

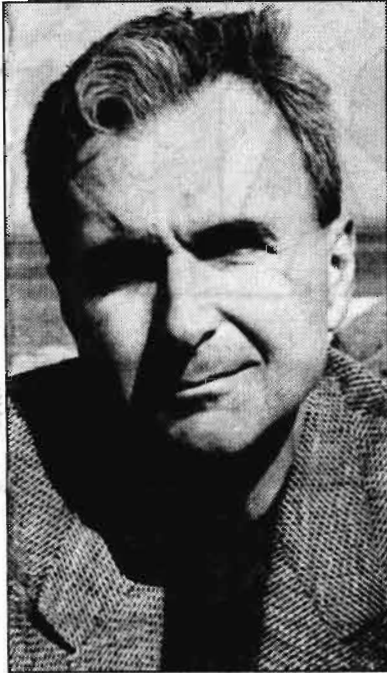
# Colliding With Manhood and Math

**WHERE DO YOU STOP? The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy (continued),** by Eric Kraft. Crown, 181 pp., \$15.

By Douglas Century

**F**ROM 1982 to 1985 Eric Kraft published a series of eight comic, interrelated novellas, purportedly the memoirs of a middle-aged writer named Peter Leroy, who from a room in an old hotel reminisces obsessively about his boyhood spent in the town of Babbington, Long Island. Anthologized by Crown earlier this year under the title "Little Follies: The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy (so far)," these novellas — loosely connected episodes in one large, unfinished narrative — offer a wry variation on Proust (from whom the phrase "little follies" is borrowed), as well as a frequently poignant slice of postwar Americana, universal in many of its themes while still firmly rooted in the distinct and idiosyncratic milieu of the fictitious Babbington, a town referred to by Kraft throughout the novellas as "the clam capital of America."

Kraft's latest installment in the Peter Leroy series, the just-published "Where Do You Stop?," picks up with an 11-year-old Peter on the verge of entering junior high school, just beginning to become aware of, though not fully comprehending, his adolescent sexuality. The madeleine that sets the adult Peter off on this particular reverie is the memory of his seventh-grade science teacher's legs: "To Miss Rheingold, the legs she crossed may have been merely legs, but in the moment of her crossing them they filled the room like the dazzling burst from a flashbulb." The recollection of Miss Rheingold's talismanic legs is the springboard from which Peter Leroy the writer attempts to complete, some 30



Eric Kraft

Medaline Kraft

years later, the science project he was never able to finish for Miss Rheingold's class, to answer the "nearly imponderable question" that lends this volume its title: "Where *are* the edges of things? Where in space-time, for instance, does one phase of your life end and another begin? Where do you mark the end of a belief? Where do you mark the onset of an idea, a discovery?"

The quest to answer the question "where do you stop?" leads Kraft's alter ego down a number of cleverly interwoven subplots involving Peter's first encounter with the black residents of Babbington, his obsession that his amateur inventor grandfather enter a competition on a 1950s television novelty show and his friendship with a budding entrepreneur named Porky White who would go on to become the legendary owner of the nationwide empire of "Kap'n Klam's Family Restaurants."

Along the way, Kraft employs the clever trope of casting all of Peter's adventures within the framework of a seventh grader's grappling with concepts of quantum physics clearly beyond his ability to comprehend, replete with mock experiments and parodic diagrams of the how-things-work variety. Miss Rheingold's elementary explanation of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, baffling as it is to the seventh graders, causes Peter to call into question all the things in his young life that he has considered beyond question.

Kraft is at his most inspired depicting Peter's confused amorous feelings both for the stunning Miss Rheingold and for Ariane, the 17-year-old sister of Peter's best friend, Ras-kol. He deftly captures that stage in a young boy's life when just being alone in the presence of an attractive girl, watching the afternoon movie on TV, can become a moment of ineffable wonder. The greatest thrill Peter takes away from his

hours spent plumbing the mysteries of physics is the realization that during his afternoons lying on the sofa next to Ariane their "essences" may have been, on a molecular level at least, commingling ("something of her entering me, something of me entering her").

Kraft is a sure-handed novelist, seamlessly drawing together the numerous strands of his narrative by book's end. He turns the subplot involving Peter's first encounter with one of his black classmates to powerful effect; Peter refuses to swallow his father's explanation that the residents of the black section of Babbington live without paved sidewalks because they prefer it that way.

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