

# Novels Go Together Like Marriage and Divorce

## THE HOUSEGUEST

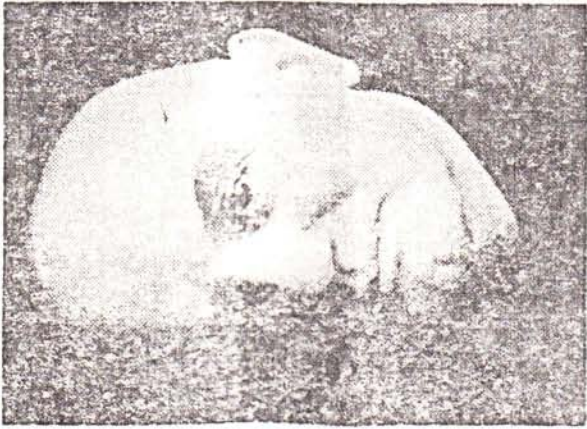
By Thomas Berger  
Little Brown  
240 pages, \$16.95

## HERB 'N' LORNA

By Eric Kraft  
Doubleday  
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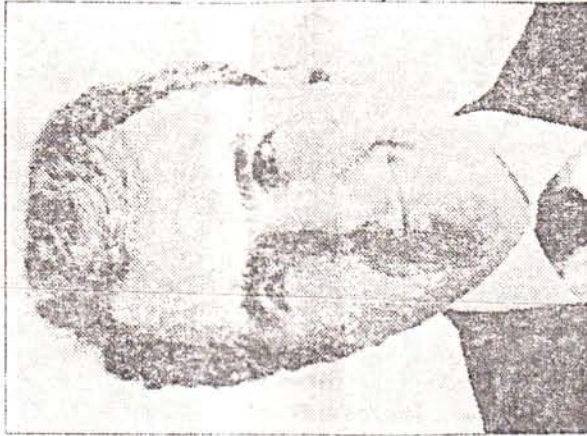
Thomas Berger: shows his mastery.

have taken a shaming to his "Gothic" effects, doing well by "Little Big Man" (which produced an Oscar nomination for Dustin Hoffman) while butchering "Neighbors" (which featured John Belushi in one of his final roles).

"The Houseguest" bears some resemblance to "Neighbors"—both expose the primal impulses that underlie a seemingly comfortable domestic situation. But Berger's focus in the current novel is upon the pretensions of bourgeois morality. (The Graveses are an underachieving, if well-to-do, offshoot of an Eastern Brahmin family.)

By the time the Graveses catch on to the fact that Chuck Burgoyne is conning them and playing them off one another, it's almost too late. He blackmails, humiliates and intimidates the lot of them — actually raping Lydia shortly after rescuing her from drowning. Their response is both brutal and inept: an irrational mockery of their previous high-minded hospitality.

The polymorphous Burgoyne is never subdued. Instead, Berger inserts a far-



Eric Kraft: an auspicious entrance.

ing plot twist that eclipses him, a turn that may seem too arbitrary for some readers, but which deflects attention from the suspense of the plot to the broadly-drawn morality play that underlies it.

A less problematic, if no less delightful novel is Eric Kraft's "Herb 'N' Lorna," a high-spirited romp through four generations of recent American history that may well prove to be the most pleasant surprise of the current literary season. Kraft is not a complete unknown. His eight-part serial novel entitled "The Personal History, Adventures, Experience and Observations of Peter Levoy" (1983) won him a small but rabid following. But it's hard to recall a more auspicious mainstream debut in recent American fiction.

An extrapolation of many of the themes and techniques developed in "Personal History," "Herb 'N' Lorna" is narrated Peter Levoy's imagined account of the half-century romance between his maternal grandfather and grandmother, Herb and Lorna (née Huber) Piper, af-

fectionately known as Gumma and Gappa. They were the geniuses of what was once known as the "coarse goods" industry and the American inventors of animated erotic jewelry.

Although the novel is an elaborate digression on the theme of personal mythology, it is never simply masturbatory in spirit. Moreover, although it explores a study of the social and technological changes that have taken place in 20th-century America, the purpose of the book is not simply to replay the past, but rather to reclaim it.

In large measure, it is a comradely celebration of human malvergency and iniquity, or more properly of the mutation of love and art over human folly. The families of both Gumma and Gappa are richly eccentric. The Pipers are a line of inspired thinkers and salesmen who tend to get caught up in the excessive enthusiasm of their own salesmanship. The Hubers cast their lot with the town's haberdashery trade and its offshoots.

Herb Piper is selling "Professor Clapp's Five Foot Shelf of Indispensable Information for Modern Times" as a front for the "coarse goods" trade introduced to him by his Uncle Ben when he calls on the Hubers. Lorna Huber, sophisticated extravaganza and the protégée of her libidinous Uncle Luther's "coarse goods" manufacturing sideline, answers the door and is immaculately smitten.

Thus begins a remarkable romance in which Lorna, the most accomplished artist of the erotic jewelry industry ever produced and Herb, the marketing and engineering wizard who developed a process for "animating" erotic jewelry, carry on their cloud-strewn careers in complete secrecy — unbeknownst even to one another for nearly 30 years.

Kraft's narrative technique is without contemporary parallel, but "Herb 'N' Lorna" is an unconventional success on its own terms. Indeed, Kraft's benign view of marriage and family life is the perfect antidote to Berger's tale of predatory power relationships in the parlor, kitchen and bedroom.