

Wichita Eagle Beacon

Novel brings heart, humor to eroticism

"Herb 'n' Lorna" by Eric Kraft
(Crown, \$17.95)
6-19-88

By Jim Erickson

"Herb 'n' Lorna" is a gentle little romp of a novel about two people who made their livings and found their satisfactions in a branch of the erotic-arts trade while keeping their involvements in it secret even from each other; it is one of those rare novels that handles erotic material with healthy good humor and affection for the people involved, with impressive physical frankness and bemused detachment at the same time.

It even describes acts of intercourse in terms of characterization, distinguishing not only between how Andrew does it and how Herb does it, but between how Lorna receives it and how Alice receives it, and more than that, between how Herb's mind reacts during it and how his physical organs respond to it, and it's all in character, fitting with what else we know of the people involved, and it's all considered very droll and quite acceptable as part of the human comedy. Nor is autoeroticism denied its legitimate role.

NOR IS PORNOGRAPHY. Herb and

Lorna are artists in the coarse-goods trade, designing and manufacturing tiny ivory models of people performing all manner of sexual acts, with even tinier gears and cogs and pistons and springs to make their movements realistic, and Kraft makes very clear that the designers, the manufacturers, and the purchasers enjoy the full erotic arousal that in fact, in real life, such watch-sized creations could hardly hope to produce. Even sexual rejection is presented as warm and humanly valuable, filled, like everything else in life, with heart and humor in about equal portions.

The tale is told by their grandson Peter Leroy, who had to learn to live with the shame of Gumma and Gup-

pa's profession, which he learned about, pretty improbably, at Gumma's funeral. The novel is published with all the trappings of a genuine memoir, including old photographs and indented passages of testimony by the lone survivor and references to actual places and people and events, though credibility is not strained at and the general effect is more of a legend or a comic epic than of an actual history. Kraft is the author of the serial novel "The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy."

AMONG THE MAJOR themes of

"Herb 'n' Lorna," running straight through the innumerable erotic passages, are the differences between life as experienced by A and by B, between what was said and what was meant and what was felt. But in Kraft's gentle world, the differences somehow get resolved and the real meanings come through somehow, at least when they are benevolent. That a novel can be at once so realistic and so optimistic is refreshing and rare.

The story is rambling and episodic, as the biographical form invites, but the novel is united by a number of intertwined themes: the coarse-goods industry; perceptions vs. actualities; the contrasts between the relatively ordinary characters and the bizarre events they go through, between the innocent tone and the raunchy activities, and between the problems of secrecy and the obvious lack of need for it; even the changes that come with age, and the differences between artists and engineers.

"HERB 'N' LORNA" is almost perfect poolside reading: episodic, to allow for interruptions; optimistic, to fit the leisurely summertime mood; funny, for occasions when sentiment would be awkward; sexy, without being erotic. It is an elegant trifle, but Kraft looks at life and individual situations in a suffi-

ciently complex way to convince the reader that he is trifling with reality but not out of touch with it; "Herb 'n' Lorna" is more intellectually satisfying than it sounds, partly because it never takes itself too seriously any more than it does anything else.

Very occasionally, the delicate balance wavers. Mrs. Stolz's conviction that Lorna is insane while Lorna is persuaded that Mrs. Stolz is senile is not a theme that can be carried far even in such a book as this, and Herb's

remodeling of the GI canteen cup gets more attention than we can choke down. The autoeroticism verges on bad taste here and there. But general healthy good humor about sex, and the sense of proportion about it, are among the rarest and most valuable virtues of a surprisingly satisfying and highly unusual novel.

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