

# An appreciation of Sarah Ellis



*Judith Saltman*

**Résumé:** Dans cet essai, qui est en partie un hommage, Judith Saltman analyse comment, dans la production romanesque de Sarah Ellis, le désir de promouvoir les valeurs familiales traditionnelles doit composer avec une tendance contradictoire qui, par le biais de la parodie et de la satire, transforme le réalisme en réalisme magique.

photo: Keith Maillard

Sarah Ellis wears a dizzying array of professional hats. She is a critic and teacher of children's literature, a columnist for the prestigious American children's book review journal *The Horn book magazine* and a children's librarian, a professional storyteller and a writer of award-winning children's books. In 1987 Ellis became the first recipient of the B.C. Book Prizes Sheila A. Egoff Prize for Children's Literature for *The baby project*, her first published book. And Ellis's *Pick-up sticks* won the 1991 Governor General's Award for Children's Literature in English.

Ellis's life in the world of children's books began with a contented 1960s childhood spent in Vancouver's West End. One of her strongest memories is the weekly visit to the public library which fueled her one-book-a-day reading habit from grades three through seven.

After studying children's literature and library services with Sheila Egoff at the University of British Columbia School of Librarianship, Ellis spent over a decade as a children's librarian in Toronto, Vancouver, and North Vancouver. She has taken great emotional satisfaction from the librarian's daily bringing together of child and book. She especially enjoys the discipline of putting ideas about books in written form.

This need for intellectual rigour led her to Boston in 1979 where she took a Masters degree at the Simmons College Center for the Study of Children's Literature. There she met Ethel Heins, then editor of *The horn book*. While chatting about books over dinner, the two agreed that Canadian children's books deserved international recognition and conceived the idea of a *Horn book* column on Canadian children's books. Ellis's writing in "News from the North" is personal and thought-provoking. She feels the column is neither reviewing nor criticism, but appreciation of a variety of genres and writers. Ranging from discussion of L.M. Montgomery's journals to Elizabeth Cleaver's picture books, the column is interesting to read for its own sake, dealing as it does

with general issues. Discussing Canadian books for an American audience has its odd moments of cultural disparity and sometimes involves explaining Canadian phraseology to the editor ("skiddoo" or "in the bush"). Ellis's voice in her *Horn* book column is refreshingly intimate and often inspiring. Speaking of Michele Landsberg's literary criticism, Ellis says: "One simple, but I think valid, touchstone for literary criticism is to ask whether it leads you back to the book that is its subject" ("News" 95). Ellis's columns do just that.

The writing of children's books is a more recent undertaking for Ellis and has had an impact on her column, making her a more appreciative reader, more aware of the structure of books and the effects achieved, and more easily delighted with the original, successful work, recognizing the amount of work in even a lacklustre book. But, adds Ellis in a recent interview, "I still hate to be disappointed. I want people to do better – not to get away with cheap effects and clichéd thinking" (interviews).

Surrounded by a community of writers in Vancouver, Ellis turned to the creation of children's books. "I wanted to see if I could do it. That must occur to anyone who gets pleasure out of children's books." In 1985 Ellis traded her full-time position as Coordinator of Children's Services in the North Vancouver District Library for a part-time job as reference librarian. After one year of writing and thinking time which produced never-published articles for *Homemakers Magazine* and technical writing gigs (how to build picture frames), her first book, *The baby project*, was published in 1986 by Groundwood Books. Margaret McElderry Books published it in the U.S. in 1988 as *A family project*.

*The baby project* is a modern child and family life story with a contemporary cast of believable, well-rounded characters: a working professional engineer mother, taxi-driver and house-husband father, two older sons, and the protagonist, eleven-year-old Jessica. The family scenes, natural dialogue, and engagement of characters recall the warmth and humour found in the traditional family stories of the 1930s to 1950s. Ellis creates a fully realized world, a family home the reader can walk into and inhabit.

The book is divided into two separate parts. The first half of the book revels in quirky humour and sharpness of characterization that at times veer towards Helen Cresswell's British Bagthorpe saga with such details as the eccentric tenant who writes unforgettable parodies of country-and-western songs.

