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Confabulation n. 2. Psychiatry. Replacement of a gap in memory by a falsification that the subject accepts as correct.

The Random House
College Dictionary

Reality, in Eric Kraft's fifth novel, sometimes seems as slippery and difficult to grasp as a jellyfish in baby oil.

Like a nimble child playing hopscotch, Peter Leroy, the present-day narrator of this confabulation, delights in hopping back and forth across the borders of truth, being,

"What a Piece of Work I Am
(A Confabulation)"

Eric Kraft

Crown Publishers

\$22

memory, meaning, and existence — asking, and often answering, provocative questions about the nature of being and becoming, and about how we construct ourselves (literally *make* something of ourselves) over the course of our lives.

Mr. Kraft's novel is not so much a story as an investigation into these various themes and concerns. It is about imagination, creation, and, oddly enough, fiction.

In a preface, Peter tells us:

Most children give their imaginary friends up after a while. . . but I kept mine, and along with him, I kept his entire family: his enormous half-witted brothers, his sturdy and long-suffering mother, his violent father . . . and his sultry sister, Ariane.

First People

A bit later Peter tells us that Ariane Lodkochnikov, his imaginary friend's imaginary sister, was killed in a house fire and (ironically) that he blames himself for this.

If I've got this right, "What a Piece of Work I Am" is a novel narrated in the first person by Peter Leroy (who himself plays but a small role), and also half in the first person by Ariane.

Ariane's first-person narration, however, is subsumed within Peter's, though the boundaries tend to blur a bit because they alternate frequently, Ariane relating to him, in Peter's imagination, events in the first person, and Peter adding to them, correcting them, offering his own insights, and otherwise contributing to her story.

Sometimes Peter and Ariane tell her story in alternating sentences, nearly in unison, so that first and second person almost seem to merge.

"There I was, standing there, in the locker room —"

"— in the harsh light of the locker room, outlined against the deep shadows —"

"— struggling to get into Renee's dress —"

"— chewing your lip with anxiety about being discovered, tiny beads of perspiration misting your furrowed forehead —"

"— and I came to the realization that Renee was a smaller woman than I was."

Are You Confused?

Ariane is actually (imaginarily?) dead, but what follows is Peter's version, the story of the made-up Ariane as she might have been. That is, had she not been imagined dead.

This narration is based on notes Peter took during a month of (imagined) conversations with her. It is in these conversations that we hear Ariane speak of her life. This then is (at least in one sense) the "confabulation" of the title, the filling-in of a memory gap which the subject (Peter? Ariane? Us?) will believe is correct.

Are you confused yet? Just wait, the diabolically clever Mr. Kraft has several more twists and torques of reality and imagination in store.

At times — as when Ariane imagines or envisions *other* versions of herself and her story — keeping all of the labyrinthine levels of this made-up imaginary reality in my head felt a bit like playing three-dimensional chess, drunk.

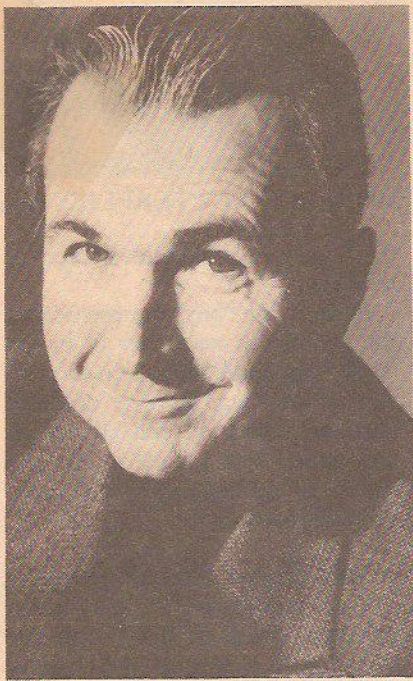
She Is The Play

The novel opens with Peter arriving at Ariane's home, having not seen her for some years. She kisses him — something he used to fantasize about

as a young boy, when she was 17 — and then begins to tell him her life story, starting with the origin and implications of her name.

