

A RAPTUROUS VERBATIM

A BLOG THAT THINKS IT'S SIGNIFICANT, FOR A WORLD THAT THINKS IT'S CIVILIZED.

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Early Review: Flying

The long, drawn out process of catching up on the late reviews I've had to do as a member of the [LibraryThing](#) Early Reviewers group is, officially, at an end! And, if I may say so myself, what a way to clear out the backlog.

In what has clearly been a case of saving the best for last--or, more appropriately, saving the longest for last--I have finally gotten around to reading *Flying* by Eric Kraft, a lengthy tome consisting of three novellas, two of which were previously published, that tell one continuous story. The book was originally released on March 3, 2009, and by the time I received it, it was already on bookshelves, but that does not excuse my delinquency in any way.

And as you will see by the content of my review, the time I've taken getting around to it was the most regrettable part of the read, as I have found it to be one of the best contemporary fiction works I've read in quite some time. Unsurprisingly, it was recently named one of Barnes & Noble's Editors' Picks for the Best Fiction Books of 2009, and if you're a fan of this blog, I believe you will be incredibly interested in reading more about this thoroughly excellent title, and so I present my review below.

I feel it is my duty to begin this long-overdue review by extending my sincerest apologies to the author, Eric Kraft. When I received *Flying* as an Early Reviewers book many months ago, I was exiting the swamp of graduate school and simply could not motivate myself to read a nearly 600-page book. And so, despite my solemn obligations, it languished on my bookshelf for months and months. Heaven only knows what prompted me to pick it up on Monday. All I do know is that today is Friday, and the book is complete. And so I extend my apology: I'm sorry, sir, that I did not read this book sooner, because it is an unequivocally wonderful piece of literature.

The novel, which really consists of three parts (two of which were previously published novellas), tells the story of Peter Leroy, Kraft's protagonist throughout all his works. Peter narrates the story of an adventure he made as a 15-year-old, in which he built an "aerocycle" (lovingly recreated by plans found in *Impractical Craftsman* magazine) and "flew" (the term, he admits almost immediately, is very loosely used) to New Mexico on the pretense of attending a prestigious high school summer program. The program is a fabrication: really, Peter's friend Matthew got the spot because he never told Peter about the program, so Peter invented a new program and deceived the necessary parties into letting him go. As Peter retakes the trip fifty years later, his wife Albertine at his side, he reflects on the places he's seen and the things he has and hasn't done--and the reader quickly learns that deception is an integral part of the tale.

The novel succeeds as a read because it works on so many levels, not the least of which is the detail with which Kraft allows Peter to operate in both a fictional and nonfictional framework. Peter Leroy, we're quick to learn, is the quintessential unreliable narrator, and though the thrust of the book is his quest to right the wrongs that his deceptions have wrought, we see that his stories often are too good to be true--to borrow Albertine's words, they lack the ring of truth. Albertine becomes a great foil for him, a motivation and inspiration for him to try to come clean, but the act of deciphering what is true and what is "embellished" is constantly at the novel's forefront. It's a high-wire act that Kraft executes perfectly: we never feel too frustrated by Peter, and even at his most dishonest, he is nonetheless incredibly entertaining.

What makes the novel so entertaining, however, is the fact that it is legitimately funny, perhaps one of the only novels I have ever read that actually made me laugh aloud. It works because, unlike most funny books, the entire function of *Flying* is not simply to make the reader laugh. Instead, the laughter comes as the targets of Kraft's satire become increasingly more absurd. At the start, we laugh at the town of Babbington's lame attempt at "redefinition," but as each town Peter visits becomes a more potent example of the commodification of processed experiences, the original target becomes less and less absurd. But, in an expert move, Kraft allows the reader to see Peter as an increasingly absurd figure, a memoirist who tells stories that few people care to hear. Yet the reader is constantly entranced, leading us to laugh a little at ourselves for becoming so involved in the joke--a joke that works on a number of levels and evolves to remain fresh.

The novel's structure, too, is pitch-perfect as well, as each part of the novel is formed in a different way. In part one, as Peter conceives his plan and builds his aerocycle, we bounce erratically back and forth between the past and the present, with much of the focus on the nostalgia factor of the young Peter's project. The second part resembles a picaresque, in which Peter in the 1950s travels by aerocycle and Peter and Albertine in the present travel by electric car over roughly the same areas, often seeing the exact same locations in each consecutive chapter. This gives the second part a far more reflective, insightful quality. In part three, we contrast Peter and Albertine's abrupt return trip with young Peter's adventures in New Mexico, as he tries to assimilate himself (with some success) into a group of like-minded individuals. In each case, Kraft is careful to draw distinct thematic connections between the past and present, all while pacing the story at an admirably comfortable pace.

But the true joy of *Flying* is in its language, rich with metaphor and beauty. Kraft's sentences are marvelous, long and flowing, reading naturally and seductively and wrapping around the reader's mind in an intoxicating way. It is appropriate that he alludes often to Proust, for the influence on Kraft's style is obvious, as is the propensity towards digression. Peter is a memoirist at all times, even when he's merely reflecting on memoirs, and the result is that there are brief moments, often of minimal consequence to the plot, of self-contained truths that are so incisive that they stick in your mind. The same goes for the more humorous passages, particular those in dialogue: Kraft proves he is as comfortable with an amusing back and forth as he is with a thoroughly ridiculous and long speech. Kraft has many, many tricks up his sleeve, and he knows not only how to use them, but where to use them to gain their maximal effect.

The result, in case I haven't made it clear enough, is a novel that is an unbridled joy to read. It is long, sure, but it demands to be read, refuses to let your interest slip for a moment, and, despite a rather quick resolution in the end, makes you both satisfied by having taken the journey but leaving you craving more. It is, in that manner, like any good trip should be. One final note: my Early Reviewer copy was missing 16 pages near the end. I immediately went to the Internet, found the nearest library that had it in stock, and went to that library right after work to read the missing pages because I didn't want to miss a word. I was *that* hooked on *Flying*--and I suspect you will be too.

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