The first half also explores the new social realism in children's literature with the impact on the family of a late baby (Mom is 42), and the adjustment to the baby by the entire family. After Jessica is surprised by the news that her mother is pregnant, she and a school friend enthusiastically adjust by monitoring her mother's "baby project" as a school science project. This section of the book has unforgettable scenes, from the stormy adolescent brother quietly reading *Motor trends* to the new baby, to Jessica and her friend taping the

ocean waves for a baby lullaby.

But this is not just an episodic family story, secure and ordinary. *The baby project* combines humour and pathos, comedy and tragedy. The second half of the book moves unexpectedly into an entirely different dimension. With a twist of direction and tone the narrative shifts into devastating tragedy. The baby dies of crib death and the chaos of the family's reactions, from withdrawal and numbness to rage and isolation, is dealt with honestly. The author does not show any quick, easy, lushly emotional resolution but the tentative beginnings by each family member of finding balance and solace in a cruelly changed world. The tensions and frictions in a family under stress are explored as they are in Jean Little's *Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird*. "I intended on writing a wholly sunny book like Lois Lowry," says Ellis, "a funny, warm family story. It kept getting serious on me. I knew the children were unhappy but I didn't know about what. I picked the baby's death because it didn't involve blame; it was a bolt from the blue."

There is a rare tonal quality in this book – a balance of tragedy and comedy – that recalls the work of Brian Doyle. The notion that life can be cruel and that humour and love are needed to balance its tragedies is handled sensitively. Part of Jessica's healing comes from her friend Margaret, who has already suffered through her parents' divorce and abandonment by her father and has survived. When Jessica questions Margaret on the future sadnesses life may provide, she answers: "I don't think it gets worse and worse. I think it just gets to be more of a ... sort of mixture, with different kinds of happy and sad" (*The baby project* 112).

The necessity of continuing the emotional celebration of life itself, despite its blows, is portrayed in a magical night bike-ride of Jessica and her brother through Vancouver in a cleansing odyssey that leads them beyond their pain to the threshold of healing, to a renewal of their family intimacy.

Jessica is an intriguing protagonist. We experience her inner psychological life. She is a whole, rounded character on the edge of puberty. Like that of a William Mayne or Jane Gardam character, her mind is constantly turning over ideas and exploring perceptions of self, others, society and the adult world.

Ellis's style is extremely polished and controlled for a first novelist. Much of the wry wit is implied through seemingly artless, very natural and colloquial dialogue balanced with Jessica's inner soliloquies. About the reception of *The baby project* Ellis comments she is amused by the reviews describing the family as hypermodern. "I don't feel like a very modern person," she says with a laugh. "I have no interest in deconstructionism. I'm not very fond of four-letter-word children. I really like the family in *The baby project*", she continues, "I was writing about a 1950s-style stable family. In fact, the initial scene of the book is one parent (the father) baking cookies."

Ellis's memories of childhood are of a family closeness and security closer to the atmosphere found in classic child and family life novels such as Eleanor

Estes's secure *The Moffats* than that of the modern dangerous world of Brock Cole's *The goats* where danger comes from the dysfunctionality of contemporary society. "My worlds aren't really dangerous worlds," she explains, "I am building stable families with traditional, old-fashioned values – even with the stresses of the single-parent family, as in *Pick-up sticks*."

As in *The baby project*, a Vancouver setting is subtly evoked in Ellis's second novel, *Next-door neighbours* (1989). Set in 1956, it is basically a traditional family story as well as one of friendship. "I feel like it's my warmest book," comments Ellis, "and maybe the most accessible to child readers. It's quite a naïve book, full of real child play."

