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A Romp About More Than Just Sex

Herb 'n' Lorna

By Eric Kraft

Crown, 310 pages, \$17.95

BY LISA JENSEN

The voice of Peter Leroy and his reminiscences about the fictional hamlet of Babbington, N.Y., were first heard in Eric Kraft's cultish comic serial novel, "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy."

Now, Kraft brings Peter back to narrate a new novel, "Herb 'n' Lorna," a whimsical investigation into the past, supposedly prompted by Peter's astonished discovery that his sweet, comforting grandparents lived a secret life. Apparently, the couple he remembers as "Gumma" and "Guppa" were "virtually the creators of the animated erotic jewelry industry."

Peter is still coping with this revelation when he learns that anti-pornography groups with names such as "Prude Pride" are picketing a retrospective of American Erotic Jewelry at the Smithsonian. There "Mothers Against Sex" proclaim, "You can't tell me that this has anything to do with artistic expression or freedom of speech. This has to do with only one thing, s-e-x." No, says Peter at the start of his book, "There's much more to it than that."

Indeed, there is, and Kraft is off and running with an exhilarating comic novel that is both marvelously sly and enormously good-natured. Sexuality, in all its buoyant mystery, is certainly a major element in "Herb 'n' Lorna," but so are true love and the American Dream. For, as the underground "coarse goods" trade grows up, so, too, in flashbacks that make up the central focus of this novel, do young Herb Piper and Lorna Huber.

Lorna grows up in Chacallit, on the banks of the Whatsit River in upstate New York, a turn-of-the-century boom town in the men's furnishing industry. A talent for sculpture gets Lorna a job carving



Eric Kraft: comic narrator Peter Leroy returns in new novel

ivory cuff links and shirt studs at the factory where her Uncle Luther is employed. Recognizing his niece's exceptional talent, Luther moves the eager, curious teenage carver onto "specialty" items of an erotic nature of his own design.

Meanwhile, Herb is born into a family of supersalesmen in Boston. He, too, has a slightly disreputable uncle who gets him a job selling books, with specialty items out of Chacallit on the side. An inveterate tinkerer, Herb improves the products by inventing tiny mechanisms that animate the beautifully carved figures in miniature tableaux that fit neatly inside a watchcase.

Ironically, Herb and Lorna happen to meet, fall deliriously in love, marry and move to Babbington without ever revealing to each other the secret work each carries on in the coarse goods trade.

"Herb 'n' Lorna" is a wonderful love story in its celebration of both enduring emotional companionship and innocent carnal pleasure. But there is still much more to it than that.

Even minor walk-on characters

with nothing to do with the story at hand provide their share of hilarity. Herb's World War I platoon in France is made up entirely of cheerful ethnic stereotypes. For a young woman Herb meets in passing who's trapped in a disappointing marriage, "all days seemed gray, all music seemed monotonous, all birds resembled pigeons, all food tasted like lima beans."

Loony and beguiling, "Herb 'n' Lorna" is essentially a tribute to the Yankee ingenuity that can imagine such marvels as the ice trade, the Studebaker Starliner coupe and animated erotic jewelry in the face of world wars, economic crises and middle-class prudery.

As Peter the narrator cheerfully paraphrases Shakespeare and invents his grandparents' private pillow talk to tell his story, he's the first to admit that "the facts may be wrong but I think the spirit is right." And so it is.

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