

Eric Kraft tells a funny, sexy story with consummate skill

Writing erotic fiction must be hard, since it is so rare, but Eric Kraft has certainly done it with *Herb 'n' Lorna* (Crown, \$17.95), which is also very funny.

As Kraft calls it, humor and the erotic are all mixed up, which he symbolizes in the things husband and wife team Herb and Lorna make: erotic jewelry, erotic sculpture, the act of love in miniature, reduced to the level of a novelty, a gadget, or, maybe better, a charm, or even better, a marvel.

The publishers are not being coy when they call this a love story, because, however high its sexual content, it is always about love, and the twists and turns, logical and illogical, that love takes between two lives bound together down the years.

Everything about *Herb 'n' Lorna* is slightly cockeyed, beginning with its form, that of a mock biography (it even starts off with a satiric version of the mandatory first chapter of local lore and family history, before Herb and Lorna can get born, grow up, and meet cute), and running right along to the linchpin of the plot, which is that Herb and Lorna, man and wife for many years, are each involved in the "coarse goods" trade without the other one knowing.

Their story is told by their grandson, Peter Leroy, the subject of several serial novels by Eric Kraft. Here Peter abandons his own story to tell the story of Herb and Lorna Piper, whose involvement in the manufacture of erotic jewelry he does not discover until their deaths.

This is one of those novels that dotes on routine, in quietly elegant prose that burnishes the quotidian to a soft glow. Beyond that, one of the aspects of routine that *Herb 'n' Lorna* concentrates on is the process of producing erotic jewelry, and doing it such that the reader has to fill in the details. Kraft's vision very quickly becomes a shared affair.

It's also the kind of book that specializes in cliffhanger plot twists, but where there's always a mattress under the guy who falls off the roof, and guns are always loaded with blanks, and knives are the collapsible kind. And if misunderstanding dominates human transaction, it's never too serious, or it gets cleared up, or it turns out for the best.

ST. PETERSBURG TIMES
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In *Herb 'n' Lorna* reality gets stood on its head. Everything works out. Love is a charm. Which can only remind us, as the bad turns good time after time, that this is not life, this is art that makes things happen this way.

It is almost as if the whole novel is summarized in the passage that begins, "Lorna, holding Herb's hand to steady herself, stepped into the rowboat. The first notes drifted out over the lake just as Herb pushed off from the dock. And — what luck! — 'Lake Serenity Serenade' turned out to be lilting and beautiful, and the sax section of the Triple-A Orchestra outdid itself. It was a great stroke of luck, one of those happy accidents we discredit when we hear an account of their happening to someone else, although they figure so prominently in our dreams and daydreams and are sometimes our only reason for hope."

Outside of their work in "coarse goods," Herb and Lorna are just two ordinary people, by most standards. Herb is a Studebaker salesman. Lorna is a housewife. They live in the clammy town of Babbington, Long Island, a cozy but altogether ordinary place. There is, of course, the matter of their secret lives, which we know all about but which is a secret to everyone else — including Herb and Lorna. (When *will* they find out about each other? The suspense is something else!). But it gives them a special lift in our eyes. If only other people knew what we knew . . .

That, though, is beside the point, as it turns out. Because, as Herb and Lorna each realize, independent of the other, nothing, not even secrets, exists in a vacuum. Art and commerce need each other, in the same manner that our public and private selves interact and overlap.

It is anything but an accident that Kraft has Herb selling Studebakers, since Studebakers were designed by Raymond Loewy, the industrial designer who, well, almost single-handedly invented the notion of in-

dustrial design back in the '30s, and then went on to redesign the Coke bottle, the Sears Coldspot refrigerator, the Lucky Strike pack, the Broadway Limited, and as much or more than any other brought art and commerce together in this century. He designed the Studebaker that looks the same backward and forward — and got a lot of ribbing for designing a car that couldn't decide if it was coming or going! But . . . he was also proving, and proving again, that art and commerce could go hand in hand and be the better for it.

As Herb points out, there is a crucial connection between making something and selling it, or rather, things take on an importance, a point, a purpose, when they are made for a reason no more complicated than a retail transaction.