The balance of humour and pathos found in *The baby project* is here rendered in an examination of the love and kindness of family and friends as opposed to the social cruelties of prejudice and bigotry. Poignant, episodic vignettes and Ellis's low-key, offbeat sense of humour propel this quietly-paced story of twelve-year-old Peggy who has just moved from the country to Vancouver. Overwhelmed by shyness and feeling alienated at her new school, Peggy tells a lie to gain attention and is ostracized by her schoolmates when it is discovered. Over the summer she finds solace in unlikely friendships with her two "next-door neighbours." Both are unusual friends who extend her limited vision of social acceptance, self-esteem, and humanity. One is Sing, an adult Chinese gardener and house-boy for a wealthy woman who uses him as a kind of slave. The other is George, a young Russian refugee her own age. Both Sing and George have lived through experiences of cruelty and pain. George has harsh memories of the Second World War; Sing's daily treatment by Mrs. Manning is a grotesque humiliation. Yet Sing and George have such a level of self-esteem and acceptance of themselves that they are not destroyed by their roles as "outsiders" in society.

Their summer of friendship involves a satisfying project, the truly child-like creation of a puppet show, with tension caused by Sing's dismissal (he has taken half an hour from work to attend the puppet show which he had helped to create). The children are stricken with a sense of injustice and guilt over this unexpected consequence of their actions. They search for clues to Sing's whereabouts and discover the reality of his life. Their examination of the empty shell of his bare, lonely room extends their understanding of human suffering and courage. However, the love and sensibility of Peggy's family and the wisdom she has shared with Sing and George ameliorate her pain and she faces the new school term with assurance.

The story is quietly told, and as in *The baby project*, the final scene has a celebratory, exuberant fullness restoring order and meaning to Peggy's world as she celebrates her Christmas with a fire-works display sent to her by Sing. It is a celebration of the human spirit's triumph over cruelty and limitations. It is also a rejoicing in the Canadian tradition of multiculturalism.

Ellis says of *The baby project* that writing of the crib death required re-

search; it had not happened to any family that she knew. Peggy's shyness in *Next-door neighbours*, however, has its genesis in Ellis's childhood. "When I was a kid I had no idea that others felt shyness. I thought it was unique to me and I wanted to give Peggy that feeling." To Ellis, "As anger and guilt are reversals, so shyness has to do with shame; it is shame writ small." The source of the protagonist, Peggy's, shame is her constant state of embarrassment, her sense of potential humiliation, and the oppressive struggle with ambivalent feelings about who she is. Ellis explains that *Next-door neighbours* has a more formal story-telling quality than her other novels. There are more stories within stories: Sing's childhood story of jumping into a ditch to avoid embarrassment and the puppet show story of "The fox and the hare." This stronger narrative quality, Ellis feels, makes the novel "an easier book to read. The style is more straightforward, younger and the humour different, more naïve."

The assertion of self within the folktale of "The fox and the hare" becomes the assertion of Peggy and George's sense of unique selfhood and their recognition of the wrongness of intolerance and racial prejudice in the pain of Sing's life.

Ellis says that child-readers respond to this book more openly than to the others. "I've been to schools," she says, "where teachers have gone into it with children. The children want to talk about racial prejudice, moving, shyness. Kids have these experiences."

Also in 1989, Ellis ventured into picture-book territory with the publication of *Putting up with Mitchell: My Vancouver scrapbook*, a witty tour of Vancouver full of charming details in concert with the exuberant and whimsical illustrations of Barbara Wood. While visiting their grandmother in Vancouver, Elizabeth and her obstreperous younger brother Mitchell are taken on day-trips to Vancouver landmarks such as the UBC Anthropology Museum, the aquarium, and the Bloedel Conservatory. The lively book was partly inspired by Vancouver bookseller Phyllis Simon who noted there wasn't a children's book specifically about Vancouver. As an admirer of Barbara Wood's pictures of Vancouver buildings, publisher Terri Werschler subsequently approached Sarah Ellis to create an appropriate storyline and characters to match Wood's style.

With the publication of *Pick-up sticks* in 1991, Ellis crossed the threshold into the genre of young adult fiction. Thirteen-year-old Polly, the protagonist, is older than Jessica or Peggy and her life, as Ellis says, "is more out there in the world. She's not at home in the same way as Jessica and Peggy." Whereas the younger girls' stories are rooted in home and community, family and friendship, Polly's story is one of homelessness: losing roots and community as well as losing closeness to her mother. Polly struggles with the spectre of homelessness and instability in her life with her single mother, a stained-glass artist who decided to have a child without a partner.

