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BURRELLE'S

Eric Kraft satisfies his readers' hunger with the continuing saga of Peter Leroy

By Darrel Schultz

Between 1982 and 1985, Eric Kraft delighted readers with a serial novel in eight parts, entitled "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy."

Fans of Peter Leroy have had to wait an agonizing three years to sate their appetite for more, but at last there is more, and it is well worth the wait.

In "Herb 'n' Lorna," Peter Leroy returns, not to recount more of his personal experiences so much as to set the record straight on his grandparents. Heretofore they were known only as "Gumma and Guppa, a child's mispronunciation of Grandma and Grandpa, but, on the day of "Gumma's" funeral, Leroy discovers a thing or two about his grandparents.

Stunning discovery

He learned they were leading manufacturers of erotic jewelry or "coarse goods," and, in fact, invented the most refined variety, *animated* erotic jewelry. After this discovery, Peter reflects that his grandparents were "... two people I had never met before, people who had been hiding inside my grandparents, people with genitalia."

Kraft has created a world in which the odd and incongruous become the playful norm. The convoluted way in which Herb's and Lor-

HERB 'N' LORNA

By Eric Kraft
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na's lives become incontrovertibly linked is the work of no less than a master humorist.

Herb is a Piper of Boston, a clan particularly gifted in good ol' American salesmanship. It is their curse, however, to be so good that they end up selling themselves their own bill of goods.

Herb's father was particularly good at selling cork products. He believed so much in cork that he developed a line of cork furniture ("easy to rearrange"), an idea that failed so miserably he never quite recovered, leaving the young Herb to support the family. One of the ways Herb does it is by selling, among other things, coarse goods.

It is on a trip to Chacallit, N.Y., the men's clothing accessory capital, that Herb meets Lorna Huber. He has no idea that Lorna is involved in the manufacture of erotic jewelry, does not know that she is, in fact, the best erotic carver around; likewise, Lorna doesn't know that he sells it.

Later, he invents the animated variety, culminating in the "watchcase wonders," tiny couples who move about in a watchcase by the operator turning a knob. Needless to say, Herb and Lorna fall in love. Through mutual embarrassment,

however, they hide their identities from each other through most of their adult lives.

The bulk of the novel traces Herb and Lorna's married life together and takes on a heaping dose of 20th century American culture. Herb becomes a moderately successful Studebaker salesman; Lorna works in a slide rule factory. Together they live more or less conventional lives. But through it all they clandestinely keep up their involvement with Chacallit.

Message of optimism

Kraft has deftly woven the fates of both the Studebaker and the slide rule into the narrative. He traces their histories concurrently with that of the Pipers and the Hubers, and their inevitable demise becomes symbolic of a rapidly disappearing way of life. Yet the message Kraft delivers is one of enduring optimism, the sort that a Piper salesman would need.

Kraft, in his first full-length novel, has managed to concoct a yarn as complex and exhilarating as the best of Twain; he has captured the flavor of New England and upstate New York as skillfully as Garrison Keillor captured Minnesota, and has combined it with the wacky good humor of vintage Peter DeVries. It is a comic novel in the best American tradition.

Darrel Schultz is a Denver-based free-lance book reviewer.

Author
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