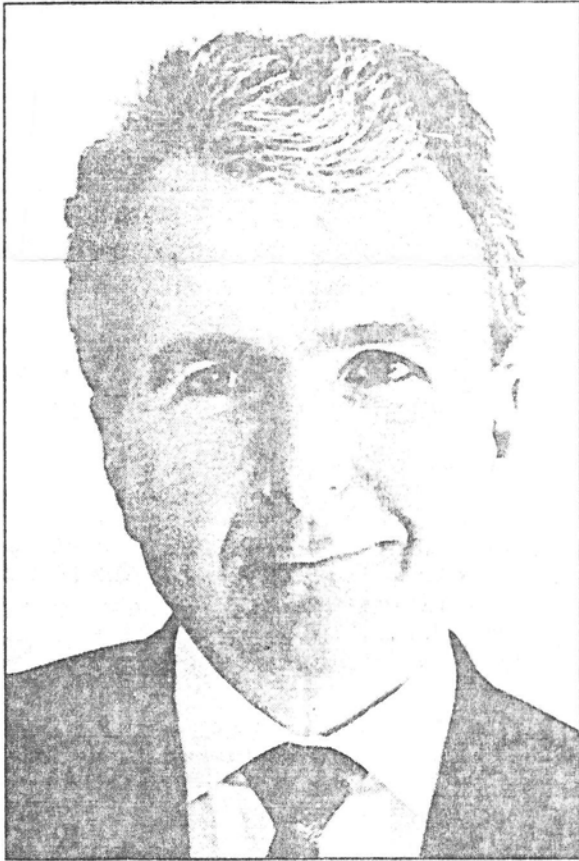
Herb says, rhetorically, "Would the Starliner have been better if it hadn't been made to sell? There's no telling what kind of strange ideas Loewy would have come up with if he hadn't had to make a car that somebody would buy."

When I begin to make up lists of the foremost artists of any kind in this century, I lean immediately in the direction of the Fred Astaires, and Duke Ellingtons and John Fords and Frank Lloyd Wrights, and many others who wrote, composed, designed or filmed in a commercial situation. They made their living from talent and wit, and they made art.

This has all been pointed out before. This is the century for mass culture, when something as negligible as 45 rpm records made for honky tonk jukeboxes helped turn a culture on its ear. What has not been much talked about, is what effect this do-or-die commercial situation has on the artist. In Herb and Lorna's case, it gives them a reason to go on, it sharpens the point of their lives.

Kraft handles all this far more deftly than I have, with allusions, hints, suggestions. Like everything about his work — his prose style, his plotting — his meanings are subtle and unobtrusive. Most of the time, that is. His cockeyed, comic view won't let him pull off the Proustian smoochie act he keeps trotting out.

So, when Herb meets his future lady, she is not merely "a short scrawny woman." Nor does she merely have "wild hair." No, "it looked as if she'd given each of the phrenological regions of her scalp a



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Or better, consider his brief but cogent essay on our nation's home woodworkers:

"He was at a critical point as a tinkerer. On the one hand, he had discovered how to increase the salutary distraction that comes from fiddling around, the distraction that, to take woodworking as an example, comes from cutting and sanding, producing a bunch of smooth rectangles and a nice pile of sawdust. On the other hand, however, Herb was losing sight of the need to justify such fiddling around by producing something that had enough utility to keep one from being considered a loony. (Just think of all the happy guys across America who are passing this moment making the chips fly with powerful and noisy routers. If asked by a neighbor, 'What the hell are you up to, making all that racket?' they don't have to be so frank as to say, 'Oh, just fiddling around.' They justify the time they spend in their cozy workshops by making signs for the homes and cottages of their friends and neighbors thereby demon-

strating their generosity and, quite frequently, their reckless disregard for the plural and possessive forms of surnames.)"

Not that you should think of this author as a shameless gagman. *Au contraire*, Kraft invariably subjugates a joke to the demands of his general design. Thus, with the comic's sense of timing and the patience of a saint, he waits, without so much as a tremor or a drop of sweat, for 294 pages, before he describes Herb as "wearing the look of a boy who has just been asked, 'Do you suppose I can trust you to go into town and sell the cow on your own?'"

Kraft may never get the attention he deserves, precisely because he works so hard and so successfully to ensure that what he does doesn't look hard. The immediate benefits of this strategy all accrue on the reader's side of the slate. *Herb 'n' Lorna* is funny, readable, carefully plotted and cleverly told. You don't get this lucky that often.