The dynamics of *Pick-up sticks* are more complex than those in the earlier

novels. The book is thorny with difficult contemporary social issues and public concerns, in subtle juxtaposition with, and straining, the intimacy of Polly's relationships with friends and especially her mother. Vancouver's social and political atmosphere, with its strong alternative life-style community and numbers of the disadvantaged and dispossessed in conflict with the developers and politicians, is even more a concrete figure here than Vancouver's physical presence, pervasive in the earlier novels. "I write about Vancouver and set my books here," says Ellis, "because I live here. It's what I know."

After Polly and her mother lose their home, they go on a quest to find a new one, a depressing search that reveals to Polly the economic disparities and social injustices of her city. Polly also ventures into a different quest: the young adolescent journey of self-discovery, an exploration of personal, familial, and social values. Her struggle with conflicting beliefs and values is set against the dramatic urban headlines which emerge as subtexts: the lack of affordable housing and homelessness; the inclusion of the mentally disabled in society; the increase in disaffected youth and vandalism; the threat of urban violence; the dynamics within non-traditional families and dysfunctional families; the power of social activism in opposition to greed and exploitation.

The weight of such a litany of urban pain could be crushing to a lesser writer, but Ellis's concentration on the personal story of Polly's conflict with her mother provides a concrete focus. The strain of near-homelessness leads Polly to leave her mother and stay with her affluent Uncle Roger's family. The contrast between their life of material privilege and cold, emotionless alienation and Polly's warm life with her free-thinking mother and friends is aptly drawn in Ellis's depiction of Uncle Roger's home:

Life at Uncle Roger's was so easy. No lugging her horn to school in the rain. Uncle Roger drove her. No busing home from the library. Aunt Barbie came to pick her up. No dishes. Just stow them in the dishwasher. No cleaning out the bathtub. Mrs. Clemens came in on Fridays. If you phoned somebody and the line was busy, you didn't even need to dial again; you just pressed the redial button.

You hardly even needed to talk. The family didn't eat together unless Uncle Roger and Aunt Barbie had a dinner party. When Uncle Roger drove Polly to school he listened to sales motivation tapes. The house was often empty, the only life the little blinking lights of machines – microwave oven, VCR, telephone answering machine, CD player (*Pick-up sticks* 69-70).

Once again, Ellis writes of outsiders in society. In *Pick-up sticks* the portrayals of George and Sing from *Next-door neighbours* are joined by the character of Ernie, middle-aged, mentally disabled, and one of Polly's closest friends. The humour, dignity, and warmth marking the special closeness between the two friends is shaped by Ellis's compassionate acceptance and celebration of human differences and her strong social conscience, as also seen in the depiction of racism and tolerance in *Next-door neighbours*.

The growth and development of Polly's character through the story into a deeper understanding of human nature and need is paralleled by Jessica and Peggy's personal growth and change in the earlier books. Touched by the cruelties and complexities of life, each girl voices within herself an awareness of inner transformation, of slow maturing, however simple or fleeting. In *Next-door neighbours*, Peggy lies in bed at night:

Beside her curtains, in her mind's eye, hung the plastic ones in Sing's room, the cold linoleum, the stained sink. She looked at her ornament shelf of lovely ceramic ladies, at her desk, her books, her framed paint-by-numbers, and she thought of people in small, mean places – Sing in his scene-decorated basement, and George in his railway car. The Peggy who had sneaked into Mrs. Manning's basement suddenly seemed like a child years younger than herself, a child she could barely remember being. She punched a hollow in her cool pillow and gave in to sleep. (107)

Of the thematic links among her three novels, Ellis says, "I have only one major idea and I have it to death – a preadolescent girl discovers that life is more complicated than she had previously thought." Admitting to a somewhat medieval world view of capitalized humours and large emotions, Ellis explains, "In each book I've dealt with one big emotion: grief in *The baby project*; shame in *Next-door neighbours*; anger in *Pick-up sticks*."

