Peter Leroy novella in a series of seven that is collected in these pages, perhaps best captures Eric Kraft's eccentric inspiration. Focusing on a Long Island lad of the 1950s named Peter Leroy, it is an account of the young Peter's uneasy relationship with his imposing paternal grandparents.

There are some droll moments in the attic chamber of a great-grandmother who carves portrait busts of her favorite Leroy forebears out of coconut shells. But the heart of the story is an evocative account of Peter's spasms of biological anxiety when he goes clamming with his crusty granddad, and watches appalled as the old geezer pops each new bivalve into the front of his skimpy bathing suit. "Soon his bathing suit would fill up with clams, bulging enormously," Peter recalls. "I knew that I was expected to do as he did, but even thinking of dropping a clam into the front of my bathing suit brought a stab of pain between my legs.... I was sure that clams must bite and that they were likely to snap me in there."

The first seven Peter Leroy novellas were originally published as a series of slim paperbacks, from 1982 to 1984, a self-styled "serial novel." The modesty of the format seemed to suit these stories about life in Babington, N.Y., on Bolotomy Bay, "the Clam Capital of America," which diverted us with anecdotes and sly parodies so that the artistry would have a chance to sneak in. Corraling this entire inexhaustible saga into a single volume and adding two new novellas, "Little Follies" draws its name from Marcel Proust's observation that "We are all obliged, if we are to make reality endurable, to nurse a few little follies in ourselves." It's good to have Peter back in print again, taking a shot at the wide readership he deserved from the beginning. But this edition has Important American Fiction written all over it, and I'm not sure that's a good thing. Will the books seem as magical to readers who don't get to find out for themselves that there's more to this stuff than just having a good time?

The characteristic Peter Leroy tone is accommodating, conversational; it's the voice of a smart man with a wry sense of fun patiently explaining something pretty complicated to a group of friends. (A lot of the best stuff pops up in parenthetical asides.) "Little Follies" reads like footloose light fiction, but the complexity of its fabric, and the precision of its effects, are the hallmarks of an artist who has made a serious commitment. In many places, particularly in his passages on sex, Kraft suggests that commitment and a light heart aren't necessarily polar opposites, that they can be glorious collaborators.

Kraft is playing three-dimensional chess with narrative structure in "Little Follies." Most fiction written in the first person adheres to the convention that the

narrator, even if unreliable, is telling us the truth as he sees it. Eric Kraft gives us a fictional character who writes fiction based on his own life; but in reshaping his real life, Peter Leroy explains, some fiction was required. The river journey described in "Life on the Bolotomy" was considered — but never undertaken; Peter's grandfather wasn't actually a Studebaker salesman; and so on. In the preface to one story, Peter tells us that he had to ask his wife to stand in for one of his characters, so that he could interview this figment of his imagination about a sexy plot development he had planned for her. (It's a perfect Kraftian twist that Peter and his wife get turned on by the role-playing.)

These are complex books that yield straightforward pleasure. Each novella centers upon some telling incident or high adventure: It can be minor, as the time Peter's mother tipped out of her lawn chair ("My Mother Takes a Tumble"), or as ambitious (from a 10-year-old perspective) as an expedition to find the source of the far-from-mighty local river ("Life on the Bolotomy"), with a stopover at the watery cul-de-sac known as Andy Whitley's Gall Bladder. But as Peter himself observes, the plots are "only the trellises on which each book grew ... the vines that grew on these

trellises were much, much more interesting." A lot of the fun of "Little Follies" is in the vines, the inventive incidentals: maps of Babington and of clam-laden Bolotomy Bay; fully worked-up magazine stories and advertisements, from apocryphal publications such as Impractical Craftsman; a whole children's book, "The Fox and the Clam," that comes complete with illustrations.

Peter Leroy and his world are still Eric Kraft's one and only subject as a fiction writer: His two recent "conventional" comic novels, "Herb 'n' Lorna" (1988) and "Reservations Recommended" (1990), unfold in the Leroy universe, and his next, "Where Do You Stop?," due from Crown this fall, will be a full-length Peter Leroy tale.

Reading and rereading these books really is like

exploring a familiar locale that seems to exhibit some startling new feature every time we return to it. As each new chapter is added, the frame of reference expands, a new vantage point is supplied, and the design, not only of the whole but of each chapter, looks richer than ever.

Of course, we could compile a long list of everyday items mysteriously non-existent in the Peter Leroy universe, from pop-culture staples such as TV and comic books to such major issues of the 1950s as the atom bomb. "Little Follies" does not have much truck with what are sometimes called "the harsh realities of modern life." It generates its own, more benign reality, and it's profoundly funny. Although it's doled out in short segments, the evolving landscape of this saga, this masterpiece of American humor, feels vast.

Eric Kraft should be able to keep on writing about it as long as he can hold a pen. "He has made a world," as Evelyn Waugh said of P.G. Wodehouse, "for us to live in and delight in."

— DAVID CHUTE

David Chute is a free-lance writer living in Los Angeles.

