

Book Review

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Made for Each Other

HERB 'N' LORNA

A Love Story.

By Eric Kraft.

Illustrated. 310 pp. New York:

Crown Publishers. \$17.95.

By Cathleen Schine

ERIC KRAFT'S "Herb 'n' Lorna" is a historical farce, a comedy of four generations of happy errors. This very funny novel — as graceful, complicated and exhilarating as a quadrille — is an appreciation of folly, not a satire of it. This means no one will ever be assigned to read it in

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high school, but those of us who do read it will read it more than once.

Peter Leroy, the hero of Eric Kraft's previous work (an eight-volume serial novel called "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy"), learns at his grandmother's funeral that his beloved grandparents made erotic jewelry, and in fact invented "animated" erotic jewelry. When members of the Prude Pride movement and Mothers Against Sex begin to demonstrate against the American Erotic Jewelry exhibit at the Smithsonian, Peter decides to try telling his grandparents' story himself, rather than leave it to the tabloids. The premise of "Herb 'n' Lorna" could have been dreamed up, let's face it, by a self-destructive, third-rate television writer. But what sounds at first like cheap, false formula is in fact a work of lovely formal artifice.

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Herb 'n' Lorna

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Eric Kraft creates an odd, playful family history that comes to seem inevitable. Herb is a Piper, and it is the curse of the Piper family to be such good and passionate salesmen that they eventually sell themselves a bill of goods, something referred to as "doing a foolish Piper thing." Lorna Huber comes from a hilly town in upstate New York called Chacallit, the men's haberdashery capital, a place that revolves around the manufacture of cuff links, collar pins and sleeve garters. Lorna's Uncle Luther accidentally throws a doodled sketch of a young woman he's daydreaming about into a pile of designs for carved ivory men's jewelry, and the erotic men's jewelry business, known as "coarse goods," is born.

helps his family by peddling newspapers and rolls (from his Studebaker Junior toy wagon), then is enlisted by his uncle to sell Lorna's coarse goods. Herb and Lorna have not met, but their life together has begun.

Herb is astonished and moved by the delicacy of the little sculptures he sells. A tinkerer, he soon develops a crude mechanical model of two figures inside a pocket-watch case, a tiny couple who actually couple when you turn a wheel. When Lorna opens what Herb has named the Watchcase Wonder and sees the little figures, she falls in love with their anonymous creator. "In part, they won her over with their fluid agility and their cunning construction, but most of all, a small gesture won her: a gesture that Herb had supplied

meet, they fall in love too. They marry and move to Babbington, L.I. There, in spite of their contributions to the coarse-goods trade, which each keeps secret from the other, Herb and Lorna live what conventional novelists like to see as conventional lives. But Mr. Kraft has the gift of generosity of vision, and he detects passion, satisfaction and joy in the most mundane activities — selling Studebakers, sorting clams, calculating tables of artillery trajectories for the Army (with a slide rule). Tiny, eccentric gestures of affection, like that of Herb's mechanical man, are something Mr. Kraft himself has perfected, and the book hums and sings and spins with them. Satirical novelists like to poke holes in things; Mr. Kraft sees the holes that are already there and thinks they form intricate designs. He writes about the formal beauty of having fun. The novel is all about sex, and sex, in "Herb 'n' Lorna," means everything in life that is good — craft and art and imagination and hard work and humor and friendship and skill and curiosity and loyalty and love.

Eric Kraft is interested in the clink-clank of how things work, how people do what they do. In his book, the mechanics of seduction, running a saloon, falling out of love, making your younger sister thoroughly unhappy, have a rhythmic, energetic clarity. Yet when he writes about machines, he writes about machines that are extinct, like the slide rule and the once unthinkable modern Studebaker, or machines that never existed at all, like the Watchcase Wonder — machines that have become artifacts, quaint and abstract now, a testimony to American ingenuity and optimism only in their obsolescence. For Mr. Kraft, technology has an ephemeral quality, while something like the Piper salesmanship lives on through the

generations.

Reading "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy" after you've read "Herb 'n' Lorna" is interesting, but somewhat disappointing too. Many of the components of Mr. Kraft's idiosyncratic world are in place in the "Peter Leroy" books,

which are amusing, nicely written and sometimes touching; but they are also arch and self-conscious, a young man's clever literary exercise. "Herb 'n' Lorna" is no exercise. Eric Kraft is an odd bird in the literary landscape — an exacting comic novelist whose work is happy and expansive. □

Mr. Kraft documents his study of the Pipers and the Hubers, of Herb and Lorna, with mild little parodies — mock scholarly quotes and references, pseudo-acknowledgments and a section of stock archival photographs, solemnly mislabeled with captions like "Lorna (arrow) working at a cutting machine on the main floor at Cole & Lord's Gent's Accessories." These parodies are not brilliant, but they're welcome surprises, like prizes in a cereal box.

