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A review of Where Do You Stop? by Eric Kraft



It may seem strange that, in a book where so much is tied together in ways that have to do with physics, a contrary motion coming from the same source is also possible. The key to the book is discontinuity. It is a frequent word in the text and it is also a fact of many situations.

Reviewed by Bob Williams

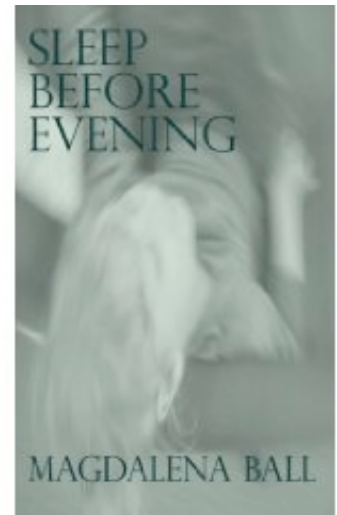
Where Do You Stop?

By Eric Kraft

Hardcover: 181 pages ; Dimensions (in inches): 0.75 x 9.25 x 5.25 Publisher: Crown Pub; (September 1992) ISBN: 0517585448

The epigraphs, of which there are many, are largely scientific, even the quotation from Musil has a scientific cast. All of them appear to be genuine and not made up for the occasion.

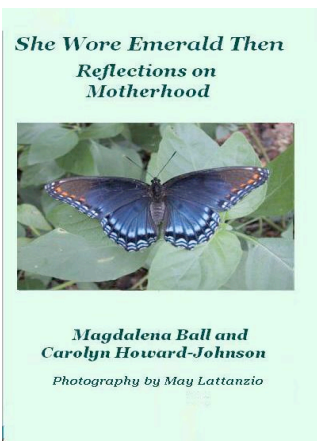
We have left Boston and the darkness of Reservations Recommended, but we have regressed in time. This is Babbington and we will contemplate Peter's experiences at the Purlieu Street School where he was in seventh grade. He is eleven since he skipped third grade and the year is 1956. The preface is from the Small's Hotel and Peter exercises his memory of 1956 in the company of Albertine's parents, Anna and Martin Gaudet. (Peter writes that he was ten but this is slightly misleading. If it has taken Peter thirty-five years to fulfill his seventh grade assignment and if 1991 - the date of the preface - is the date that marks the thirty-fifth year, that would fix the date at 1956 and in 1956 Peter, born in 1945, was eleven or almost eleven. Peter himself wavers when he writes about the question that is the title of the book. "if it



Poll

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- Everything! Without readers authors are nothing.
- Authors should meet reader expectations.
- Readers have the right to guide characterisation.
- For nonfiction, trust and authenticity at least.
- For fiction, authors can do what they want.
- Historical and factual



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
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seems like a simple question to you, try thinking about it with a ten- or eleven-year-old brain.";))

It is appropriate here to notice a characteristic of Kraft. He is prolific with characters, many of whom - like Albertine's parents - decorate a scene and then are heard no more. Lesser writers get vague about details like this but the solidity of any fictional work depends on specifics. Kraft therefore creates real persons at every turn in his fiction. Some have no names but have vivid titles (the Neat Graffitiist from Reservations Recommended) and some although described vividly (the elegant couple at Two-Two-Two in Reservations Recommended) have no names only because the introduction of names would be impossibly cumbersome. There is a similar specificity about places. Such devices make a novel navigable and lift it out of the commonplace.

Towards the end of the preface Peter invites the reader to regard the novel as a combination of three novellas and he even gives us names of the parts for our further consideration. It is clear from this that this novel has a greater kinship with Little Follies than with either Herb 'n' Lorna or Reservations Recommended.

The Purlieu Street School is a new school erected to accommodate an influx of students. This need for a new school always catches the community by surprise since in the days before computers made such forecasts easy "people had to rely on pencils, paper, mechanical adding machines, and brains." The school year has not begun and Peter is small enough - ten here is his correct age - to hide in a locker from the night watchman. Before the opening of the Purlieu Street School students had attended sessions on a split-time basis with some going to school in the morning and some in the afternoon. This gave Peter the opportunity to watch television programs, especially "Fantastic Contraptions," a giveaway show for inventors hosted by Fred Lucas and Florence Hill. These have some resemblance to Fibber Magee and Molly but the identification is not conclusive. Peter describes the program in detail while we wait in vain for his explanation about his hiding at night in a school locker.