All three of her novels reflect what Ellis calls her "old-fashioned values: love, loyalty, humour, warmth, imagination, kindness, honesty, integrity, tolerance, and compassion." Ellis recognizes, however, that *Pick-up sticks* is different from her two earlier novels. Speaking of her three protagonists, she says, "Polly of *Pick-up sticks* is more out in the world than Jess or Peggy. A lot of the scenes take place not in the home but in a laundromat, running on the street, with an awareness of strangers and the urban threat." She goes on, "With the other children, someone is always at home when they come home; they don't think about money. Jess in *The baby project* thinks about death and cruelty; Peggy in *Next-door neighbours* thinks about tolerance and cruelty; Polly thinks about money, finding a home and a father, the clash of values with her mother."

Ellis does not subscribe to the school of thought that children need lots of plot. "I am trying to work out for myself how to write a compelling book without relying on major events." Ellis's novels are usually episodic in structure. "I tend to write a book in scenes, little set pieces (I can't think of any other way to do it.)"

*Pick-up sticks*, however, has a real plot. Ellis is satisfied with the suspense of the narrative, how the pieces fit together, the shape of the book. "In my other novels," she says, "the interrelationships were the focus and problem. Here, there appears to be a tangible problem: finding a secure home. But that turns out not to be the problem after all. In an earlier draft, I had Polly find a home. Then I realized it was unnecessary since the conflict is actually the clash of values between Polly and her Mom."

Although the genesis of *Pick-up sticks* was a specific CBC *Morningside* interview with a homeless woman which mentioned her daughter's pain and tears, most of Ellis's novels are based on her own childhood memories of family and friends rather than on ideas or on past or present events. "I definitely explore feelings more than ideas. I really admire idea writers: Jill Paton Walsh begins with ideas – the great idea of sending a contemporary child back to Victorian England in *A chance child*. Kit Pearson finds inspiration in history in *The sky is falling*. But I don't. I start with a character. I'm really interested in trying to get people right, in capturing the subtext and the feeling between people in dialogue."

And, like many writers, Ellis continues her characters' stories beyond the confines of the books, linking the life of the 1950s in *Next-door neighbours* with the 1980s in *The baby project*. "This is all in my head, of course," she comments, "but, when Sing goes to Dawson Creek at the end of *Next-door neighbours* he marries a much younger woman. They have a son and that son is Jessica's friend Margaret's father, the disappeared dad in *The baby project*."

It is true that Ellis pays meticulous attention to human emotions and life's details. Her writing successfully evokes a vivid quality of livingness: subtle feelings and thoughts explored from within characters' minds; the complexities of human interaction; the clarity and awareness of living in the moment. She says, "I like to notice how things are and try to capture that: the details that build a world, the relationships between characters, the surface of life – how you eat an ice cream cone."

Critics and readers often comment that Ellis is a natural storyteller. But the professional storyteller disagrees. She says of her writing process, "I don't like being a storyteller, always saying what happened. I like saying what is happening, being right in the moment. I tend to think this is what is happening and I'm going to tell it to you in the truest way I can: the crispest, most real, most recognizable way. That level of vividness is what I am trying to give to children in my writing."

This degree of clarity and intensity gives Ellis's narrative voice a freshness and vitality matched by her superb use of language. Her love of language and obsessive search for the exact word and phrase result, she explains, in a difficult writing process. "A recurring problem is my internalized loud-mouth editor's voice which paralyzes me. It doesn't allow me to blurt out and tidy up later. Because I want to get it perfect as I go along, I write slow and tight. And so I am a short writer. I edit too soon. The first draft of *Pick-up sticks* was only 80 pages long. My editor, Shelley Tanaka, said 'Where is the rest?' I said 'I cut it out'. I think I should take a writing course that loosens you up. But I'm superstitious that if I become too analytical about writing I wouldn't do it anymore."

