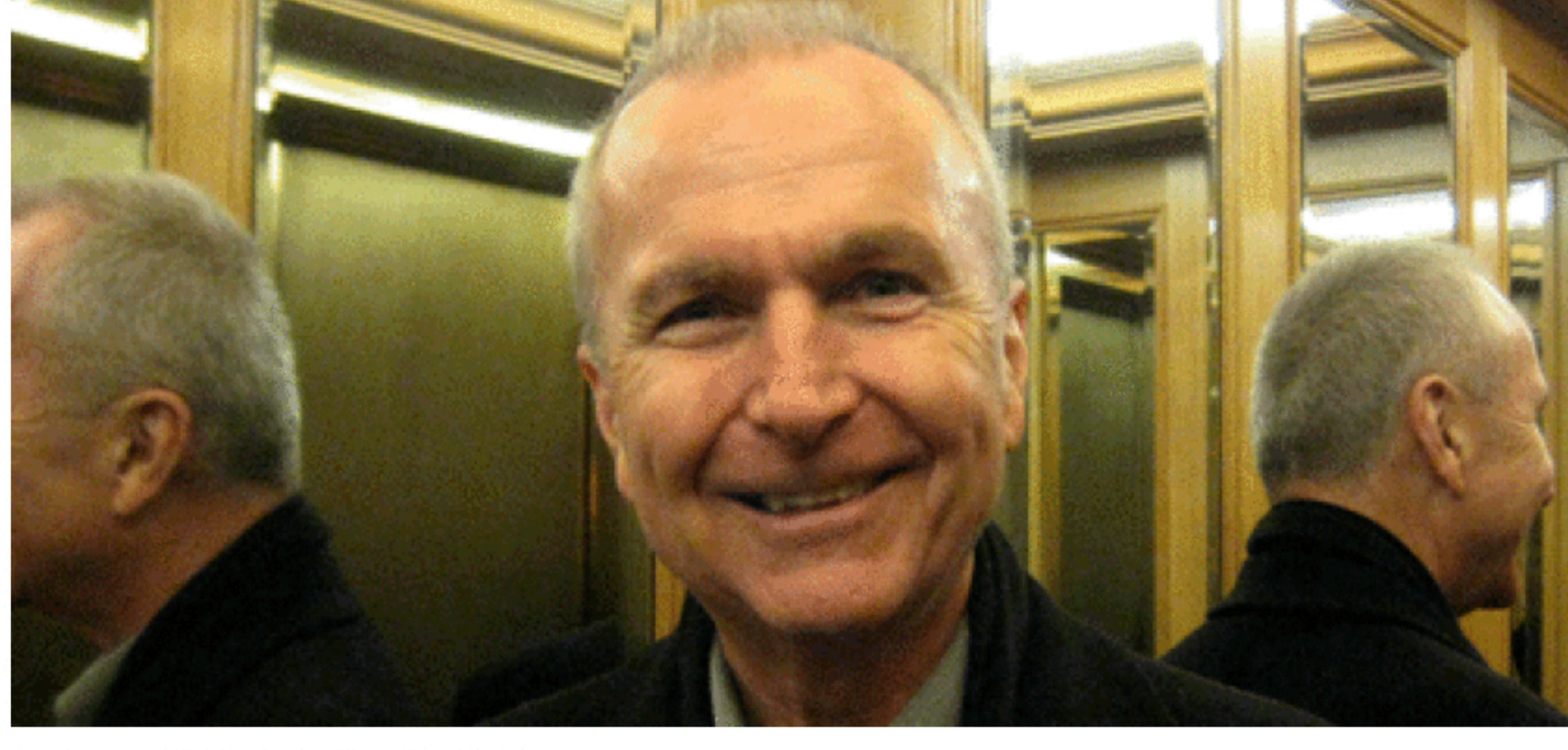




Dreams of a dreamer



Author Eric Kraft; photo: Madeline Kraft

By RICHARD RAYNER

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Eric Kraft is an oddball, an eccentric, a bit of a genius -- the writerly equivalent of a dreamer who puts together weird and wonderful contraptions in his garage. For almost 30 years, and through many books, he has been crafting “The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy,” a series of fictions framed as memoir, or maybe they’re just fictionalized memoir, bits of life seen in a dizzying metafictional mirror. Reading these books and trying to figure out where Kraft stops and Leroy begins is part of the mystery here, and part of the fun.

“The usual descriptions -- author and character, ventriloquist and dummy, left brain and right brain -- are inaccurate and inadequate,” Kraft has said, muddying the waters with typical playfulness. “He calls me Peter Leroy. I call him Eric Kraft. He thinks he invented me. I think I invented him.” Kraft puts on Leroy the way Charlie Chaplin used to don the tramp suit. Kraft plays the clown, but something essential and transformative is also at stake.

