

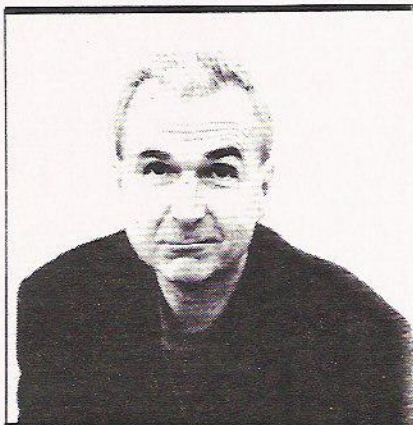
7/10/94

# BOOKS

By Roger Harris

## Reality and fantasy mesh in novelist's work

**WHAT A PIECE OF WORK I AM (A Confabulation)**  
by Eric Kraft. Crown. \$22



Eric Kraft, whose new novel is about life in a small Long Island town during the 1950s

The Peter Leroy stories and novels of Eric Kraft are among the most ingenious works of recent fiction. They are this fine writer's way of using fiction to deal with that age-old dilemma of art, the links between illusion and reality. In his new novel, Kraft has gone further down this road than before. Reading it is something like watching a play within a play—a very good play within a play that may be better than the larger play itself.

"What a Piece of Work I Am" is very good, more complex and ambitious than anything Kraft has attempted yet. It is a book that succeeds at two levels. It explores the delicate boundary between life and make believe. Yet it is also a straightforward tale of a woman trying to break away from the trap that society and her own inertia has set for her. It is a story of the past, set largely during the 1950s. At the same time, because of the writer's innovative techniques, it is quite modern, in the same vein that such writers as Philip Roth and Martin Amis have used to place a filter on reality.

The Peter Leroy stories and novels are tangentially related to the characters in "Herb 'n' Lorna," perhaps Kraft's best-known novel, but have a different history. They began as radio scripts and became, in time, short stories. More recently, Kraft has subtly enhanced them into full novels, without in any way losing their charm or altering his technique. The fact that this book is subtitled "(A Confabulation)" should be enough to alert us that something different is going on.

We begin with Peter Leroy, a resident of Long Island where, not surprisingly, Kraft also resides. Leroy is the narrator of this book, but we learn nothing at all about his present life in this volume, although there are sketchy descriptions in other books. All Peter speaks about are the friends of his childhood. Except they are not really friends of his childhood, they are fictional people whom this fictional character has made up. Sometimes, in this work of imagination, Kraft will take us a step further and the fictional character's fictional characters will invent fictional characters of her own. This may sound unnecessarily complex but, trust me—the whole thing hangs together beautifully.

We begin with Peter's confessional that he lied to his great-grandmother when he was growing up. He had no best friend and, desperately wanting one, he invented a buddy. His best friend was named Rod, short for Rodney, he told his great-grandmother, who, understandably, wanted to know Rod's last name.

"I was ready for this," Peter tells us. "I had a last name for him. It had been given to me, gratis, one day in the schoolyard. I had witnessed the taunting of a sullen, dark-haired girl by a group of other, livelier girls. Over and over they repeated, in sing-song voices, something that may have been 'Koochie-koochie-koochie-koo. Would she take it off for you?' The lively girls laughed. The sullen girl stared at the ground and turned and walked away. As she passed a line of boys leaning against the schoolyard fence, they took up the chant, too. I had no idea what all of this might have been about. I was seven, and the actors in the little drama might have been 13. On the way home, however, I found myself repeating the chant, as well as I remembered it. The distortions of memory and repetition twisted it into something like 'Koochie Koochikoff,' and, eventually, in the days that followed, into what I used for Rodney's last name."

"'Lodkochnikov,' I said."

So, Rod Lodkochnikov was born—and, promptly, disappeared. This is the only reference to Rod in the novel. The book is actually about Ariane Lodkochnikov, who is the older sister of the imagi-

nary Rod. The tense switches to the present as Ariane invites Peter over to explain her life and why she is leaving Babbington, the fictional Long Island community in which almost all Kraft's books are set.

In her lengthy narrative, Ariane Lodkochnikov tells us how she became known as "Tootsie Koochikoff"—again reflecting Peter's childhood reverie. Ariane, or Tootsie, was, in the morality of the 1950s, known as the town slut. She was, by her own admission, a loose woman. But she found a way to become something else, she converted her sexual immorality into art. It is a very funny story as Peter tells it, with the humor enhanced by one final unexpected trick by the author.

After spending some time as a waitress and a chambermaid, and being abused by various men, Ariane finds a new dodge. She moves into a house with her boyfriend and, quite literally, sells tickets. It is the ultimate in public performance, life as art, with all acts of living—including the sexual ones—on display.

Kraft's techniques are sly indeed. He satirizes artistic pretentiousness, while, at the same time, obviously enjoying what he satirizes. The delicate line between art and truth has never been more entertainingly explored.