

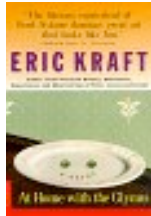


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A review of At Home With the Glynnys by Eric Kraft



At Home with the Glynnys is a funny book with a witty ending. Its air of naturalness is refreshing. Kraft always tempers for Peter a bleak life with worried and watchful parents of limited understanding and sympathy by giving him mentors of warmth and wisdom - Porky White, Eliza Foote and Rosetta Glynn.

by **Bob Williams**

At Home with the Glynnys

by Eric Kraft

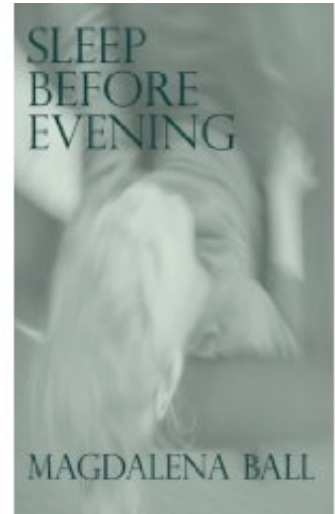
Paperback: 179 pages

Picador USA; Reprint edition (May 1996), ISBN: 031214279X

Of the first eight books by Kraft, four of them (Little Follies, Where Do You Stop?, What a Piece of Work I Am and At Home with the Glynnys) give Kraft credit as designer. This is appropriate in an author who has integrated illustrations into his text to the extent that he has. Some (as in What a Piece of Work I Am) are utilitarian but most of the illustrations are comic inventions. They are as abundantly present in other works for which Kraft receives no credit as designer.

This is a shorter novel than its predecessor. It is about the same length as Where Do You Stop? but divided into slightly more chapters, forty-three instead of thirty-seven. It has an ample quantity of epigraphs beginning with one that disparages epigraphs. Except for the first and the last epigraphs, the common theme is a celebration of the primacy of imagination. The last epigraph discusses the paradoxical nature of time travel and the multiplication of an abstract young woman named Sonia as a result of her stepping into a time machine tomorrow to return to today.

The preface continues the more reflective side of Peter Leroy's character. He tells

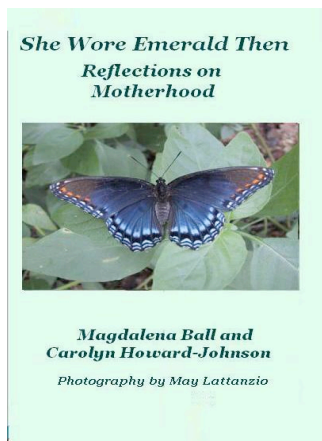


- [Alan I. Casden](#)

Poll

What do authors owe readers?

- Everything! Without readers authors are nothing.
- Authors should meet reader expectations.
- Readers have the right to guide characterisation.
- For nonfiction, trust and authenticity at least.
- For fiction, authors can do what they want.
- Historical and factual accuracy in fict & nonfict
- Nothing either way! Authors should have autonomy.
- Authors' imaginations belong to authors only!



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us that some of the facts in the story to follow are not facts - that the Glynn twins, for example, were not actually twins, something that he has already mentioned in the preface of "Do Clams Bite?" (Little Follies). More importantly it contains a statement of purpose: "My art is made of recollection, and revision, and wishful thinking."

Peter first asks us to consider peas. The popular brand in 1957, the year of this story, was Troubled Titan, an alternative universe version of the Jolly Green Giant brand. The twins, with a purpose of their own, want Peter to manipulate peas with both hands in any variety of ways that they call for. Peter substitutes marbles but the twins bring him back to their way of thinking and insist on peas.

In the midst of these activities they call on Peter to escort them to the movie since their father will not allow them to go by themselves. Of the movies named and those which run through Peter's mind "six movies in all" only two are real and neither are likely to be shown at the Babbington Theater in 1957. One of them (Intruder in the Dust) was a little known 1949 movie based on a novel by Faulkner and the other (Dust) was a 1916 silent movie.

The story has digressions, one of the biggest concerns the Glynn parents. He is a painter and she is a poet. The Babbingtonians impose on them the stereotypical image of impractical dreamers and make them the subject of their gossip. Although this is gentle gossip by small town standards, it conveys the community's feelings of superiority. The effect of this on Peter is an admiration for the Glynn's even before he meets them since what Babbingtonians disparage is sufficient reason for him to like it.

Recollections of the Nevsky mansion's burning clears up one point left unclear in "Do Clams Bite?" (Little Follies). Buster took the photographs of the nude May Castle. Present along with Ella at the fire but standing apart from her are Gumma and Guppa. They have strange smiles and Ella wonders why. We of course know since we know (from Herb 'n' Lorna) that they associate fires with successful sexual encounters with each other.

The factual newspaper accounts that Peter reads much later astonishes him since there was no one great fire but a series of small ones over a period of several days. The facts were not part of

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the popular lore about the fire and Peter concludes that the Babbingtonians, like Peter himself, told stories about the fire in order to talk about themselves - the fire was the focus, not the point.

