

## LEARNING TO ACCEPT CHANGE AND LOSS

**The baby project**, Sarah Ellis. Douglas & McIntyre, 1986. 144 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-047-2.

Sarah Ellis's *The baby project* is remarkable for its range of tones which elicit diversity in the reader's emotional response. From humourous and critical satirical portraits to depictions of extreme grief and love, Ellis's wit and sincerity are apparent. *The baby project* deals with several contemporary family issues (perhaps too many for the young reader's assimilation) in its focus on eleven-year-old Jessica Robertson's response to the specific challenges and obstacles of her situation — a situation abruptly disrupted and complicated by the birth and death of her sister, Lucie.

Some of the subjects and issues addressed by Ellis include popular child psychology, prenatal conditioning, parents' roles, single parents, emotional illness, education, older mothers, adolescent withdrawal and crib death. Some subjects are treated seriously and thoroughly, with compassion and sympathy: for instance, emotional illness is explained in an extremely striking and sensitive manner. Others, such as crib death, are merely introduced and glossed over. The remaining issues are treated in a humourous manner, and the child's point of view casts aspersions over the adult world, which tends to take itself too seriously in attempts to direct and control experience.

Ellis is at her strongest when she uses Jessica's perspective to expose and gently satirize contemporary language, attitudes and stereotypes. Jessica's response to Mr. Blackburn's request for the use of "a variety of media" in the school project involves a mundane translation: "That meant Mr. Blackburn wanted you to go to the school library and look at filmstrips." Jessica accurately predicts Mum's weekend topics for conversation (derived from parenting articles left in the bathroom) and analyses Mum's attempts to spend "quality time" with her children, as opposed to the "equality time" offered to Jess by the tenant, Charlene.

The non-traditional roles of Jessica's parents are not simply accepted by either Jessica or Ellis, but are examined and criticized, even though the Robertsons have obviously chosen the roles most suitable to their temperaments. Ellis pokes fun at the contemporary stereotypes: Dad, who stays at home, makes egglemon soup and refuses to use canned feta cheese; and Mum, the beautiful, brilliant and athletic engineer, who cannot abide the boring task of ironing. Ellis's point is positive simply in its presentation of these non-traditional roles, but is also realistic in its acknowledgement of problems and conflicts, especially for Susan Robertson, who struggles to be both engineer and mother.

The novel's weaknesses include a rather confusing and compressed time frame, which could be clarified by specifying the length of Lucie's life. Jessica herself pales a little beside some of the more eccentric and captivating secondary characters, particularly Charlene, the dispenser of blue sea-urchin hair and black nail polish. Jessica's precocious friend, Margaret, arguably the most interesting of the characters, unfortunately fades away towards the end of the novel. Finally, *The baby project* concludes on a contrived and predictable note in the reconciliation of Jessica and Simon.

These are minor weaknesses in an unusually humourous and perceptive novel. Sarah Ellis deftly handles the eventual link between Margaret and Jessica, which is based on their shared experiences of hollowness and loss, along with their relinquishment of "that...happy in every part feeling." The extreme changes in Jessica's life force her to accept circumstances rather than attempt to escape or control them.

**Margaret Steffler** recently completed a Ph.D. at McMaster University on the Romantic child in Canadian fiction.

## CONVINCING AND COLOURFUL

**Tales of a gambling grandma**, Dayal Kaur Khalsa. Illus. author. Tundra Books, 1986. 32 pp. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 088776-179-8.

There are two things I really like about this book. The first is that it's funny almost by accident. The second is that the tone is so majestically irreverent. Humour and irreverence: what more can you ask for? No wonder, then, that readers feel the full force of a tragic ending. Not for a long time have I cried twice while reading a kids' book.

*Tales of a gambling grandma* is a schoolgirl's recollection of her grandmother, a Russian-born woman now living in Queens, New York. We know that the girl's parents work all day, and that Grandma lives with them. Grandma takes good care of her treasured grandchild, but, considering she's a grandmother, she has an uncommon skill. She's a "sharp-eyed" gambling card-player (initially, "to help make extra money"). The tragedy is that Grandma gets sick one day and dies.

I really felt like I was there. I was hugging and smelling those beautiful oversized multi-coloured dresses in my grandma's closet. I was collecting all those dirty old pennies in the corner of her drawer. I savoured the scent