

## PEOPLE

# Youthful musings make Babbington inviting place

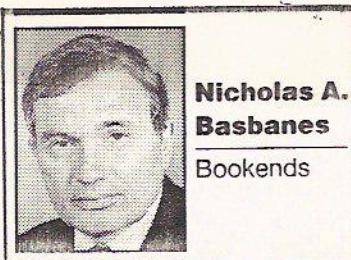
The evocative world of Peter Leroy, conceived three decades ago during a college daydream, is alive, well, and prospering admirably in the fictional Long Island community of Babbington, N.Y., on Bolotomy Bay.

Of course, Peter's gentle ruminations of daily life during the 1950s — transcribed faithfully by his creator, Eric Kraft — reach much wider audiences than they did when first distributed by newsletter during the 1970s, thanks in large measure to a series of highly promoted hardcover editions.

Indeed, ever since "Herb 'n' Lorna" was reviewed on the front page of the New York Sunday Times Book Review in 1988, many more readers have taken notice of the ongoing pageant. That book was followed in 1990 by "Reservations Recommended," which thereupon prompted publication in one volume of eight early novels, "Little Follies: The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy (so far)."

Last week, Crown Publishers released Kraft's latest installment, "What a Piece of Work I Am" (\$22), which offers the reminiscences of Ariane Lodkochnikov, a one-time clam bar waitress who is able, through the compassionate intervention of Peter Leroy, to re-invent her life.

She becomes, in the process, one of the most engaging creations to emerge from Kraft's imagination.



**Nicholas A. Basbanes**

Bookends

"They're a willful bunch, that's for sure," Kraft said of his family of characters in a telephone interview from his home in East Hampton on Long Island, N.Y. "From the first time I saw her, I knew that she was going to have a book of her own."

While many of the characters who populated Kraft's earlier works were modeled on people he knew as a youth growing up in Babylon, on Long Island, Ariane is totally invented.

"She is someone who kind of wandered into the story," he said. "At first, she was just part of the background, sitting there on the rickety banks of the tidal flats. She seemed to sleep a lot and was terribly seductive to 10-year-old Peter, who couldn't get her out of his mind, and thus had to re-imagine her for himself."

#### NOT AS ECCENTRIC

An essential element to Kraft's artistic design is the power of memory, which is one reason the community he envisioned is a lot like the actual city of Babylon, but still different.

"The world I found myself creating started with what I remember

as a child," Kraft, now 50, said. "It may have been a touch of homesickness when I was in college that first got me thinking about reconstructing a childhood. But as Peter began to become an individual and a more fully realized character, the town of Babbington became something quite apart from Babylon."

As he looks back, Kraft said he does not recall that the citizens of Babylon "were as eccentric a bunch as the citizens of Babbington. There is, of course, the fact that I am in control of the town of Babbington, and in a sense responsible for all of its citizens. So I'm careful of them."

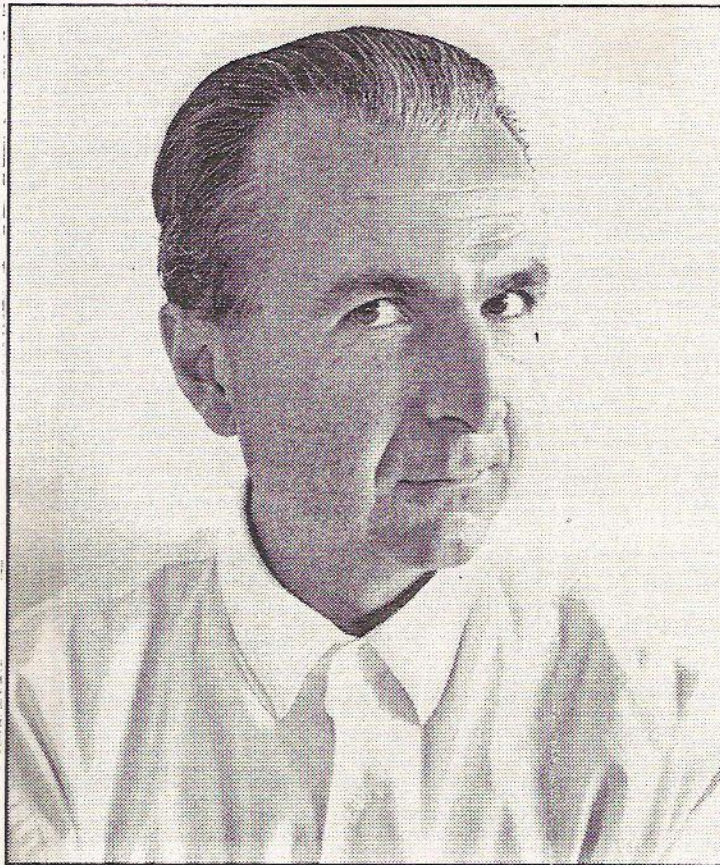
While delighted about his growing popularity, Kraft said he looks back with affection to the days when his stories were read by a small circle of friends and admirers.

#### DREAM OF LITTLE BOY

Peter Leroy made his presence known in 1962, when Kraft was a sophomore at Harvard College. "I was in the library dozing over a German lesson. When I woke up, I had the memory of a dream in which I saw a little boy sitting on an old dock in the warmth of a summer day. He had no name yet, and he was dragging his feet in the water. But the dream has never left me."

During the 1970s, when he and his wife, Madeline, were living in Boston and running their own small business producing textbooks, the image kept coming back, and with it ideas for stories.

"My friends got tired of hearing



FILE PHOTO

Eric Kraft says, "The reader who likes my work is somebody with a good mind, a good imagination, someone who is happy to participate."

me talk about these characters and all these books I intended to write," he said. "I was becoming a pariah at parties. I had to do something."

The defining moment came

when Kraft discovered that instead of using his own voice, he should use Peter's, a decision that gave him much greater flexibility. He began by writing a series of newsletters for friends.

"I enjoyed the newsletters very much. I was very happy as my own publisher. I found myself easy to get along with, and it was a very interesting way to develop the work."

In 1982, however, Kraft wrote the first Peter Leroy novella, which was published as a paperback by Applewood Books, a small Massachusetts company. A small, but devoted, following began to build, which led to a contract from Crown for a full-length novel.

"I've always had the strongest awareness of form," Kraft said. "Every piece that I have written is complete unto itself, but still very much a part of the larger work."

Along with a wider readership has come a greater response to the world he created. "I worked in silence without showing things to anyone for a decade, because I had to find what it was that I had to say. Now, more and more people have their own ideas about what the work should become."

Kraft believes, as a consequence, that he now understands what he has been trying to accomplish for the past 30 years.

"I think that what I do is provide a fine place for people to think and to imagine along with me," he said. "I've made this place, this Babbington, and I've let it mirror reality in some ways, and I've let it suggest an alternative reality in other ways. The reader who likes my work is somebody with a good mind, a good imagination, someone who is happy to participate. I really think that the reader and I are in this together."