

Dayal Kaur Khalsa

Terri L. Lyons

Résumé: Dans son éloge de Dayal Kaur Khalsa, décédée en juillet 1989, Terri Lyons passe en revue les sept ouvrages qui ont marqué la vie de cette auteure et illustratrice. C'est un intérêt grandissant pour la représentation des petites choses de la quotidienneté qui explique les thèmes et les illustrations de *How pizza came to our town* ou *Julian*.

One of Canada's leading illustrator/authors of children's books, Dayal Kaur Khalsa, died in July 1989 at the age of 46 after a long battle with cancer. Her publishing career spanned only three years but during that time she won numerous major awards in both Canada and the United States.

Generally speaking, art critics and reviewers examine an artist's whole body of work to detect patterns and growth over a lifetime. Unfortunately, Khalsa's oeuvre consists entirely of seven completed books and one text without illustrations. Despite the sparsity of finished works, Khalsa's work demonstrated definite growth and development. Patterns were beginning to emerge in her illustrations and stories. We can only speculate on what might have been, but there is little doubt in my mind that Dayal Kaur Khalsa would have become a leading international artist.

Khalsa was published exclusively in Canada by Tundra Books. Their writer's biographical data states that she was born in Queens, New York, in 1943. She attended City College and then wandered the United States and Mexico as a flower child before emigrating to Canada in 1970. She first lived in Toronto and then, in the late 70's, moved to Montreal to be a member of a Sikh ashram. Later she moved to an ashram in Vancouver to be closer to old friends.

As a completely self-taught artist and writer, Khalsa's accomplishments have been impressive. In Canada she has been a runner-up for the Canada Council prize, the Governor General's Award and the Amelia Francis Howard-Gibbon Medal. In the U.S. her books were selected as "best of the year" by *The New York Times*, the American Library Association, and The New York Public Library, to name only a few. Just recently (November 12, 1989) *The New York Times Book Review* chose *How pizza came to our town* as one of the ten best illustrated children's books of 1989. (In the USA it was published under the title of *How pizza came to Queens*).

Khalsa was well known for her personal trademarks – her vivid flat illustrations and her whimsical sense of humour. By the time the author had completed *Julian*, certain other trends had emerged – the endpapers were illustrated and Khalsa had now clearly perfected her painting technique.

The first two books, *Tales of a gambling grandma* and *I want a dog*, had plain endleaves (the paper that covers the inside cover board and also serves as the first blank page). The following four books have delightfully illustrated endpapers. Khalsa, with her usual gentle humour, chose an identifiable motif from each story and decorated the leaves in a manner similar to wrapping paper. *My family vacation* has its endpapers covered with post card-like images and *How pizza came to our town* is decorated with wheels and slices of pizza floating through a cloud filled blue sky.

It is in *Julian*, however, that this treatment became something more. The brown dogs appear to be cut-out stencils on a rich green background. A reviewer, writing about *I want a dog*, said that ". . .one might quibble with her renditions of the various dog breeds which seem to be too often in show-dog profile, as if an Illustrated Encyclopedia of Dogs was too close to hand" (CCL 53 1989, p. 87). That may have been true for *I want a dog* but in *Julian* the format is perfect! The dogs point in the same direction, all lined up in neat rows. Khalsa's unique vision is epitomized by the corresponding yellow dog in the lower right corner of both endleaves. *Julian*, the large boisterous dog, is depicted in mid-bound. Legs gathered together under him, ears flying out, *Julian* gallops wildly across the page. The mere juxtaposition of this mad lovable dog with the show-dog profile of the other animals exemplifies the author's humour and joy in life.

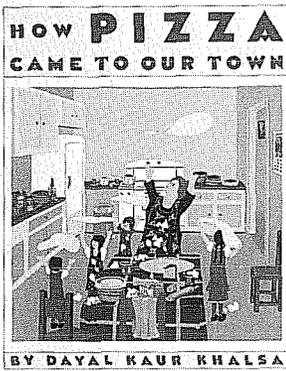


In addition to having a strong love of life, Dayal Kaur Khalsa had the unique ability to speak directly to *both* children and adults. What child wouldn't love May, the heroine of three books (*I want a dog*, *My family vacation*, and *How pizza came to our town*)? And every parent is sure to smile at the young girl's antics and then relate them to their own children as well as their *own* childhood memories. May, clearly based on the author's childhood, is universal and

timeless. The girl's persistent determination to convince her parents that she is capable of taking care of a dog is, I am sure, something we have all experienced. Khalsa, however, took the theme one step further – she had May adopt a rollerskate as a surrogate dog. Anyone who ever had to pretend that an egg was a baby during Family Studies is going to smile in wry sympathy at May's gambits.

