

Review

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Kaleidoscopic View of an American Boyhood

WHERE DO YOU STOP?

The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy
(Continued)

By Eric Kraft
Crown; 181 pages; \$15

REVIEWED BY
MICHAEL UPCHURCH

On one level, Eric Kraft's new novel is about a seventh-grade science experiment that winds up taking 35 years to complete.

On another, "Where Do You Stop?" is an enchanting comic meditation on the quirkiness of memory and the joys of daydreaming. And at its most ambitious, it's nothing less than an attempt to comprehend the nature of the universe itself — all thanks to Miss Rheingold, a glamorous junior high school teacher who can hardly contain her excitement over the mathematical foundations of quantum theory.

Since 1962, Kraft has been working on what he has called

"one large piece of fiction with many moving parts interconnected in intricate ways," all of them narrated by one Peter Leroy as he fondly recalls his 1950s boyhood in Babbington, on Long Island, "the clam capital of America."

Peter's history, adventures, experiences and observations first appeared in novella-length chapbooks in the early 1980s and were collected in "Little Follies" earlier this year.

Working on a Proustian scale (Kraft's novels "Herb 'n' Lorna" and "Reservations Recommended" are spinoffs from the Peter Leroy series) and spicing his all-American vernacular with a natty erudition, Kraft dazzles, entertains and can move you to tears even while you're chuckling.

"Where Do You Stop?" is the latest installment of the Peter Leroy saga, and it's a treat. Peter, at 46, is prompted by a newspaper article on a Babbington resident's "homemade scanning tunneling microscope" to plunge into recol-

lection of his 11-year-old self, for whom new worlds of sex, knowledge and social awareness were opening up. They all appear to be combined in the figure of Miss Rheingold, who throws her general-science class into a tizzy.

She's the first person Peter ever met who "loved complexity" and her class marks the point when he is first asked to think for himself. The thrillingly informal way she sits on her desk and crosses and uncrosses her legs is also a revelation.

Miss Rheingold isn't the only surprise of the seventh grade. There are also, for the first time, black students in his class who come from a part of Babbington he never knew existed. One of them, Marvin, shares Peter's love of words such as "epistemology" and "ontology" and has a mother who with her handy way with scrap metal is a perfect match for Peter's grandfather, whose specialty is offbeat inventions.

Outside class, things are just as lively and unsettling. The older

sister of his best friend, Raskol, has suddenly become an object of intense erotic allure. And his construction plans for a backyard lighthouse ("alerting any ships that might otherwise have blundered the five miles inland to my neighborhood") are instantly assumed by Marvin and Raskol to be a rough sketch for a watchtower, thus revealing the way a shift in perception can change the nature of the object being perceived.

This seeming miscellany of youthful memories is given tension and structure by a fuguelike verbal patterning (as in Marvin and Peter's serendipitously shared vocabulary) and some zanily farfetched coincidences. A sobering vein emerges in the book's gradual revelation of the racism in Peter's family and hometown.

The book's philosophy is best summed up in Peter's approach to building his lighthouse/watchtower: "I didn't hit the nail heads squarely very often, but when I did I was rewarded with the solid sound of competence. I found

that I could hear that sound and get the satisfaction that came with it more often if I used a lighter touch, and I've applied that principle to all forms of work throughout my later life."

Marvelously written, "Where Do You Stop?" is also peppered with odd illustrations revealing why changing class at school is like a game of Chinese checkers, what selective memory has in common with peas and mashed potatoes, and much, much more.

All these high jinks are in aid of such profound unanswerables as Miss Rheingold's doozie: "Where do you stop?" (Three-and-a-half decades after being asked the question, the 46-year-old Peter finally comes up with an answer.)

Droll, provocative and filled with memorable characters, "Where Do You Stop?" confirms Kraft as one of our most engaging and adventurous writers. ■

Michael Upchurch's novels include 'Air' and 'The Flame Forest.'