

Novelist recalls a vanished age of innocence

WHERE DO YOU STOP? The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of PETER LEROY (continued)
by Eric Kraft. Crown. \$15

The wonderful Peter Leroy novels of Eric Kraft are about an older man recollecting a happy childhood in suburbia. If that sounds like the Norman Rockwell type of sentimentality, it isn't. This is the other type of childhood reminiscence, the funny kind inspired by James Thurber's "My Life and Hard Times." Leroy's childhood may have been wonderful but it was certainly wacky.

So are most of the novels of Eric Kraft, wacky with a grain of common sense at the core. The list of Kraft's fiction prior to "Where Do You Stop?" includes the novels "Herb n' Lorna" (Peter Leroy's grandfather and grandmother), "Reservations Recommended" (probably the only and certainly the best novel about today's restaurant and serious food craze) and "Little Follies," which takes some explanation.

Kraft wrote a series of novellas about a Long Island man named Peter Leroy who reminisced about his boyhood during the 1950s in the fictional town of Babington, ("ciam capital of the world"). There were eight Peter Leroy books, all published by a small Massachusetts publishing firm during the 1980s. The stories quickly went out of print but were, nevertheless, pursued avidly by the growing number of Kraft admirers. Earlier this year, they were collected, along with a ninth novella, in a single volume, "Little Follies."

Now, Kraft has provided us with yet another Leroy book, this one considerably longer, a short (181 pages) but, nevertheless, full-length novel, or, as narrator Leroy admits in his "preface," three linked shorter works that make up a single work. It is as good as anything Kraft has written, which is very good indeed, and should delight the Leroy fans while introducing him to a wider audience.

What is the charm of Peter Leroy—Eric Kraft? It is difficult to characterize and easier to simply let it shine. It comes from looking at things from every possible vantage point, from seeing humor in situations that any lesser mortal would deem routine or even dull. Take the strange case in "Where Do You Stop?" of the splines.

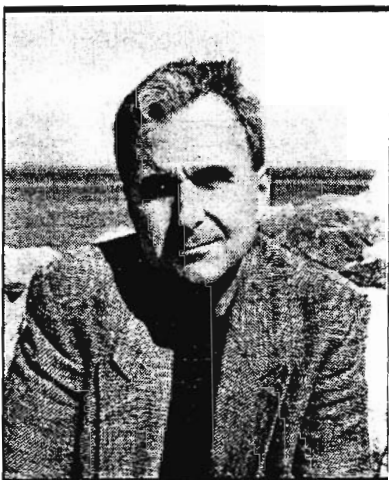
What are splines? You may well ask. It is not what splines are but what they aren't. The 11-year-old Peter and his friend Raskol are examining the combination locks to the lockers in the school they attend. Raskol shows him a cap with numbers on it that he says "fits onto this shaft and over the splines." This causes Peter to reflect, years later:

"Splines. What a nice word. This was my first encounter with it. It appealed to me at once. It seemed inherently poetic, sensual. In fact, it sounded so good that I could imagine lots of use for it, none of which was related to combination locks. Splines could be soft, round benign creatures, handy to writers as emblems of hope and calm. 'When the storm abated at last, Cynthia and I emerged from the cave where we'd sought shelter. A preternatural calm had settled over the sea, and the splines had come out to sun themselves on the rocks.' Just as easily, they could be the sort of rich comforting food that grandmothers specialized in: 'Jimmy! Time to get up now, you hear? Grandma has fixed you your favorite—hot splines with butter and honey.' My ignorance of the true nature of the splines must have shown since Raskol went on to deliver an explanation.

"See these little slots inside the cap?" he said. "They slide onto these ridges on the shaft. Those are the splines. They make the cap turn the shaft instead of just turning on it.

"Ah, splines. What a good idea. What a nice word. The idea of a splined shaft appealed to me almost as much as the word. As a device, it demonstrated economy of design. As a concept, it suggested security. Spline still sounds wonderful to me."

Cross purposes and misunderstandings make up a good deal of the humor in the Peter Leroy stories. At another point, Peter visits the parents of a friend and



Eric Kraft, whose new novel continues the boyhood experiences of Peter Leroy and his circle of friends

finds the friend's mother cooking a New Orleans fish soup. He asks for a taste and pronounces it excellent and the New Orleans woman nods appreciatively and describes her handiwork as "bonne soup." Peter misunderstands her, however, and thinks she said "bun soup." For some time, he wonders to himself how a soup made out of buns can taste so good.

As for the plot, there is not much of one. The title comes from the theme for a science paper assigned by Peter's teacher. A group is assembled to explore the implications of the question and their efforts to resolve it, as one might expect, carry them far afield. Beyond that, there is a good deal about watching early television, when one watched TV not to see the program but simply for the sake of watching.

There is a Tom Sawyer-like incident in which Peter and Raskol break into the school in connection with their scientific experiments and hide from a night watchman. Then, there is Ariane, the older sister of a friend, whose seductive hip mesmerizes the boy. There is an effort to get Peter's grandfather and the cooker of "bun soup" on a TV show called "Fantastic Contraptions." Kraft not only recalls a vanished age but invests it with greater excitement than those of us who lived through this period realized at the time.