

'Herb 'n' Lorna' lovingly, romantically Krafted



BOOKENDS
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There is a quite extraordinary fictive world being created in Boston by a writer named Eric Kraft.

Herb 'n' Lorna is Kraft's first full-length novel in hard-cover, but by no means is it his first book, not even the first to feature his priceless continuing character, Peter Leroy.

Before we proceed into a discussion of this agreeable new work, however, it is important to explain that Eric Kraft is a romantic.

Each day, he and his wife, Madeline — his high school sweetheart from West Babylon, Long Island, no less — take a walk in their neighborhood off Newbury Street in Boston's Back Bay.

Each day, they have a martini together, usually at 5 p.m., and the martinis are always prepared with Bombay gin.

Each day, they take at least one photograph of the world around them, and the finished prints go into a visual album they keep to record their lives-in-progress.

And each day, Kraft manages to write something about Peter Leroy, a character he claims to have first visualized more than 20 years ago while falling asleep in the Lamont Library at Harvard University when he should have been studying for a German exam.

MARKETED TEXTBOOKS

When Kraft graduated from Harvard in 1965, he took a master's degree from the Harvard School of Education, and after that he worked in the educational publishing field. Later, he and his wife wrote and marketed their own textbooks. All the while, though, that image of Peter Leroy — a youngster sitting on a decrepit Long Island dock playing a solitary game with the surface of the water — continued to percolate in his mind.

Though Kraft kept formulating stories about Peter Leroy and the imaginary town of Babbington, Long Island, it wasn't until 1982 that he actually made an effort to introduce him to the reading public.

"My friends got tired of hearing me talk about these characters and the books I intended to write about them," Kraft said in a recent Boston interview. "I was becoming a pariah at parties. I had to do something, so the first book finally was finished."

Though the publishing strategy he selected — the serial novel — was itself an anachronism that evoked the writings of Dickens and Proust, it nevertheless gained a compact but dedicated audience. In all, eight books were published in paperback by a small firm out of Cambridge, Applewood Press, under one umbrella title, *The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy*.

The individual novellas — with titles like *My Mother Takes a Tumble*, *Do Clams Bite?*, *Life on the Bolotomy* and *The Fox and the Clam* — brought forth new though not necessarily chronological installments in the life of the narrator and his family and friends during the innocent 1950s.

CHARACTER CAUGHT ON

This delightful character caught on so successfully that Crown publishers signed Kraft up for a full-length novel in hard-cover, *Herb 'n' Lorna* (\$17.95) is the happy result, a loving account of Peter's maternal grandparents, Herb and Lorna Piper.

In a front-page rave last month, *The New York Times Book Review* aptly called it a "historical farce, a comedy of four generations of happy errors." It is, in fact, a very funny, yet soothingly gentle book.

In a preface — Kraft has written prefaces for each of these books — Peter explains that for years he had "tried to avoid writing this book." Forces beyond his control, however, prompted him to do otherwise. He knew he had to write the book when he learned that his late grandparents — two wonderfully warm people he had loved dearly — had been involved in "the animated erotic jewelry industry."

For his part, Kraft said he was "as surprised as Peter" to learn about the Piper's secret activities, activities that in the novel attract the righteous attention of such groups as Frude Pride and Mothers Against Sex.

The relationship between Eric and Peter is pretty obvious on levels that are more than superficial, and Kraft does not deny that they exist.

Kraft said he expects he will always be writing about Peter Leroy in one fashion or another. "I can't imagine being without him," he said. A book he is working on now will focus on the life of Matthew Barber, Peter's classmate in elementary school now living in Boston.

"This is being written in the present time," Kraft said. "He was a very dour third-grader, a little sad sack, who is convinced that most things, given enough

time, will turn out badly. We now will see him working as a vice president for Sensible Toys by day, and moonlighting as a restaurant reviewer at night. He uses his reviews as a vehicle for social criticism. His voice in the narrative is very different from the voice in the restaurant reviews."

LITTLE MOMENTS RETAINED

The Krafts have two children, both now in their 20s and living away from home. The practice of taking the daily photograph began when the children were younger, and changes came more rapidly. "It's astonishing how you can bring back little moments with a picture," Kraft said.

The photograph can be of anything — a chance acquaintance, a trip to the post office or the old standby, the family cat — but generally it documents a "small thing" that happens, the kind of ephemeral experience that disappears forever if not somehow preserved.

During the interview — over lunch with Eric and Madeline Kraft — the question was asked just how the daily photograph is chosen. At that point, Mrs. Kraft lifted a small Olympus automatic, aimed it capably at yours truly, and clicked off a shot. "There's one right there," they both said, almost simultaneously.