The indirect route that Kraft takes has its own fascination. His generosity to digressions even has its own offspring, the defense of digressions. After describing the history of the Nevsky mansion, he has these interesting asides - this is chapter thirteen in its entirety:

"An aside on the subject of the compulsion to tell a story. When, as a small child, I couldn't get to sleep at night, my mother, after she tired of reading to me or just talking with me in the dark, used to tell me, "Make up a story for yourself." Latterly I find that the child's solution has become the adult's problem, and I now have to figure out how to stop making up stories so that I can get to sleep.

"Another aside, on shells as a concept. I promised myself that I would resist the temptation to elaborate the parallels between the mansion's shell and the shell of a clam, but I find that I have to say, at least, "Hey, look: the mansion's shell, sheltering and protecting the fragile hope that the future would hold an interesting life, would bring more stories, is very like the clam's shell, sheltering and protecting the clam itself, which has always seemed to me to be a creature very much like hope: soft, vulnerable, chewy, tasty."

Peter approaches the father of his girl friends, a formidable task for any young man. Andy Glynn turns him down when it comes to taking his daughters to the theater but it is not hopeless. Peter amuses him and he invites him to come the next day so that he can get to know him. Peter arrives on Saturday and meets Rosetta, the mother. She drinks slivovitz and tells Peter how Andy had to flee from the fascists who marked him for death because of his caricatures. She emphasizes that laughter is the human characteristic. It follows, of course, that those who cannot laugh are not human. In Kraft's unflagging interest in the question of identity we discover that Andy and Rosetta were born with different names. They became Andy and Rosetta when they escaped from their native land, when they crossed the border.

Andy is that rare being where others are concerned, especially unfledged others like Peter. He is honest, caring and

understanding. Peter becomes his student and he explains the basics but Peter, when he has the opportunity to ask a question, wants to know what happened to Andy and Rosetta when they crossed the border. He is, in other words and as we would expect, interested more in the story than in the fact of them.

The mechanics of exile as it then existed took them to Ireland and, after a short stay, to the United States. Rosetta, caught in a self-destructive web of self, finally achieves release in a silly, but believable, contest sponsored by Troubled Titan. She writes her entry, an angst-ridden cry of despair, in the grocery store itself. The grocer reads it and tells her that she doesn't have a chance. But she figures out what will win and shares the secret with Peter. It is, she says, "[t]he shock of the new cushioned by the familiar, wrapped in hope." Peter participates under her tutelage in contests.

Peter spends about a year visiting the Glynn's regularly. During this time he listens closely to Rosetta's sometimes unfocused meditations. He finds that they are analogous to photography - a simile that he used in "The Girl with the White Muff" (Little Follies) "in that they often do not develop clearly until after a long interval. He has served a satisfactory apprenticeship and is at last allowed to escort Margot and Martha to the movies. And at the movies the girls pull Peter out of the line - to his dismay since he has almost reached the box-office - and take him to the Fine Arts Theater where a foreign film - L'Amour, La Guerre, La Poussière is showing. This title translates as Love, War, Dust thus adding another "dust title" movie to the films mentioned earlier. The principals of this film, frightening to the three children, are Rocky, Lulu and Lola. The parallelism between the hero and two heroines is a double of Peter and his two companions. The name Rocky is significant. It is the name of Larry Peters' sidekick in the adventure stories that star Larry Peters. He is first mentioned in "Call Me Larry" (Little Follies) and will play a great role later in Leaving Small's Hotel.

The movie is not much, based as it is on stereotypical situations, but it has an erotic undercurrent that differs greatly from the bland movies that Peter is used to and he has an almost constant erection through the steamy conclusion of the movie. On the way home the girls, their imaginations fired by the movie, reenact its situations. In the course of this Peter is

the beneficiary of passionate kisses from both girls. He ends up in their bed between them and instructed, after his hands have been correctly placed between their thighs, to remember what he had learned from the manipulation of peas.

After a very happy night, he leaves their room by a rope ladder and joins the family for breakfast. Andy and Rosetta both ask him about the movie. They had seen a movie that they should not have seen and Peter is at a loss for a minute but he recovers and describes the movie that they had seen but as if it were a western. It impresses Andy and Rosetta who had always underrated the genre.

The routine of art theater movies and Peter's insertion of himself into the roles of the heroes makes him consider the motives for this and this results in a highly significant consideration:

"I'm grateful to my younger self for that understanding [that the assumption of parts was a temporary manifestation without permanent effect]. I sometimes turn to it as evidence of my sanity, since the boy who understood it has become a man who slips in and out of the lives of the people he encounters as easily as he slips in and out of his favorite old black wool jacket, the one that Albertine keeps offering to discard. I find everyone irresistible in this respect: I want to live everyone's life for a moment of mine, provided that I can put it back on the rack when I've decided that it isn't what I want to wear forever. That includes your life, Reader. I want to poke around in your house, eat your food, sleep in your bed, weed your garden, repeat your anecdotes to your friends over dinner, and after dinner, sitting in your favorite chair, snug in your favorite jacket, pick up one of my books and read it as you would. I'm grateful to my younger self for pointing out to me that this is not an illness, but a game, the harmless pastime of a literary chameleon."

