

★ Kraft, Eric  
INFLATING A DOG  
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Kraft's multivolume *Chronicles of Peter Leroy* (*Leaving Small's Hotel*, 1998, etc.) continue with this often hilarious bittersweet tale of adolescence recollected in tranquility: middle-aged Peter's fictional improvement on the subject of his mother Ella's checkered career as an independent businesswoman.

In a kaleidoscopic narrative that's a little like a marriage of Marcel Proust and Mark Twain, Peter (a former teacher and author of a series of boys' adventure books) treats his long-suffering wife Albertine (who's his best critic) to a fantasized version of growing up absurd in the clam-rich municipality of Babbington, Long Island. Specifically, he imagines that the determined Ella found her commercial niche catering "elegant excursions" aboard her newly purchased clam boat (whose previous owner had neglected to mention that the vessel *leaked*). The story also fulfills 13-year-old Peter's fantasy needs in the person of schoolmate sexpot (and the Leroy's collaborator) Patù Fiorenza. That's about it—and it's enough, in a charmingly loopy come-in-and-sit-a-spell tale that segues comfortably among past and present, truth and lies, the main point and ingenuous digressions, including explications of technical matters that stimulate Peter's urge to *inker* with everything he touches (not excluding Ms. Fiorenza). One particularly impassioned chapter is presented as a playlet. Interpolated explanatory ones employ illustrations and diagrams to dwell on such nautical arcane as "The Mysteries of the Jet Pump Revealed" and "Morphology and Aesthetics of Clam Boats." The title metaphor, explained in an epigraph from *Don Quixote*, assumes several risible forms, and Peter's determination to explore all the mysteries of environment, heredity, and (especially) sex is memorably expressed in such deadpan wonders as the episode entitled "martinis with the Merry Widow" and "a doo-wop version of Stanza XI of Wallace Stevens's 'Esthétique du Mal.'" And Kraft wraps it up with a fabulous final chapter in which Peter says his final farewell to the redoubtable Ella.

Glorious stuff. Is there no end to the (obviously autobiographical, irresistibly entertaining) permutations of Peter Leroy? Let's hope not.