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BURRELLE'S**SHORT TAKES****Eric Kraft
cooks up
another treat**6505
BY TIMOTHY HUNTER

Eric Kraft continues his delightful and brainy series of novels about the engaging denizens of the fictional Long Island clamming town of Babblington in his new book, **What a Piece of Work I Am** (Crown, \$22).

Peter Leroy, the inventive and ever-optimistic protagonist of Kraft's "Where Do You Stop?" and "Little Follies," makes a return appearance, though his role is ostensibly limited to listening to his wonderfully realized but completely imaginary first love, Ariane Lodkochnikov, as she tells beguiling tales about her life.

Many of her experiences have curious parallels in classic mythology.

Lodkochnikov goes from serving chowder at a clam bar to working as a waitress and maid at Babblington's new Sunrise Cove Resort Motel. Like her near-namesake from Greek mythology, Ariadne, she, too, finds her dashing Theseus. He takes the form of the motel's handsome manager, Guy.

In another episode, she helps out Leroy's grandfather and his terminally ill wife. The trio takes a make-believe journey to a tropical paradise, though the trip often resembles a ride down the river Styx.

**Kraft**

Lodkochnikov later becomes a kind of performance artist who attracts a devoted following. She eventually embarks on a far-ranging odyssey of self-discovery, only to be followed by some of her more harpylike fans.

Lodkochnikov's voice is as fetching as can be, by turns tough and wistful. Like Mythology, her vibrant stories show human beings at their worst, their best and their most fragile. And they yield more than a few bits of wisdom.

Above all, Kraft's new novel celebrates the joy of storytelling while gently probing the psyches of those who feel the need to create the stories.