Peter is oddly self-conscious during much of Ariane's narration. "I chuckled, grinned, and shook my head, as a person would do to demonstrate mild amusement, and I was quite aware of myself *as* a person registering mild amusement."

It is not until later in the story that we learn why. Ariane, it turns out, is living her life on stage. She inhabits a wall-less apartment which has been constructed inside a warehouse so that she is visible at all times to the



Eric Kraft

Kristine Larsen

audience surrounding her. Yes, even when going to the bathroom.

She has been on display 24 hours a day for about 10 years. She is not *acting* in a play, she *is* the play, and so is anyone — including Peter — who comes to visit her.

Life-Liver, Life-Actor

As you may have guessed, this peculiar admixture of life and art brings up a whole new set of questions concerning the nature of art and Ariane's status as mere life-liver or a kind of life-actor. In an extraordinarily clever scene, she has a conversation with Duncan Rollo, chairman of the Babbington Town Zoning Board:

"Are you aware," said Mr. Rollo, inflating himself like a puffer under attack, "that you are dwelling illegally in a building that is not zoned for habitation?"

"Dwelling?"

"Living."

"You call this living?" she asked, indicating her modest circumstances with a sweep of her hand.

"Yes I do. I see a kitchen. I see a bed. I presume that there is a toilet in that cubicle over there. And I know from reports I have received that you are in residence here 24 hours a day. I call that living."

"Well, then, I've fooled you, haven't I?"

"In what way have you fooled me?"

"Well, look out there. What do you see?"

"See? I see seats. A few people. Tables in the back —"

"You see a theater."

"More or less."

"And what does a person go to a theater for?"

"See a show —"

"And those people out there came to see what?"

"You, I guess."

"There you are! This isn't living. This is a *show*. It's *like* living. It looks like living. But it isn't. It's a show. It's not real."

Remaking Herself

And then:

"You said you play the part of a woman. What woman?"

"Ariane Lodkochnikov."

"But you *are* Ariane Lodkochnikov."

"I *am* Ariane Lodkochnikov, but not the Ariane Lodkochnikov I play here on the stage. . . ."

On this stage set which she calls home, Ariane describes to Peter, to her audience, and to us readers, the stages and events of her life, from her first job working at Captain White's clam bar, to how she came to be living her "decade on display."

During an early period of her life, she managed to become the "town slut." Unsatisfied with that role, Ariane decided to "begin transforming

herself from town slut into someone else." It is this process, this making of herself, that shapes the book and, so we are told, begins to shape Peter, the better to tell her story.

Fiction's Boundaries

There are several important events in Ariane's life which have a formative effect on the shape of her, or, as she and Peter eventually begin to think of it, on the self-creation of Ariane as a work of art.

These experiences form the framework of the novel, but take something of a back seat to Mr. Kraft's exploration of the boundaries between truth and fiction, art and artist, artist and consumer.

As Ariane says to an audience member, "We *need* each other, you and I. Without you, I'm just a woman up here talking to herself, and without me, you're only someone sitting in the dark." The same may of course be said of fiction and reader.

A Darker Vision

Mr. Kraft refuses to be limited to or constrained by mere narrative. The novel contains several drawings, two of the setup of Ariane's theater and one of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, a prison design in which the guards sit in the center and look out at the prisoners. The parallels between Ariane's life and this Panopti-

con are intriguing.

There are also reviews of Ariane's stage performance, as well as excerpts from several invented books, something which Mr. Kraft does deliciously well.

It should be mentioned that this novel, like all his others save for "Reservations Recommended," takes place in Babbington, Mr. Kraft's Northeast answer to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Babbington is now a far darker place than in previous novels, however, and the author's vision is more somber and much less whimsical.

"What a Piece of Work I Am" contains (in a movie about Ariane) some graphic violence — something I don't ever recall encountering in Babbington — as well as prolonged illness, and death, too.

Mr. Kraft is aiming high here, compelling his characters and his readers to struggle and grapple with preconceived notions about reality and fiction and truth and their relationship to how we become ourselves. It is well worth the effort, though, because we are — as we have come to expect from Eric Kraft — in the hands of a master.

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