

# An author & his Kraft

## BOOKS

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**A**LL the freshmen at Longwood College in Farmville, Va., know Boston novelist Eric Kraft.

For reasons unknown to Kraft, all these students have been assigned to read his serial comic novels, "The Personal History," "Adventures" and "Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy."

But Kraft will soon have more readers than Longwood students and the fans who, in the last five years, diligently have sought out his Leroy books in local stores. His first full-length novel, "Herb 'n' Lorna," was published last month.

The book is an exuberant, quirky and charming love story about Peter Leroy's

grandparents, Herb and Lorna Piper, the manufacturers of erotic jewelry, and two of the most endearing characters to somersault onto the contemporary literary scene.

Kraft, whose lively, boyish smile reflects his apparent delight with life in general and writing in particular, lives in Boston with his wife, Madeline, and has been writing for 20 years — as long as he has lived in New England.

He was born in Bayshore, N.Y., grew up in Babylon (fictionalized as Babbington in the Leroy books) and arrived as a freshman at Harvard in the early 1960s.

"My father was killed in World War II," Kraft said, "and my mother and stepfather put aside my war orphan's allowance so I could go to college."

He was not a typical Harvard student. During semester break of his sophomore year, he married Madeline, his high school sweetheart. They set up house in North Cambridge, "down the street," he added happily, "from the first Steve's Ice Cream."

Kraft supported his wife (and, soon, his two children) by delivering laundry for the Gold Coast Valetaria. In the summer, he trimmed ivy from Harvard's hallowed halls. Madeline worked for a while at the Coop and the Harvard Observatory.

Later, with a degree from the School of Education, he spent two years and two summers teaching "every grade from kindergarten to high school. And by night," he said impishly, "I was a rock critic for 'Boston After Dark.' For which they never paid me a dollar."

All the time he was working, he was writing about Leroy, a character who first visited him in Lamont Library and never left. "I feel as if I've lived with these characters all my life," Kraft said, talking about the inspiration for his books. They seem to invent themselves, in fact, as Kraft writes.

Now he is at work on a novel about Matthew Barber, a character from an earlier Leroy book, who is living in Boston as the vice president of Sensible Toys. By night, he is a restaurant reviewer.

Kraft said its title, "Reservations Recommended," expresses Barber's philosophy of life.

While the book seems more serious, on the surface, than the Leroy novellas, Kraft said it has a humorous underside.

It's the first of his books that he thinks would make a wonderful film — "with Spaulding Gray as Matthew," he hinted.

Readers of Kraft's books are likely to think of John Cheever; Kraft said that comparison flatters him. Kraft, like Cheever, treats contemporary suburbia with humor and irreverence, although Kraft is more generous in his portrayal of his characters.

"I'm interested in how people treat each other," he said, and in 'Herb 'n' Lorna,' people treat each other with kindness and love.

"The ideal work of literature," Kraft said, "creates a world for readers in which characters can live on in more than one book."

He cited the books he read as a child — the Hardy Boys and Horatio Alger — as inspirations. More recent intellectual influences are John Hawkes and Nabokov.

For more than two years, he and some friends read Proust every Sunday. Now, with writers Ann Bernays, Justin Kaplin, Michael Rosine and Kimberly French, he and Madeline are beginning "David Copperfield."

"And no," Madeline says, "we're not watching the television series."