

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

of the stale Evening in Paris cologne in its blue bottle. That anomalous breed of "old Country" woman, headstrong and self-reliant, curiously disapproves of non-sexist play patterns (Grandma insists that her granddaughter buy a doll and not a Ping-Pong-Pow Gun). At the same time, however, loving Grandma can't wait to teach her granddaughter how to play "real" cards — straight poker, five-card stud, three-card monte, chicao, and blackjack. The problem is Grandma always wins.

But Grandma isn't all kinky. She can knit, and she makes wholesome lunches. She also has a sense of social responsibility; she gets all the neighbourhood grandmas together to gamble for "trifles." The Sunshine Ladies Card Club meets in the backyard between the lawn mower and the umbrella clothes line. And this I know from the exquisite, brightly coloured illustration, naive yet exacting.

The book is convincingly written from the point of view of the little girl until the last paragraph (where she has supposedly, but not convincingly, grown up). When the storyteller's grandma dies, she says what other people say: "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." Then she goes upstairs to her grandma's room, and mourns in a child's way. She hugs the dresses and checks the drawer. Khalsa's images, carefully repeated in the right places, both in joy and in sadness, are shared only by grandma and granddaughter, and they continue to be part of the repertoire of all grandmothers and their precious grandchildren.

Marlene Kadar, a researcher and editor affiliated with the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto, teaches Creative Writing.

A STOCKING STUFFER ANTHOLOGY

Seaweed in your stocking, Stories and poems by Nova Scotian writers. Children's Writers Workshop, 1985. 56 pp. \$5.50 paper. ISBN 0-9692342-0-1.

There is considerable talent in this group of Halifax children's writers. This book, their first effort, a collection of stories and poems for Christmas, offers six short fiction pieces and five poems with appeal primarily for the eight to twelve age group. Many of the authors illustrate their own stories and the black and white line drawings (no one east of Montreal has the resources to print full colour) show charm and a fair degree of finesse,