

Long Island Books

GARY REISWIG

"Leaving Small's Hotel"

Eric Kraft

Picador USA, \$23

Sometimes the style of Eric Kraft's genius creeps up on his readers, and they may smile or may laugh out loud at the subtlety of their surprising discovery. While there is plenty of subtle humor in "Leaving Small's Hotel," he has added a new dimension - his dark humor now reaches out and bites, so that readers may turn around, snarling and angry.

As with most of Mr. Kraft's writing, this is not a book that's easy to label. No adjective or genre can adequately describe all the strands the author has woven into his offbeat story.

The narrator of this story, the inimitable Peter Leroy, the narrator of Mr. Kraft's other novels, is turning 50. One might be justified in calling this a "coming of age" novel, although it is Mr. Kraft's seventh book, for in fact Peter Leroy is, finally, trying to grow up.

So Many Levels

But growing up is a struggle, even for a man in the throes of middle age, and in this disarming process lies the charm of this intricately structured narrative which, at times, challenges the reader's attention span.

There are enough levels in this novel to inspire acrophobia in the Empire State Building's lift engineer. First, there's the story about Peter Leroy, nearing 50, and his beautiful wife, Albertine, owning Small's Hotel.

The hotel, located on an isolated island in the bay off eastern Long Island, seems to be crumbling at its foundations. Dwindling income and mounting expenses force Albertine to tell her adoring husband they must sell. It is a sobering thought for Peter Leroy, the dreamer.

Literary Event

Albertine devises a scheme - invite people to hear Peter Leroy read from "Dead Air," the latest installment of his personal memoirs. And so the reader enters the second level of the novel, the story of the scheming electronics entrepreneur and budding sex fiend, the 13-year-old Peter Leroy.

Maybe Albertine hopes the opportunity to read his work will ease Peter Leroy's pain. Maybe she hopes the readings will attract new customers and potential buyers for the hotel.

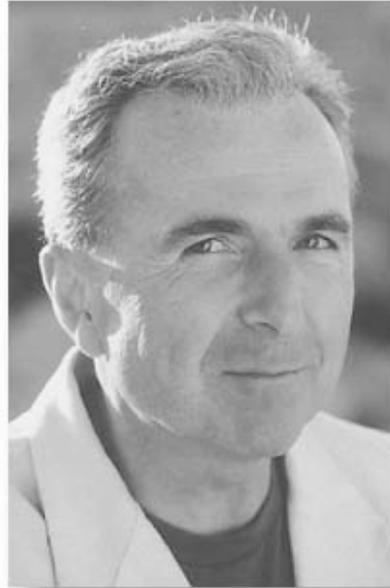
As one might expect, a literary event does not draw the right crowd. The people who gather are a motley sort, a "fun couple" discreetly called "Dick and Jane" and the man Peter Leroy labels "the grumpy guy."

Uh Oh

But wait a moment. A developer with a dredger, two "d" words that mean "bad" on eastern Long Island, and I mean really bad, starts to work.

The developer, Dexter, wants to build a new island with his dredger so he can rent "personalized motorized recreational watercraft." This will be the end of life as the East End has known it. Besides, the new island will make it impossible for Peter Leroy and Albertine to sell their old island. Who'd want a sleepy little island hotel with all that noise from the personal motorized recreational watercraft?

They find help residing inside Small's Hotel. The "grumpy man" knows a "demolition man." However, when Peter imagines what a demolition man might do, he suffers a few qualms, but can't find the courage to call off the



arrangement.

Characters Come

The demolition man arrives with his wife, son and daughter-in-law, granddaughter, and her friend. Although they're freeloaders, the dread of any hotel owner, they more than make up for it by what they contribute to the hotel.

Demolition man stops the dredging, then the girls help in the kitchen and in the process start their own catering business, as many girls do who move to the East End, and someone (characters seem to drop in and out) starts to redecorate the hotel room by room. But, more important, all the guests listen to the readings of "Dead Air."

Back at the readings, characters from "Dead Air" start dropping in to hear Peter Leroy read. Get the picture? Every evening, Peter Leroy, the 50-year-old, reads about the 13-year-old Peter Leroy, and his adventures. His friends from when he was 13 show up for the readings.

Busted

But one character from the memoir doesn't appear, Mrs. Jerold, the neighbor, the object of the little sex fiend's fantasies. Someone asks Peter Leroy how old Mrs. Jerold would be now, and he admits to his audience he made up the whole thing.

What? But it's a memoir, they exclaim. Besides, the characters he's been reading about are present in the audience, corroborating the story. And here enters one of Mr. Kraft's recurring themes, who is real? Once characters have been imagined, are those people any less real than the person who thought of them?

And here resides the potential major disturbance for readers of the novel. Is the author entertaining them? Or playing with their minds? And is it all in fun? And the answer is, yes, it is fun. So relax, enjoy the unusual dimensions the story calls upon the reader to enter.

Killer@hitman.com

About the time the reader's head stops spinning, out of Mr. Kraft's imagination, or is it Peter Leroy's, roars a contract killer - Rockwell Kingman, reachable at: killer@hitman.com .

What use is a hit man in a comic novel, even a dark one? To make money. Everyone needs money. Al though haunted by the possibility of financial failure, Albertine is a little queasy about Rockwell, she doesn't understand why her gentle husband has suddenly invited him into their lives.

As if this isn't disturbing enough, in the evenings after the readings, Peter Leroy tunes into Baldy, a dummy with a radio show. Baldy's show is aimed at children, and every night his advice drifts over the airwaves (Peter Leroy doubts anyone else is listening) and the advice sounds something like this: "Your little life could be much, much worse. You just roll that rock in front of your cave, boys and girls, and you sleep tight. Tomorrow is another day."

Running Out

Late at night, Peter Leroy confronts his failure. "I lay in bed facing the awful conviction that I had failed in the ultimate goal, that all I had done was buy coffee and varnish tables and write my memoirs, but failed to make Albertine happy, and that I was running out of time to accomplish it." Our boy is coming of age.

It is that sense of "running out of time" that infuses this novel with its different comic spark. And if Peter Leroy, and the rest of us, ever learn that it is impossible to make others happy, then perhaps we shall all be on the way to "coming of age."

In the end, even Baldy the dummy gives up, goes off the air. As his wooden head strikes the table, his sidekick, Bob, who has never said anything but "yeah" just before the microphone is turned off for the last time says, " 'There! That ought to make the bastards happy.' And then the microphone was switched off, leaving a permanent silence."

And you are left, dear reader, to figure out the rest.

Gary Reiswig, who lives in East Hampton, is the author of the novel "Water Boy."

Eric Kraft lives in Sag Harbor.