- accuracy in fact & nonfict
- Nothing either way! Authors should have autonomy.
- Authors' imaginations belong to authors only!
- Other (please email comments)

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Peter wants Guppa (Herb Piper) to compete on "Fantastic Contraptions" since Guppa is an inventor of note and gifted mechanic. Peter has ample opportunity to badger his grandfather. The contractor that built the Leroy home left a mound of debris at the back of the lot. It is an overgrown mound that the Leroy's describe to themselves at last as a hill. It is here that Ella Leroy decides to plant a bamboo grove for fishing poles. As a business venture this is a failure since there is no demand for bamboo fishing poles but the grove flourishes and encroaches on the back yard at a frightening rate. Guppa wants to use the back yard as a garden where - ever grandiose - he will plant wheat. Bert Leroy gives his permission on the condition that Guppa will keep the yard free of bamboo. In this labor he spends much of his time and when he does Peter is there to promote "Fantastic Contraptions." This convoluted story is like something out of Tristram Shandy. Peter launches into the praise of junk. "The ready availability of intriguing materials is, I think, a spur to creation more often than the arrogance of artists allows us to admit." Bert and Guppa come into their share of praise; they never throw anything away and they will readily acquire the trash of others. A particular item in this case proves to be a motor once used to make the turntable of a record player revolve. Peter is thankful that the motor has been divorced from its original function since otherwise he might have been tempted to make it work as it once did. Through experimentation he determines that he has the makings of a revolving light suitable for a lighthouse. He determines with the most diplomacy that he can muster to get his father's permission to build a lighthouse.

And this is the reason - at last - for Peter in the school locker. To build their tower he and his friend Raskol have salvaged scrap from various building sites but there is no site more choice than that of the unfinished Purlieu Street School. Their time within the unfinished school itself consists of intense exploration and one occasion gives Peter the opportunity to explore further a metaphor mentioned in the preface.

"On one of our nighttime visits, we discovered that the entry hall had been

laid with terrazzo, the flooring material most like life. To make a terrazzo floor, chips of marble are scattered in a soup of cement, like notable moments scattered through a life, and then, when the conglomerate hardens, the surface is polished so that the bright chips show to good advantage, glinting against the monotonous ground as notable moments do in memory."

On this same occasion Raskol analyses Peter with an interesting insight: "Hey, I know how your mind works," he claimed. "One little thing gets you going, and you're off on a train of thought that makes lots of stops. Any little station that comes along - you're liable to get off and take the next train that comes through. No telling where you'll wind up. You've got a strange mind."

Of some practical value to boys of their age they discover the combinations of all the lockers. Raskol also sees how easy it would be to manipulate all the locks so that the combinations would not work. Raskol also acquaints Peter with the word "spline," a word that Peter adds to his collection.

Familiarity with the school plant does not help Peter on the opening day of school. He and his fellows have somewhere crossed the border into adolescence and, when he looks to his parents as models for the new behavior demanded of him, he is uneasy. They don't seem adequate for the purpose. The presence of other races emphasizes that he is ignorant of his own community. Where have these people been? Subjects have been renamed. Arithmetic is now mathematics. Peter perceives mathematics as "a tightly wound spring, straining, powerful, dangerous." They are suddenly mobile as they abandon one classroom for another for instruction in different subjects. Peter invokes Mark Dorset, his friend, and his sociological analysis of the different personalities of the wanderer and the homebody. In the new school a new personality, that of wanderers, is being forced upon them. Peter illustrates this with three images of Chinese Checker boards which represent students in separate classes, all the students in the hall between classes and a mixture of students in their second class where, Peter points out, "they are commingled,

confounded, and confused." The science teacher entrances Peter. She is young and astonishingly beautiful. As a teacher she is hopeless. Kraft describes Effie (Reservations Recommended) in a way that would fit Miss Rheingold: "Effie may have been a terrible teacher by every objective measure, too full of pep for her own good, so eager to give what she knew that it spilled out of her as if through a burst dike, making her seem disorganized, confused, and ill prepared before a class." Peter's teacher fires questions at the class and doesn't pause for answers. This confuses the students, as it must also have confused Kraft since Spike's given name in "The Girl With the White Muff" (Little Follies) is Lily but here it is Rose. Miss Rheingold outlines the criteria for a science paper and then poses six questions. These are distributed among the students in randomly drawn slips of paper. There are four copies of each question so that each question attaches to itself a team of inquirers. Peter draws the question "Where do you stop?"

