

Fabulous Long Island

WHAT A PIECE OF WORK I AM
(A Confabulation)

By Eric Kraft
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By Mark Ciabattari

NOVELIST Eric Kraft's niche in contemporary literature might well be as a snappy, upbeat American version of the Argentine fabulist Jorge Luis Borges.

Like the latter's magical realism, Kraft's writing focuses on personal identity as an ephemeral, ever-changing construct, and this theme underlies his ongoing, major life's work: *The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy*, now consisting of five, independent yet related novels, including the latest, *What a Piece of Work I Am*.

In all his books, Kraft's fictional alter ego, the now middle-aged novelist Peter Leroy, recreates the imaginary Bobbington, L.I., a clammy village of the post-World War II era. Within that small-town world long past, he recounts stories of the younger Peter or of other residents—his own maternal grandparents in all their carnal delight in *Herb n' Lorna* and, in the satiric *Reservations Recommended*, the life of Peter's pompous food-critic friend, pen-named P. W. Beath.

Mark Ciabattari's latest novel, *The Literal Truth*, set in Manhattan and Long Island, will be published in July.



ILLUSTRATION BY BETTY HEIBER FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

His newest novel centers on the sultry Ariane, who had been the town bad girl in the 1950s. Baring the sexual secrets and bizarre events of her past to Peter, the platonically friend who is newly out of college and working as a teacher at their old high school when she first begins her story, Ariane pieces together a wild, fascinating tale based on her erotic history.

Peter listens as Ariane, who is six years older and more worldly, recounts growing up lower-class and having sex with many boys while the good girls shunned and bounded her for it. He remembers vividly his own puppy love for this luscious older sister of his best friend, Raskol—a friend who he says was "imaginary." A rebel before her time, questing, daring yet humbling in the back seats of guys' cars, fearless to the point of foolishness, she remains resilient enough to pursue a twisting life's odyssey that demonstrates her growing sophistication in matters of love and sex.

Peter tells Ariane's as a story within a Chinese box of stories—for instance, their many chats begin after Peter learns that Ariane "really" died when her house burned down. Wishing to give her the chance to have the life he thinks she deserves, he wills her back to life. In this new ending to her tale, accounting to Peter, she telephones him one night several years "after the fire extinguisher saved her life" to tell him she now wishes to share with him the hidden tale of her life. Borges-style, Peter lays bare the scaffolding on which he bases his tale.

As he helps her give a shape to her past, the wry, observant Peter evolves his own fable of Ariane. In this complex mirroring of two sides of an evolving identity, what the masterful tale teller Kraft does is show that, while Ariane may not exist materially, it is enough that she exists in Peter's imagination "at a crossroads in a labyrinth of tales."

Ariane is a rough-and-tumble Cinderella. She has experiences that are all too real—

like the time Guy, her boss at the first chain motel-resort in the area, seduced and beat her, then fired her.

She also experiences imaginary events—sailing as a galley cook on a make-believe boat captained by Peter's paternal grandfather, who is keeping his beloved, dying wife alive with each day's report of the "voyage" to the island of Karotoonga, the place of their dreams.

Later, a theater and film director, Greg Tschudin—like some demon personification of Ariane's unconscious processes—steals, distorts and re-shapes her memories to exploit her past. But from this, she learns to act her life consciously, and ultimately becomes famous as an actress. Years later, living in exotic places like Istanbul and Raagoon, she sends letters back to Peter, who collects them in a packet along with the yellowed notes from the long-ago chats—a cache of "real" material he says he has used in 1992 to begin this novel.

AS THE FABLED Ariane goes from being a character subject to life to being the author of the character in her life, the reader grows uneasy because her male creator, Peter Leroy, makes her overly optimistic about reconciling the contradictions in her life. She is too joyfully pragmatic.

"I've decided that my past and I have an inseparable relationship but a flexible one," she writes to Peter. "Many different dishes can be made from the raw ingredients of my past."

However, the dish Ariane sees as the best metaphor of her life is clam chowder, with the broth as her life juice, holding together disparate parts of her personal past. Kraft also sees each of his series novels as a piece of chowder adding independent flavor. If so, his latest is a mouthful of hot soup with salt enough, but not enough tang, to overcome the naturally bland taste of the truly bad girl who exists only in the mind of the coy voyeur.