His latest book “Flying” (Picador, 592 pp., \$18) collects a new work, “Flying Home,” with the previously published “Taking Off” and “On The Wing” to complete a trilogy that examines and refracts a loony adventure from Leroy’s adolescence -- the time he built a flying motorcycle, an “aerocycle,” and used the machine for a cross-country trip from Long Island to New Mexico. The exploit led to the fame that the young Leroy craved, and thereafter he was known in his hometown as the “Birdboy of Babbington,” “the teenage hero” of “a cozy bayside community.”

In fact, an older Leroy now reveals, this celebrity grew and continued out of mistake, a fraud almost -- the sad reality being that the aerocycle never did get airborne but chugged along on the ground. “Flying” interweaves Leroy’s giddy tall-tale telling of what might or might not actually have happened (with Leroy, an unreliable narrator par excellence, we’re never quite sure) with the story of how he and his wife Albertine set out to retrace the route he took all those years ago.

For the purpose of this second trip a new car is required, or rather, demanded (by the loyal, lovely and willful Albertine), prompting a Leroy trademark, the digression. This one concerns the couple’s history with snazzy, speedy, yet somehow always malfunctioning automobiles that are like “driving inside a hi-fi speaker during a fuzz bass solo.”

“We had in those days a naïve belief that somewhere there was a reliable British sports car that we could purchase, used, for a reasonable price. Perhaps that belief seems ludicrous to you. Perhaps you cannot imagine that two intelligent young people -- which we then were -- could labor under such an absurd delusion. If you feel that way, I just want to inform you -- or remind you -- that a large segment of the population of the United States believes that the sun revolves around the earth,” he says. “As we traded in, we traded up. We would rid ourselves of one limping sports car and promptly buy another that was more powerful, more expensive, and more difficult to keep running. We always had an automobile loan, and the balance kept increasing. Little by little, we progressed from one of the most basic sports cars, a Benson-Greeley Gnome, to one of the most sophisticated, the powerful Kramler.”

It’s a hilarious passage, and a clue, perhaps, to the Kraft/Leroy relationship. The reality-based wit -- “limping sports car” -- feels like it might come from observation, from Kraft’s own life, whereas the soaring madcap verbal fantasy of that splendid “Benson-Greeley Gnome” is pure Leroy. “Flying” abounds in such dizzying moments, writing that looks easy enough but in most writers’ hands falls to Earth with a clunk and a thud.

Kraft has made his career out of high-wire performance, seizing on the merest hint or detail and spinning it into magic. “Everywhere in our path lay items awaiting salvage,” says Leroy, describing a nighttime visit to a wrecker’s yard in the hunt for motorcycle parts. “Junk, one might say, but why demean it by calling it that? What should properly be called junk, I think, is only what is useless, nothing more than trash, but what surrounded us in such looming profusion was useful stuff.”

For this writer there is no junk. Everything is grist in the mill of a transformative prose that sometimes can recall Proust or Nabokov, and at others the British humorists P.G. Wodehouse and J.B. Morton (better known as “Beachcomber”). “Extrapolating from my experience with food back at home, I guessed that this was a stew of some kind,” writes Leroy, describing a ghastly meal from his youth.

Regular visitors to the alternate realities conjured by Kraft/Leroy will recognize familiar ties and tropes: There are the usual mocked-up ads and parodies of magazine articles; there are frequent visits to dotty hotels, motels and boarding houses as well as farcical encounters with the people who inhabit them; there is a willfully rambling structure that encompasses a nostalgia for failed technologies and inventions and a satirical, albeit affectionate, concern for the dreamy craziness of ordinary America.

“Flying,” though episodic, has a pleasing coherence and sweep, and feels like Kraft’s grandest achievement since “Herb ‘n’ Lorna” (in which Leroy discovered that his grandparents had been the manufacturers of intricate, and functioning, erotic jewelry). Memory is a unifying theme -- the idea of how memory can both trap us into who we are and yet cut us free from the tugs of gravity and the quotidian.

Above all, though, “Flying” reads like a love story. The dreamy yearnings of Leroy’s adolescence are given perspective and counterpoint by the reader’s insight into the love we know he will find, and melancholy by our recognition that one day, in one way or another, this love will be lost. The idea of life without Albertine sends Leroy into a panic, and the two of them together on the page come off with the reckless panache and sparkle of Nick and Nora Charles in Dashiell Hammett’s “The Thin Man.”

Leroy: “I’ve been reflecting on my role in this adventure.”

Albertine: “Are we having an adventure?”

Leroy: “Life is an adventure.”

Albertine: “Not when I’m on line at the pharmacy.”

Rayner is the author of many books, including “The Associates” and “The Devil’s Wind: A Novel.” Paperback Writers appears monthly at latimes.com/books.