Peter discusses school with his father. It is not thrilling. Bert has a very narrow idea of life and he and Peter seem always to miss each other's meanings by a very wide margin. Peter's agile mind disturbs him and he reacts instinctively with authoritarian gestures that forestall communication and alienate his son.

Despite Bert's instructions to the contrary Peter gives his question serious and immediate attention. He abandons the tower temporarily and he visits the school library at night. Most of the books are still stacked about in random order. Peter as congenial browser finds this congenial. "The gain from categorizing is order, but the loss is surprise."

He begins to perceive that "Where do you stop?" poses a question of a different order than any that he has faced before.

"Miss Rheingold wanted me to find an answer that wasn't obvious, that might not even exist. In the past, I had only been asked to find answers that were already highlighted for me. The feeling that there were too many questions and that I had to find answers where there might not even be any was new and unsettling, but it was only a foretaste of a feeling that

would return again and again, as a feature of adult life."

Peter describes a science project (involving among other things a garden hose with the nozzle cut off) designed to illustrate the properties of discontinuity, a feature of Miss Rheingold's approach to teaching. Peter expects that she will take up the matter of the Questions but instead she shows a movie. Its star is Quanto the Minimum, described as "sarcastic and even a bit nasty." This would be enough to make him cousin to the Amazing Randy the Unbreakable Record of "The Fox and the Clam" (Little Follies). Quanto urges that everything is mostly nothing and in one segment of the movie, which is as discontinuous in style as Miss Rheingold's teaching, there is a spectacular display in the form of mousetraps and ping-pong balls designed to represent the bombardment of uranium 235. The point of the display eludes the students but there is no doubt about the effect on them of the mousetraps and the ping-pong balls. To Miss Rheingold's dismay all the questions concern the details of the demonstration. The extent of student ignorance is summed up in one student's question: "Can we use regular mousetraps, or do we have to get that model 235 they were using there in the movie?"

Peter stays to ask her a question but he dares not bring up the question of mousetraps, his original intention. Instead he asks about the Question. She is pleased to find that he has tried to research this and gives him a ponderous book to read. It is so far beyond his capacity that he feels a rare sympathy for his father and his father's discomfort whenever Bert finds an idea too much for his comprehension. To show the effect the book had on him, Peter quotes a passage with all the terms, much of the text, that he did not understand transliterated into Greek characters.

In terms of author types, there are writers that tell you more than you need to know (most mainstream fiction); writers that tell you what you need to know when you need to know it; and writers that tell their characters what they need to know and have little room in their equation for the reader. James Joyce is a very pure

example of the last type but Kraft straddles the second and the third classes. We hear the names Marvin and Patti in Chapter 7 but it is not until Chapter 13 that we learn that Patti's last name is Fiorenza and that Marvin's last name is Jones and that he is black. It is these two and Matthew Barber that constitute with Peter Leroy the Where do you stop? group. Nicky Furman, one of the overgrown thugs in the class, joins them and is too determined and possibly too dangerous to be refused. The group has met to make a start and this they do. Patti defuses Nicky's hostility to Matthew and works up the idea that if Nicky had "as he wished to do" punched Matthew, the question could be expressed in terms of where, given the emptiness of everything, Nicky's fist left off and Matthew's face began.

Matthew is not pleased with the direction that the group has taken. The question obsesses him perhaps more than it does Peter. He has decided that the feasible solution is the broadest possible one, one that involves "Peter's identification" epistemology and "Marvin's identification" ontology. Matthew suggests that they work on the question together. Peter asks about Patti and Nicky. Matthew dismisses them; they can do the cover of the report. Peter recognizes in Marvin another word-intoxicated youngster and is certain that they will be friends.

The advantage of the novel about the very young, the Bildungsroman, is that it provides ample excuse for dwelling on items and ideas that would be very uncomfortable in any other setting. The very young, like unhappy families, are always dissimilar in their own way. It is no strain therefore to dwell on the marvels of Peter's bike, a Shackelton Superba, or on the six ages of children and adolescents, ages determined on the freedom they enjoy to wander from home. This freedom depends on machines - bikes first and then a car. Peter even gives us a graph to display the relative ranges involved and accompanies it with pseudo-sociological tongue-in-cheek pomposity.

Peter visits Marvin. He notes the differences of the black neighborhood and of Marvin's home, run by the mother, born in New Orleans and open in manner. Mr.

