



FROM HERB 'N' LORNA

When Herb was in flower and Studebakers ruled the earth

## Ivory League

**HERB 'N' LORNA: A Love Story.** By Eric Kraft. Crown, \$17.95.

In 1982, Eric Kraft launched the improbable project of *The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy*, a serial novel published at regular intervals in cute little 100-page paperbacks and intended to keep on appearing, it was

proclaimed at the time, "forever." Human undertakings being what they are, Peter survived only eight installments—a hefty accomplishment, but fated to end far too soon. The last of Peter came out three years ago, and disappointed fans resigned themselves to an object lesson. Rejoice! Peter's back, with a self-contained novel this time: the story of his maternal grandparents, formerly known

as Gumma and Guppa but here endowed with their proper names, *Herb 'n' Lorna*. Peter narrates, and his affectionate, quietly funny tone is much the same, though he appears only marginally as a character. Instead, he goes back in imagination to a time long before he was born, when Lorna Huber of Chacallit, New York, met and married Herb Piper of Boston. They moved to Babbington, Long Island (scene of the Peter books); Herb became a Studebaker salesman; they raised a daughter, Peter's mother, and spent their sunset years in the retirement community of Punta Cachazuda, Florida, where, eventually, they died.

It's a commonplace story, for the most part, the convincingly realistic biography of two unremarkable mid-century Americans. In Peter Leroy's world, however, no one is absolutely ordinary; *Herb 'n' Lorna* takes off from Peter's unsettling discovery that the Gumma and Guppa of cozy memory (and earlier books) had a secret—from each other for most of their lives, from the family till after their deaths. Between them—Herb as designer, Lorna as the most accomplished of ivory carvers—they sustained and propagated the craft of erotic jewelry, or "coarse goods."

The industry was founded by Lorna's uncle Luther before World War I, but it remained crude as well as coarse until the teaming of Herb's imagination and Lorna's skill transformed it into art. With the advent of animated coarse goods, vistas of creative opportunity opened up:

*She twisted the wheel again, slowly, while she observed the little copulating couple from various angles. They enchanted her. 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 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.*

Sales of coarse goods float Herb 'n' Lorna through the depression, World War II, and even the failure of the Studebaker Corporation. How they manage to collaborate intimately for decades, without knowing it, is a mystery I'll let Kraft unravel for you. But I'll tell you that mutual enlightenment, though it comes at the verge of old age, is a turn-on:

"Herb—"  
"Lorna—"

"All these years?" she asked.

"I guess so," he said.

"Oh, Herb," she said, "Ignite me, please, right this minute."

Joyful sex suffuses *Herb 'n' Lorna*, making it an oddity, or perhaps an anachronism, in these just-say-no days. Kraft is aware that he's bucking the tide with his pornographers' idyll: Peter's preface takes a slap at the "Prude Pride" movement and refutes a spokeswoman for "Mothers Against Sex":

*"I tell you it's just sick. You can't tell me that this has anything to do with artistic expression or freedom of speech. This has to do with only one thing, s-e-x."*

*That did it. "Oh, no," I said to myself. "That isn't all there is to it. There is much, much more to it than that."*

The subject is coarse goods, but it might just as well be *Herb 'n' Lorna* as a whole: sex indeed, but love and friendship, too, every sort of pleasure offered and taken. Kraft says yes to it all. Peter Leroy couldn't have staged a more delightful return.

—Walter Kendrick