



MICHAEL Z. JODY

There are mysterious and magical forces at work in the universe. The world is filled with the unknown, the barely known, and the freshly discovered. At least according to Peter Leroy, the oddly precocious 11-year-old protagonist of Eric Kraft's delightful fourth novel.

From the in-depth examination of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, to the inner workings of the drive mechanism of a windup record player, or the perfect proportions for a beer and lemonade shandy, the young Peter leads us on a merry investigation and exploration of his (and our) world, and, in the process, invests it with a great deal of warmth and humor and charm.

Like its predecessor, "Little Follies," the novel to which it is a sequel, "Where Do You Stop?" is set in Peter's hometown of Babbington, Long Island, "clam capital of America," sometime after World War II.

The Big Questions

It is a world of early television giveaway shows like "Fantastic Contraptions," where amateur inventors demonstrate their peculiar inventions. It is the world of Studebakers, kids building wooden towers in their backyards, and movies for general science class called "Quanto the Minimum" featuring "a tiny cartoon character, Quanto the Minimum himself, who explored the constitution of matter as it was then understood."

Peter, both as adult narrator of the novel from the perspective of 25 or 30 years after the action, and as the young innocent whose experiences

are being chronicled, also does a good bit of exploring the constitution of matter as well as questions of ontology, epistemology, and language.

He is interested in the big questions like: Where does the light go when the light goes out? When is now? What is the biggest question of them all? And, the eponymous question: Where do you stop?

These questions are all posed to the young Peter by his sexy science teacher, Miss Rheingold, but, decades later, he is still pondering, and seeking answers for them and other, like conundrums.

Cumulative Error

"Where do you stop?" is a deceptively simple question (and novel), which leads Peter and the lucky read-

Eric Kraft

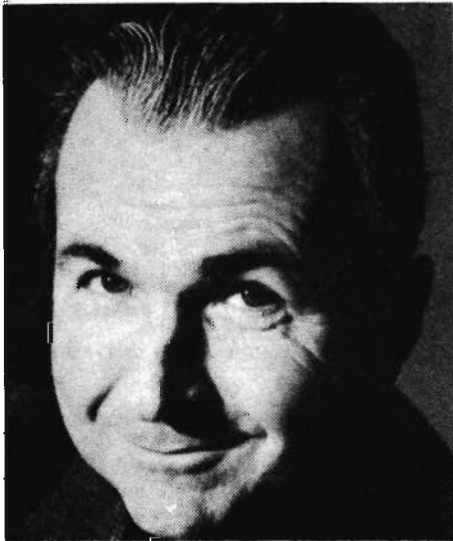
"Where Do You Stop?
The Personal History,
Adventures, Experiences,
and Observations of
Peter Leroy (Continued)"
Crown Publishers

\$15

er down all sorts of twisty and scenic paths. We learn, for example, about *Zwischenraum*, the space between things, splines, and, my own favorite, cumulative error, as explained by the famed restaurateur Porky White to young Peter.

ARTS & LETTERS

"Say you're going to build a doghouse. . . . You're going to need a whole bunch of boards for the sides, and of course they all have to be the same length. . . . You measure the first board with a ruler, mark it, and cut it. . . . Then, instead of using the ruler for the next board, just lay the first one on it and mark the length. . . . What happens when you mark the second board is that the pencil mark is going to be a little off. . . . Anyway you go on to the third board, and instead of using the ruler, you lay the sec-



Eric Kraft

Kristine Larsen

ond board down on it, mark it, and cut it, and then you go on marking and cutting the boards like that, each time measuring with the last board you cut, and then when you've got all the lumber cut . . . nothing fits. The way you measured them, the boards all came out different lengths. You don't have a doghouse, all you've got is a pile of scrap."

This then is cumulative error. And, according to Porky, most people "get their ideas and what they think are facts from the last board down the line. It might be the jerk next door; it might be one of those preachers who are always whining and shouting on the radio; it might be one of those lit-

tle booklets that hasn't got anybody's name on it." And they never go back to the ruler.

Drawings And Diagrams

As with "Little Follies," this novel overflows with wonderful drawings and diagrams and illustrations of various kinds. It is as if Mr. Kraft has too much going on in his brain to be constrained to merely using words.

He loves to show us how things work as well as new ways of looking at the world. There is a drawing of a science experiment, an "apparatus to demonstrate the power of discontinuity" (it blows up); and another of the inner works of a record player.

To show us how learning to ride a bike expanded Peter's horizons, we are offered a diagram of concentric rings which "show the roughly algorithmic expansion of a person's range with age, beginning with the newborn's barred crib" (a tiny dot); then a small circle to show the range of an infant crawling on hands and knees; a somewhat larger one for a toddler; then a kid on foot; a kid on a bike (too big to show on the page); kid with car, and up.

"Much too large to show on this scale, of course, are the limits of an adult with a credit card (the globe), of human beings (the orbit of the moon, so far), human artifacts (just beyond the solar system, so far), and human produced radiation (let's say a million light years, counting the radiating photons from the first campfire of *Homo erectus*)."

Unquestioning Eyes

But the novel is more than mere whimsy. In "Huckleberry Finn" we are forced to observe unfiltered, through the naive and unquestioning eyes of Huck, Southern racism and the basic injustices of slavery.

In "Where Do You Stop," young Peter serves a similar function, allowing us to see the de facto segregation inherent in the split sessions of his school (the black kids go to school in the morning and white kids in the afternoon), and the kind of thinking "hobbled by" fears which result in the

racial disharmony we continue to experience in this country today.

Mr. Kraft is a splendid, smart, funny, slyly sexy, and insightful writer. Though I must admit that I liked "Little Follies" more, his writing here brims with sensuality — "the aroma of smoke, the taste of Scotch, the brush of silk, a saxophone's moan" — and Mr. Kraft continues to be a pleasure to read.

—

Eric Kraft is a year-round resident of East Hampton.

Michael Z. Jody, who teaches creative writing and literature at Southampton College, is at work on his third novel.