Jones, a smaller, quieter person, has his own characteristics. He has chickens but these are special birds, they are homing chickens, a fad peculiar to Babbington. When Marvin and Mr. Jones take Peter to see the birds, Peter sees that each coop has as decoration a fantastic metal tree with metal ornaments. She calls them windflowers. In these he perceives the necessary touch of glamour to succeed on "Fantastic Contraptions."

Peter takes us on a selective tour of his home. He shows Bert as a barbecue fanatic and Ella as a woman of many "usually unsuccessful" enterprises. It is these that prompted additions to the home. One small room is described as a bedroom but it has no bed and no one ever sleeps in it. It is so-called to evade zoning restrictions regarding commercial activity. It is in this room that Ella works on her enterprises and stores her products. One of her enterprises "Ella's Lunch Launch" will appear in a later book, *Inflating a Dog*. Bert is not really pleased that Peter has been to Scrub Oaks and the way in which his mind travels over the subject is rewarding to inspect in detail. Peter has mentioned the absence of sidewalks.

"Yeah," he said. "Well.
That's the way they like it."

I was young, it's true, and I was ignorant, too, but I wasn't stupid, and this explanation was so obviously stupid that it opened the widest crack in the myth of my father's good sense. He had been chipping away at this myth for some time now, but only with tiny hammers that didn't do much more than surface damage, crazing and nicking it. Now he seemed to have taken up something heavier, a real sledgehammer, determined to finish off the job.

"It is?" I asked.

"Yes, Peter," he said. "If they didn't like it that way, they'd change it, wouldn't

they?"

"I guess," I said, because I was still a long way from the time when I would dare to tell him exactly what I thought."

While they sample beer and lemonade in various proportions to find the best recipe for shandy, Peter and Porky discuss Peter's parents. Porky tries to explain, using carpentry as a metaphor. They cut their boards, he says, by the length of the last board that they cut instead of measuring each one individually. Peter sums it up brilliantly, with a brilliance - possibly shandy-induced - that surprises him: "They're a couple of boards too far down the line."

Peter, who has to be so circumspect around his father, decides that he must approach Guppa with the same obliqueness to effect the collaboration of Guppa and Mrs. Jones. But in the event the idea bursts from him in one breathless statement - like Lucky's speech in *Waiting for Godot* - and Guppa, overwhelmed, agrees.

He calls on Mrs. Jones and Peter notes with wonder the difference in Guppa's manner. Then he realizes that he is seeing his grandfather in action as a salesman. Mrs. Jones is already disposed to accept Guppa's offer of collaboration since she has long wanted to make larger windflowers. The lawn watering system that Guppa has invented needs a name and Mrs. Jones is as ready with one - waterwillows - as if all that she needed was for Guppa to appear.

Raskol has convinced Peter that he can work on the tower and think about the Question at the same time, that in fact the answer might very well occur spontaneously while he is occupied with the tower. He, Raskol and Marvin throw themselves into the project. It takes them two weeks but only two days of actual construction. The greater time is spent clearing bamboo from the top of the hill. The last day of building is rushed and

even before they leave for the day they perceive that the tower leans and tilts. It collapses while Peter eats dinner.

Bert wants Peter to explain why he has cut the nozzle off the garden hose and Peter does his usual verbal tap dance to confuse him, easily accomplished on this occasion because Bert now notices the waterwillows in his back yard and finds their presence totally confounding.

Where Do You Stop? has thirty-seven chapters for its relatively short length. The far longer Reservations Recommended has only seven chapters. It would appear on the one hand that the greater number of chapters in Where Do You Stop? relates to the difference in registering consciousness, that of adolescent Peter requiring constant refocusing in contrast with the adult Matthew Barber. On the other hand the next Kraft novel - What a Piece of Work I Am - has seventy-two chapters so it would be an error to make of the distinction an inflexible rule.

The Lodkochnikov family has a television set, one of the last families to capitulate to television's alleged attractions. But Mr. Lodkochnikov finds television disappointing. Paradoxically this results in his purchase of set after set, each one technically better than the one before. Peter surmises: "[h]e was trying to buy a set that didn't exist: one that got better programs." Peter begins to watch television in the afternoon with Ariane, Raskol's sexy sister. She draws Peter like a magnet.

