

# Amazing journey on an aerocycle

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## Flying

By Eric Kraft

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Reviewed by Christine Ma

We all know someone like Peter Leroy. Perhaps he is an elderly grandfather who tends to wander as he relates a story from childhood for the millionth time. Or maybe she is that girl from high school who often told tales of herself you weren't sure you should believe.

That is what comes to mind when following Peter's accounts of his adventures as the Birdboy of Babbington, a teenager who builds a vehicle - "a hybrid machine, part plane, part bike, the aerocycle of my daydreams, my ride to the Land of Enchantment" - and flies from his Long Island hometown of Babbington to Corosso, N.M., and back.

Peter is Eric Kraft's main character in *Flying*, a trilogy that combines his previously released *Taking Off* and *On the Wing* with the final part of the work, *Flying Home*. In the final part, it's now almost five decades after his original flight, and Peter finds that he must set the record straight with his hometown after officials begin to redefine it as "Babbington™, Gateway to the Past®," formerly the "Clam Capital of America." The town chose the day Peter flew home to be reenacted over and over again. Think of the movie *Groundhog Day*, but more absurd.

The thing is, Peter did make the cross-country trip as a teen on his aerocycle. However, "I would say now . . . that I flew a total of about 180 to 200 feet on the way out to New Mexico. My longest sustained period of flight might have covered six feet. . . . On the way back, I flew 1,800 miles, but I was a passenger in a Lockheed Constellation." Peter's memoir is his disclosure of the truth. As he reads his work to his wife, Albertine, they re-create the trip to New Mexico - this time in a car, the Electro-Flyer - and bump into their own adventures along the way.

Peter likes to tell stories and hear his own voice. Some of what he has to say will leave readers wondering which characters and events are "real" and which are invented. He admits being not completely truthful, or as he calls it, "honest overall but vague in the details." He's also fond of digressions, some of which seem extraneous. He muses on the origins of swagger, which he swears is exuded by the EMT workers he and Albertine encounter. He tells readers how West Burke, N.H., grew out of West Burke, Vt., though neither town is mentioned again throughout the book.

Such digressions bring to mind - purposely - another book full of them. In *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, by Laurence Sterne, the title character complicates his tale with a litter of seemingly irrelevant information. Kraft bases much of Peter's rhetoric on that of Sterne's Tristram. He begins the first part of his trilogy with a quote from the book: "When a man sits down to write a history . . . he will have fifty deviations from a straight line to make with this or that party as he goes along, which he can no ways avoid. He will have views and prospects to himself perpetually soliciting his eye." That suits Peter's voice to a tee. He explains that one can't sit down to write a story straight through because he will continually be distracted.

Like Tristram, Peter insists his digressions are entirely purposeful. It may seem as though they merely interrupt his tale, but trust him, everything is moving along: "In order to digress, one must first be progressing. One cannot be sidetracked unless one is first on track. . . . To digress, then, you must begin by traveling a route that will get you where you intend to go. You must have a goal and a plan for achieving it in order to depart from it."

That's the philosophy the teen Peter adopts on his journey to New Mexico. His plan is to head west, and his goal is to reach a summer institute there that he'd invented as an excuse to make the flight. His digressions occur because he is traveling without a map and because he ends up never really taking flight.

Some readers will find Peter ultimately too self-centered to beckon our sympathy. And he appears to retain some pretty juvenile habits: his constant attempts to get people to believe his fibs, for example. It's a wonder how his wife managed to last so long with him, which brings up another question: If Peter is this careless with his facts, is Albertine made up, too? What woman would put up with such an egotist (a term he spends a couple of pages on, concluding that it means "someone who is always talking about himself")?

But not liking a character is not grounds for disregarding the book. There are several laugh-out-loud events, often during his most self-centered moments. One is a speech he gives in Roswell, N.M., to a group of people who think Peter, who arrived aboard a strange contraption, is an alien:

*"If strangers should come into your midst . . . pen your hearts. Open your homes. Let the strangers in." I paused. In the hush, I could hear sniffles. Then I asked, "Would anyone out there be willing to put me up for the night?"*

More highlights occur when Peter rolls into random towns along his way, such as Olivia, a town that is a museum for a person called Olivia; Mallowdale, where a marshmallow celebration is under way; and Hopper's Knoll, whose residents have a collective false memory of living through *War of the Worlds*.

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