

Peter Does His Homework

WHERE DO YOU STOP?
The Personal History, Adventures,
Experiences & Observations
Of Peter Leroy (continued)

By Eric Kraft
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By Thomas Mallon

PETER LEROY, the Eisenhower-era boy hero of Eric Kraft's *Little Folies*, is back in a new novel that, like Kraft's other recent ones, takes its form from a nonfiction genre. *Herb 'n' Lorna* (1988) appeared to be a biography, and *Reservations Recommended* (1990) advanced its action, in part, through restaurant reviews. Now, *Where Do You Stop?* comes to us in the guise of a junior-high-school report that's been overdue for 35 years.

The muse of this effort is Peter's science teacher, Miss Rheingold, whose name surely has less to do with opera than beer, specif-

ically the half-dozen maidens who long ago competed for the promotional title, garnering votes stuffed into delicatessen ballot boxes by Long Island boys like Peter. But at the Pur-lieu Street School, Peter's Miss Rheingold, for all the gorgeousness of her legs, is chiefly important as a teacher of disorganized inspiration who sets Peter's group the task of answering the physical and philosophical question, "Where do you stop?"

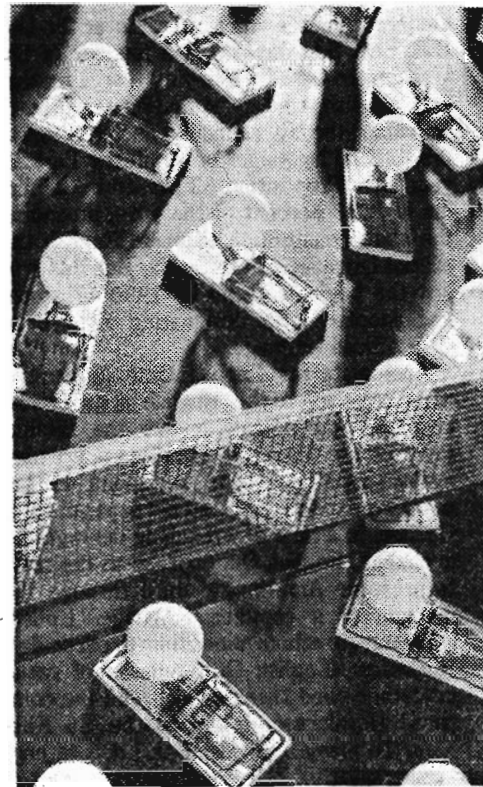
Before long Peter will come to understand that nothing stops finally or precisely, including Miss Rheingold, who in effect travels home with her students; on the first day of school, molecules of her perfume cling to Peter's shirt, "to be shaken loose that night, when I undressed for bed . . ." Nothing remains unlinked to something else: The marble chips in the school's terrazzo floor aren't so different from the students walking over them to change classes—a new experience which leaves Peter thinking that "Crisp lines separate one subject from another." But before *Where Do You Stop?* stops (sort of), his "cross-referential rambles through the encyclopedia" will teach him the opposite. Lan-

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Like any good science report, *Where Do You Stop?* comes with diagrams, a couple of which will be too cute for some readers; mostly, however, they are charming. Kraft is fond of little over-the-top occurrences, peculiar bits that may add to his theme of interrelatedness or may be just the sort of "apparently useless parts" that Flo and Freddie like on their winning contraptions. It is, for example, not terribly believable that Marvin Jones's father quotes Dr. Johnson, or that Peter's old school bus driver, Porky White, becomes "the man behind the Kap'n Klam Family Restaurants that dot—some say blot—America from sea to sea, bringing the esculent mollusk within reach of one and all." There are those readers who like their fiction inviolably realistic, as reliable as the older laws of physics, but to others—the ones mindful of Heisenberg and Einstein—these off-the-chart happenings will be the proper admixture of magic in Kraft's realism,



FROM THE BOOK JACKET

the shiny bits of marble in his terrazzo tile.

Early in the novel Peter worries about "Things left undone—how they haunt us," but by its end he has fulfilled his long-deferred obligation to Miss Rheingold. He reasons that some of the photons shined upon his face long ago, from his friend Raskol's flashlight, must have reflected outward. "Therefore, some trace of their pattern, the image of my face, has been preserved and will be preserved as long as any of them are still racing outward undisturbed, undeflected, and so, perhaps, in that one sense, there is no end of me, I do not stop." Thus is the book "Respectfully submitted, Miss Rheingold, wherever you are," though, as befits a novel that is itself a sequel and concerned with sequences, this gentle, and curiously hopeful, tale actually ends with the words "(TO BE CONTINUED)." Whether the promised follow-up comes or not, Kraft can take pride in having done the work recommended by one of the modern novel's great continuers, E. M. Forster, in the epigraph to *Howards End*: "Only connect . . ."

guage itself is one of Peter's chief associative pleasures. The chain of his new vocabulary is a kind of licorice twist he keeps turning around on his tongue as the book progresses: "Windflowers, court bouillon. Zwischenraum, shandy, ontology, epistemology, bills of lading, splines."

Kraft's introduction of physics and psychological association into the world of 1950s suburbia makes *Where Do You Stop?* read like a charming tribute to Pynchon and Joyce that's being carried on Nick at Nite. Its plot takes life in the manner of that famous demonstration of nuclear fission carried out by ping pong balls and mousetraps: In the novel one thing prompts another until all the balls are giddily in the air at once. Marvin Jones, a member of Peter's study group, is the first black friend he makes. A trip to Marvin's house in the Scrub Oaks neighborhood leads to a collaboration between Marvin's mother and Peter's grandfather, Guppa; they combine his invention of a watering machine with Mrs. Jones's "windflowers" into a gadget that earns them an appearance on Freddie and Flo's "Fantastic Contraptions" TV show. Their interracial success creates for Peter the watershed experience of hearing some ugly remarks—and their remarkable retraction—from his father. —Continued on page 8