The knowledge that an adult brings to these books adds a deeper level of enjoyment. A child would certainly derive pleasure out of the vivid cover of *I want a dog* but an adult would further relish it for its play on George Seurat's *A Sunday afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. Cathy Thomson, reviewing *Sleepers for Books for young people* August 1988), wrote: "The subtle and witty touches the author uses in her illustrations also help to underscore the book's theme; the little girl's father snoozes under Edward Hopper's Night-hawks painting, her mother takes a siesta under a sombrero, and her cat is curled up like a moon in the sky" (p.6). In addition, Khalsa's settings are from the fifties. Robin Lewis wrote: "Anyone sympathetic to the tiny visual minutiae which identify our cultural history will enjoy themselves immensely as they appreciate the cheap spotted kitchen lino, the vinyl and chrome dinette set, the frigidaire. . ." (CCL 53 1989, 87).

The reader can also get a clear indication of the author's reading taste. In one scene in *I want a dog*, May creates an obstacle course for her roller-skate/dog. Piled up books serve as props for the boards doubling as sidewalks.



The titles are as much fun to read as the text. In another book, *How pizza came to our town*, May and her friends take a trip to the library to try to find the meaning of the word "pizza". The main shelves are full of past classics, such as Tolstoy, and contemporary authors, such as Nadine Gordimer, but it is in the Little Readers section that Khalsa pokes fun (and perhaps displays a well-justified pride) in herself – cheek-by-jowl with classic children's books, e.g. Grimm's Fairy Tales, Mother Goose, etc. – sits the author's books, even those yet to be published.

It is with the use of these carefully chosen motifs that Khalsa touched and still touches the minds and hearts of her adult readers as well as their children.

Significant change, if not actual growth, can be seen in the artist's illustrations. An examination of the six books' three year span shows definite development in Khalsa's technique. Again, we can only speculate as to the outcome but her paintings are tighter, more cohesive and more polished in *Julian* than in *Tales of a gambling grandma*.

In the latter, published in 1986, Khalsa apparently used a combination of chalk/pastel and acrylic/tempera. Each illustration is a mixture of soft textured lines contrasted with bold flat colours. The paintings in this book tend to be gentler and quieter than the later ones.

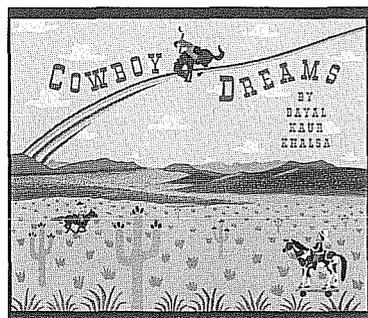
In *I want a dog*, published one year later, Khalsa was using less chalk and more paint. The lines are sharper and more clearly defined. She was beginning to master the use of colour and detail. In *Sleepers* and *My family vacation*, published the next year, 1988, there are only a couple of indications of the softer medium – in both cases to indicate red brick walls!

In the spring of 1989, Tundra Books released *How pizza came to our town* and in the fall *Julian* was published posthumously. In both books, the author has used the same technique of flat untextured brushstrokes of rich vivid colours. The end result is, however, somewhat different. This slight difference could be attributed to an insightful author or an artist who was still exploring her medium. In the former books, the illustrations and the people within them are from a distant point of view. Is this distance supposed to indicate the smaller scale of a child's vision? Khalsa apparently sacrificed intimacy for a background of rich detail suitable for a child's exploration.

The illustrations in *Julian*, on the other hand, are larger in scale and more immediate. Instead of trying to include all elements of a scene, such as a whole room, Khalsa concentrated on fragments. These fragments, like family snapshots, welcome us into the farmhouse and into the story. The rich colourful details are still there – the vines and the flowers still adorn the wallpaper in riotous profusion and the landscapes still appear to be Japanese block prints, but the illustrations are warmer. By the time the author had completed this

book she had apparently learned that two or three main elements can often create a more vital force than that of many.

In the spring of 1990, the author's seventh complete book, *Cowboy dreams*, was published, once again by Tundra Books. Dayal Kaur Khalsa had also written the text for an eighth book, *The snow cat*, just before she died. *Cowboy dreams* is the cumulation of a life-time of work and it will be interesting to see where her growth as a storyteller and as an artist had



taken her.

May Cutler, of Tundra Books, said of Khalsa's books that "they are her affirmation of the joy of life. They are her monuments." Having spent these last few weeks studying and reading her books, I too have had great joy in sharing Khalsa's vision of reality. In the very process of dying, the author wrote eloquently of life and, as a result, assured her own immortality. Her readers, whatever their age, can be thankful for the legacy that Dayal Kaur Khalsa left for us to all share.

Books by Dayal Kaur Khalsa

Tales of a gambling grandma, Tundra Books, 1986.

I want a dog, Tundra Books, 1987.

Sleepers, Tundra Books, 1988.

My family vacation, Tundra Books, 1988.

How pizza came to our town, Tundra Books, 1989.

Julian, Tundra Books, 1989.

Cowboy dreams, Tundra Books, 1990.

Terri Lyons, a librarian at the Brentwood Branch of the Etobicoke Public Library, is responsible for collections and programming for young adults.



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