But he decides - after the girls show him the secret of Andy's paintings, that they are abstracts only in the small details that become individual paintings; collectively the entire painting is a large figure painting based on his daughters - that he is not any of the dashing heroes of the movies. He is Jack of Jack and the Beanstalk, a small boy stealing from a giant, a giant who is the father of twin daughters Margot and Martha. This discovery is important to him and

emphasizes the practical value of literature. Literature provides a script in emergencies. His reaction to discovery will be to scamper down the beanstalk - the rope ladder that he uses to enter and leave the girls' bedroom - as fast as he can.

Andy confides in Peter. He has lost his direction as a painter and has taken on students in an effort to see through their work what he has missed. He finds that it is a problem of perception and that his students draw the imagination of things rather than their essence. Andy has begun a series of drawings to recover these essences but his drawings are based on the perceptions of his students. And the students have begun to provide shoddy work. As their work deteriorates they become discouraged and drop out of Andy's classes. As bait Andy brings in the twins, first to dispense tea but later to pose. The students are importunate and Andy concludes that to keep them the girls will be posing nude. To avoid this and to placate - and to keep - his students, Andy asks Peter to take the students' drawings, copy them with slight improvements that will fool the students into thinking that their drawings are better than they remembered. As an aside Andy observes that the drawings that the students make of the girls seem to the students inferior because they seem caught on drawing someone else.

After some false starts Peter sets to work successfully as a sketch doctor. This process of creating a superior image from a botched original is the concept underlying Kraft's own work and digressively (but characteristically) Peter begins to search out the submerged - someone else - that has been erupting into the students' drawings.

What Peter is doing is a secret but the girls get it out of him in the first week. In the interval of play-acting on the way home from the latest film at the Fine Arts Theater where they have seen another dusty movie, *Love and War in Dusty Rome*, Margot and Martha become the circus acrobats Angela and Angelina and subject Peter to an interrogation. He yields up the secret easily. That he attaches such importance to his work for Andy bothers them, especially since he is too busy to be their bedfellow. Peter spends more and more time searching for the "someone else" in the students' work. He arrives at a tentative sketch that looks superficially like the figure in the illustration to "Call Me Larry" (Little

Follies).

After what sounds like an Ingmar Bergman film (Frozen Dust) - too depressing for Peter and the twins to make any make believe use of it - Peter scants his sketch doctoring and goes after the image of the unknown woman that the students are drawing against their will. The following week the trio quarrels and Peter seeks for his mystery woman. He detects in her pose a reaction to the coldness of the studio, with which step we have crossed into that area where Ariane Lodkochnikov (What a Piece of Work I Am) is not real but suffers a terrible death and comes back to life or Eliza Foote ("The Static of the Sphere" Little Follies) is an imaginary figure whose feelings must be respected as if she were a real person.

There is a fiery glow in the sky. Peter awakens the family and tells them that the Nevsky mansion is burning. They huddle into clothing and go outside to watch. It is not the mansion but some building in the downtown district, further off. It is the Fine Arts Theater. Margot, Martha and Peter reach the theater in time to read the name of the movie on the marquee, We Walk a Dusty Road. The trio resembles that of Buster, Bert and Ella at the burning of the Nevsky mansion and even the same questions are asked. Even Mr. Locke, now retired from his position of principal but still a philanderer, is at the scene. Andy and Rosetta stop at the Poop Deck for a drink and Peter and the twins return to the Carriage House where the Glynnys live.

At home Peter goes into the studio. He folds his drawing of the girl and puts it into his coat. But for the benefit of the twins who are waiting for him outside the studio door, he tears up a sheet of paper. They congratulate him on abandoning a childish imagination but he is happily conscious that he has only concealed it for his future use. He dozes in their bed between them. Andy and Rosetta return and tell the girls goodnight through the door. Peter, confused and feeling perfectly at home, responds without thinking. Realizing what he has done he quickly enacts the role of Jack before the giant can burst through the door after him and Peter escapes down the rope ladder, his beanstalk.

At Home with the Glynnys is a funny book with a witty ending. Its air of naturalness is refreshing. Kraft always tempers for Peter a bleak life with worried and watchful parents of limited understanding and sympathy by giving him mentors of

warmth and wisdom - Porky White, Eliza Foote and Rosetta Glynn. The latter is a magnificent figure, vague, allusive but always honest. As all right-thinking adults should, she treats the young the same as she treats everybody else.

The novel is dense with commentary on the creative life, rich with its metaphors both for the life and the facts of creativity. The unobtrusive running joke of dusty movies is not just a prank; it is a serious observation on the possibility of bringing forth something from nothing, not the only treatment of this theme. Andy, looking for the archetypal image, and, Peter searching for the mysterious woman, also embody it.

For more information visit: [At Home with the Glynn's](#)

About the Reviewer: Bob Williams is retired and lives in a small town with his wife, dogs and a cat. He has been collecting books all his life, and has done freelance writing, mostly on classical music. His principal interests are James Joyce, Jane Austen and Homer. His writings, two books and a number of short articles on Joyce, can be accessed at: <http://fracman.home.mchsi.com/>

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