

BOOKS

Comic romp takes a headlong leap into loopy heartbreak

Inflating a Dog

By Eric Kraft
Picador USA, \$25

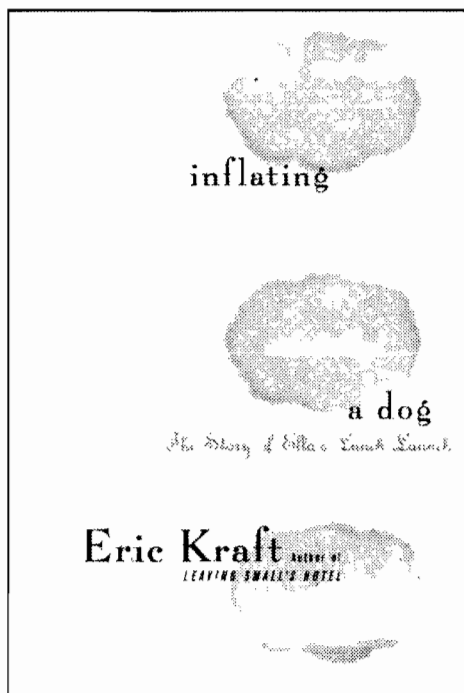
By Fredric Koeppel

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One must not launch a review with the word "hosanna," but I have to say, in any case, that I'm tickled pink by the return of Peter Leroy, memoirist and nostalgist, cynic and dreamer, in Eric Kraft's new novel *Inflating a Dog*, set in the small town of Peter's childhood and youth, Babbington, L.I., on Bolotomy Bay, where the clam is king.

Kraft, whose novels about Peter manage to be as light as a souffle yet as emotionally wrenching as grand opera — this is the eighth installment — plays, as always in his fiction, with the nature of memory and reality, "madeup" narrative and faux autobiography. *Inflating a Dog* concerns Peter's mother, Ella Piper Leroy, and an entrepreneurial venture she finally succeeds at, after the failure of such ideas as Ella's TV Colorizer, Ella's Cards for Forgotten Holidays, Ella's High-Heel-Low-Heel Convertible Shoe and Ella's Peanut Butter on a Stick. But as Peter says after he tells us about his mother's failures in the novel's Preface, "Must it be? Must it be as it was when the way it was was wrong?" In other words, Peter Leroy, looking back on his youth, will now, in telling his mother's story, recast it from failure to success, will create what his mother always wished for rather than merely record what actually happened. Of course none of this is "reality" anyway, is it? It's fiction, yet Kraft, through the lively, curious, self-deprecating intelligence of Peter Leroy, constantly undermines our faith in the fictiveness of the fictional narrative and compels us to believe in (at least to accommodate to) the exigencies of "real" life.

Not that this fiddling with reality and memory, this rewriting of personal history matter. As books by Eric Kraft usually are, *Inflating a Dog* is simultaneously delightful, provocative, poignant and deeply satisfying. (And all the more satisfying since the last Peter Leroy novel,



Leaving Small's Hotel, was uncharacteristically schematic.)

Peter lends success to Ella's plan by becoming her sidekick, a Sancho Panza, as it were, to his mother's quixotic vision of remodeling an old clam boat and taking customers for elegant excursions on the bay with champagne and multicolored finger sandwiches. He does this chiefly, unbeknownst to Ella, by keeping the Arcinella afloat. Wily old Captain Macomangus sold them a sinker, requiring Peter to work secretly every night all summer bailing the boat out (before managing to foist it off on a couple of guys as green as he had been).

Peter also draws into his mother's plan the incomparable Patti Fiorenza, the school tramp — at least she dresses the part and carries the reputation — who brings not only enthusiasm and resourcefulness to the enterprise but provides Peter, who imagines himself as burdened with a sign that says "Nice Harmless Little Boy," with his sexual initiation in chapters that test the poles of identity and role-playing.

As many teenagers do, Peter doubts that his real father, who owns a garage and watches television every night after dinner, could be the actual father of Peter Leroy or the "true" husband of Ella Piper Leroy, woman of dreams. So he elects as his possible sire Dudley Beaker, a next-door neighbor now deceased. When Dudley's widow hires Peter to watch the house while she goes away for the summer, Peter and Patti meet there and begin a speculative re-enactment in which Peter plays Dudley and Patti portrays the young Ella Piper, each ripe to entice the other in a frisson-inducing hint of mother-son seduction.

For its brevity (242 pages), *Inflating a Dog* is packed to the gunwales with the incendiary hungers, slippery bravado and rampant uncertainties of adolescence. These elements are particularly brutal for a sensitive, self-conscious lad — destined to be the author of the Larry Peters adventure books for boys — for whom the borders of hope and despair, love and sorrow, confidence and abysmal self-doubt run closely together. Kraft exercises considerable skill on these matters, especially in lyrical passages that epitomize the secret dreams and yearnings of a soul in the making, a fool for beauty who still finds beauty suspect because "beautiful things had the power to rob me of my reason, making me susceptible to romance and guile."

Inflating a Dog proves once again that Eric Kraft is a writer of magical verbal and narrative invention. The novel's various threads, its complications of character and plot, its reality-bending notions of showing and telling snap together, finally, with a gentle, inevitable, tear-inducing click. From the moment that Patti breaks into a doo-wop rendition of Stanza XI of Wallace Stevens's poem *Esthetique du Mal* to the mishaps and adventures aboard Ella's Elagant Excursions — when the mayor's wife falls into Bolotomy Bay — to the novel's consistent texture of expectation crowded by illusion and innocence darkened by experience, *Inflating the Dog* is downright elevating.

Fredric Koeppel is book page editor.

How many genocides does it take?

A Problem from Hell
By Samantha Power

now, is working," she writes bitterly. Genocide prevention

his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, he explained that it others, including the American Bar Association, who