

Taking off into the wild blue wonder



By **WILLIAM MCKEEN**

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Reviewed by WILLIAM MCKEEN

Peter Leroy has come unstuck in time. Apologies to Kurt Vonnegut for borrowing the famous opening line from *Slaughterhouse Five*, but Peter has a lot in common with Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut's mystical protagonist. Both of them are lost in time. Billy Pilgrim moves across the decades from his sedate family life to his domelike home on another planet to his imprisonment during World War II. The time shifts of Peter Leroy - the hero of Eric Kraft's new novel, *Taking Off* - aren't as dramatic as Billy Pilgrim's, but he does walk that tenuous high wire between now and memory.

Taking Off is a deft piece of work - a great tale of a young man with big dreams and maybe not much more. We're not sure - because Peter's not sure - what really happened and what he only imagined. But the story revolves around his teen exploit as the "Birdboy of Babbington" - Babbington being his bucolic Long Island hometown of the 1950s. He was celebrated for flying his aerocycle (half airplane, half cycle) from New York to New Mexico when he was a teenager. But did he really? What did he do and what did he only imagine?

Deep into middle age, Peter and his wife journey from his Manhattan home to Babbington, which has been turned into a theme park of a more innocent America - frozen in time around the time that Peter did (we think) his famous deed. He begins to doubt his personal history and with the prodding of Albertine, his beloved wife, he takes a sentimental journey through his past, trying to reconstruct his life.

There is no Babbington on the map, though the world Eric Kraft describes is so real, you'll be driven to pull out the Rand McNally to look for it. Peter also recreates his childhood with astonishing clarity. He finds plans for the aerocycle, for example, in a magazine called *Impractical Craftsman*. Of course, no such magazine existed, but you will believe that it did. (Kraft is also skilled as a graphic artist and he illustrates his book with mock magazine covers and advertisements.) The book takes several flights of fancy with language, memory and loving husband-and-wife banter that never even gets close to being cloying and sentimental.

There are a lot of laugh-out-loud moments, as Peter tries to figure out how to build his aerocycle from the instructions in *Impractical Craftsman*: "First, find a surplus motorcycle." He also takes a detour into the subculture of welding and discovers that there are welding groupies.

Taking Off is a wonderful book - a hilarious and masterfully told tale written with such an economy of language, it reads with the urgency of telegram. It lives at the intersection of memory and imagination - a crossroads we all face now and then.

And it won't spoil the ending to pass on this good news: *Taking Off* is the first book in Kraft's "Flying Trilogy." It's good to know there's more to come.

William McKeen is chair of the University of Florida journalism department and the author of *Highway 61*.

TAKING OFF

By Eric Kraft