A different magnet but of the same sensual power is Miss Rheingold. The textbook explains how frogs jump but she hands out to her class a sixty-four page mimeograph copy of the mathematical basis of quantum theory. She has variable success. Bill, who asked the very ignorant question earlier about the mousetraps, seems actually to have a good grasp of the theoretical material that Miss Rheingold presents about the uncertainty principle of Heisenberg. It is interesting - and is it a deliberate device on Kraft's part? - to ponder that at the time of this scene comic books had sixty-four pages.

Peter's parents give him an encyclopedia and he expresses the wonder and delight of wandering through volumes that promise not just something but everything. "[A]t the moment when the encyclopedia arrived I realized that everything was exactly what I wanted to know. Years later, when I began to write books myself, I knew - and this is the first time I've said it - that I really wanted to write a book about everything."

The Question assumes a definitive form as, informed by random bits of encyclopedia and closeness to Ariane, he determines that there is no place where we can be said to stop. The molecules that carry our scent are all pervasive and beings can be said to mingle by the exchange of these. Peter struggles to bring this idea to paper with the same vitality in it as when it first occurred to him but he finds it impossible. It becomes a moot point when Miss Rheingold announces that she has resigned. She has agreed not to explain to her class but, the school needs to go into split sessions again because of increase in the student population, and the school board uses this as a tool to re-establish segregation.

The schedule change at school will prevent Peter from joining Ariane at her home in the afternoons and he is grumpy when he visits Porky at the clam bar. They talk about business and Peter is able to give Porky good advice deliberately for once instead of by accident. Ariane appears. She is to be Porky's new - his first and for a time his only - waitress.

"Fantastic Contraptions" accepts Guppa and Mrs. Jones as contestants. Peter wants a celebration, so sure is he of their victory. Bert doesn't want to open his home to black guests and he refuses. This is a blow for Peter, a blow of incalculable effect. Peter hides on the stairs and hopes that his father will change his mind. He thinks that Bert has been looking him in the eye but actually Bert has been looking at himself in a mirror and not liking what he sees. He changes before our eyes and to such a degree that he frightens Ella. He explains himself in terms that exist in Peter's mind and even in Porky's so that the change has a surrealistic effect on the reader. But there is no doubt in Peter's mind when his

father decides to accept the Joneses.
"[M]y father had changed our future. I wasn't going to have to hold that earlier moment against him for the rest of our lives. I wasn't going to have to hate him."

Guppa and Mrs. Jones win the contest. The only serious competitor - doomed because serious - is a man with an early version of the electronic microscope. The other competition - a woman with an automatic dog bath - is more comic and more to be worried about but Guppa and Mrs. Jones with their naturalness, not to say naiveté, sweep all before them.

This incident closed - and the novel is now a series of progressively closed incidents - Marvin, Peter and Raskol begin rebuilding the tower. Rebuilt successfully it becomes the site of an ingenious game in which the patient player has the advantage. And patience depends on a mind ready to accept reality in small bits and extreme degrees of magnification. "When you look at yourself - or anything" that closely, you are looking at tiny bits, each of which yields only a tinier bit of information. You absorb it, consider it, and move on to the next tiny bit . . . You are an explorer of the minuscule, and the picture you begin to form is busy and bumpy, not at all the smooth and regular impression you got from a greater distance, or at a lower magnification."

And the last chapter involves the game and so much else as Peter takes the idea that he had discovered in Ariane's company and this time keeps its vitality as he traces the photons of Raskol's flashlight on his laughing face out into space where the likeness of it will last as long as the universe.

It may seem strange that, in a book where so much is tied together in ways that have to do with physics, a contrary motion coming from the same source is also possible. The key to the book is discontinuity. It is a frequent word in the text and it is also a fact of many situations. Bert's reversal regarding his allowing the Joneses into his home is one example of many. The tendency towards the close of the book is singular. Nothing is resolved but situations are closed. In its way it is a more impressive work that *Reservations Recommended* which follows the deterioration of a character already on the edge of dissolution. In the

subtlety of its plan *Where Do You Stop?* is more interesting than *Herb 'n Lorna*, a book so straightforward even in its departures from chronological time. There is every appearance here that Kraft is governed by a determination never to repeat himself.

For more information, visit:

[Where Do You Stop?: The Personal...](#)

About the Reviewer: Bob Williams is retired and lives in a small town with his wife, dogs and a cat. He has been collecting books all his life, and has done freelance writing, mostly on classical music. His principal interests are James Joyce, Jane Austen and Homer. His writings, two books and a number of short articles on Joyce, can be accessed at:

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