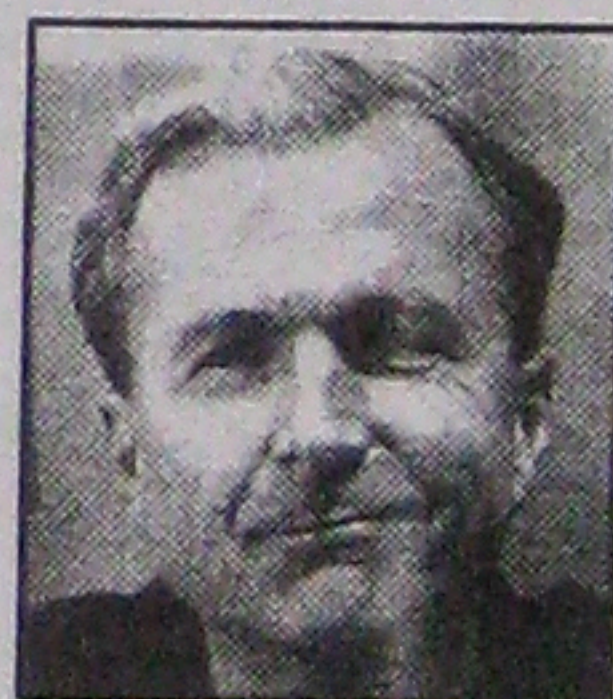
Throughout the novel, Mr. Kraft scatters quick, meticulous allusions to the development, growth and eventual decline of the slide rule and the Studebaker — his own personal landmarks, private signposts that begin to take on a mystical, epic, almost fateful quality. And so Uncle Luther (a man who in 1902, not long after Lieut. Amédée Manheim invented the modern slide rule, bought a Studebaker Brothers Gentleman's Road Cart), is the one who persuades Lorna, a talented carver, to leave the dogs' heads of conventional cuff links for the greater challenge of coarse goods. After Herb's father has ruined the family by doing a foolish Piper thing (manufacturing cork furniture, "easy to rearrange"), Herb first

Mr. Kraft writes about the formal beauty of having fun.

by shaping one tiny pulley with an eccentricity, the slightest little bump, like the lobe on a cam, so that at one point in the performance the man brushed his lips against the woman's cheek. It was a tiny gesture, one that Lorna had to see several times before she could be sure that it wasn't accidental, that it wasn't caused by the way she held the figures or the way she turned the wheel. When she satisfied herself that it happened every time, with the precision of all the other gestures and exertions that composed the performance, when she was certain that it was intentional, that whoever had made the little couple perform had considered this sign of affection an essential part of the performance, she was charmed.

Without having met, Herb and Lorna fall in love. When they do

A Secret Life in Chapter Three



THE NEW YORK TIMES/SARA WYMAN
Eric Kraft.

So there was Eric Kraft, typing away on the third chapter of his new novel, when the secret was revealed: Herb and Lorna, the warm, loving grandparents of Peter Leroy, the hero of Mr. Kraft's series of novellas, had been secretly involved in the making of erotic jewelry. "I was as shocked as Peter," said Mr. Kraft.

His reaction was particularly strong because it meant departing from his original plan for "Herb 'n' Lorna," his

first full-length work. "I wanted to write about the lives of ordinary people," he said by telephone from his home in Boston. "The small things in life are often the ones that have the most meaning."

To that end, he and his wife, Madeline, have for years taken a snapshot a day and pasted it, with a caption, in an album. "Sometimes it's a kid in the neighborhood or something from our midday walk." If it's a dull day? "The cat was always a great out."

But Mr. Kraft was also delighted by the discovery of Herb and Lorna Piper's secret life, for it allowed him to explore the nature of art. "I think this book is really about the relationship between the artist and the work, the artist and the audience, and the artist and society at large," he said.

Mr. Kraft is working on another book, drawing again from the "Peter Leroy" cast of characters. His hero is Matthew Barber, Peter's classmate in the third and fourth grades. "It's in present time," Mr. Kraft said. "Matthew lives in Boston and is, by day, vice president of the New Products Division for Sensible Toys and, by night, a restaurant critic. His life is falling apart. This is not a comic novel this time. The surface is very dark."

NANCY SHARKEY