Ellis writes simply, but evocatively. Her use of imagery is restrained: often recurring metaphors convey a sub-text throughout or illumine the changing



state of the characters' consciousness. In *Pick-up sticks* the image of the title recurs through the text at climactic moments of pain and resolution. Upon alienating Vanessa, her best friend, Polly poignantly observes a scene from a younger and simpler childhood:

Polly turned and leaned her head against the small back window. She looked into the yard below. Tony was lying on his stomach playing with a set of pick-up sticks. He arranged them carefully in his fist and then gently released them. They fell into a rainbow-colored pattern on the grass. Polly remembered doing that when she was little, making patterns, arranging the sticks into families. Sometimes she had even played the real pick-up sticks game. She had played it with Vanessa. *The stick flower blurred.* (*Pick-up sticks* 76)

The gentle pathos in this image of the tentative, beginning realization of life's mutability and changefulness is completed in the novel's conclusion. Here the metaphor reflects Polly's growth, self-discovery, and awareness of life's complexities:

Polly made a see-saw with her two plastic straws. She thought of pick-up sticks. You pull out one stick and the balance shifts and the whole pattern changes. (*Pick-up sticks* 122)

Ellis creates a sense of contemporaneity in *The baby project* and *Pick-up sticks* by building a patina of surface detail; the paraphernalia and pathos of modern life litter the pages, from the bundles of rags in downtown malls that are human beings and the walkman-wired adolescent to the blinking, lonely lights of CD players and microwave ovens. The contemporary colouration goes beyond social atmosphere or satire to become part of internalized metaphor; the contemporary image of the VCR defines Jessica's grief in *The baby project*:

Later on it seemed as though the week that followed Lucie's death was a video movie played on a machine with only two controls, fast forward and pause. Fast forward and pause, but no play, no record and, most of all, no rewind. In bed at night, scared of giving in to sleep, Jessica tried to rewind the tape to just before Lucie's death and then to make Lucie grow up. ... But it didn't work. The pictures wouldn't come alive. (106)

In the denouements of her novels, Ellis offers a vision of discovery, completion, wholeness, and a celebration of family, friendship and the human community. The serious thoughtfulness leavened by wit characterizing Ellis's writing is brought to a rich fulfillment in the rounded conclusions of her books. In each, the circle of quest and self-discovery is closed with a simple, subtle form of ritual, laminating the protagonist into the family and community. Also, in each conclusion, the realism slips for a moment into a kind of magic realism; whether a bicycle ride in the middle of the night, a fireworks display in the snow, or a group of people in a cafe transformed by beauty – the ordinary becomes charged with an extraordinary poetic significance.

In *The baby project*, the children's bike ride through the night-time city is bitter-sweet, touched by thoughts of mortality, gentle humour, and exhilarating adventure. Imbued with a softly surreal quality, this final scene evokes an awakening to life's mysterious balance and hope for the future: "All night, every night as she [Polly] lay sleeping and dreaming, there was this same and different world and she had never seen it before" (*The baby project* 140).

*Next-door neighbours* ends with a bang – Chinese New Year fireworks (a gift from Sing) set off in the Christmas snow while neighbours gather in amazement and celebration. The inner nucleus of family and friends is extended to include the whole neighbourhood in an embracing vision. All of the community can be the next-door neighbours of the title:

The first explosion made the across-the-alley dog begin to bark, and soon people started appearing. Heads poked out windows, frontdoors opened and porches started to fill up. A line of people formed at the front fence. Mum poured cocoa from thermoses, and Old Billy from the rooming house three doors down started circulating his bottle of rye....

The sky filled with flowers of light. The Murphys, who hadn't gotten around to taking down their Christmas lights, switched them on again and the tiny spots of colour reflected the grand explosions in the sky above. Colin and George began to set off two things at once, and the colours mingled and fell together. In the moment of the fireworks heading whooshing into the sky everyone held their breath and let it all out in an 'ahhh' together. The display ended with the sinuous writhings of the extra-long python snake, and then George went around with sparklers for everyone, even throwing them up to people at windows. The Murphy kids twirled theirs in hoola hoops of light until they fell over in the snow. The grownups stuck theirs in the window boxes and in the fences (*Next-door neighbours* 122-3).

*Pick-up sticks* ends with a subtle beatific blessing, a vision of Polly's mother as a young woman, at the moment when she sat in a neighbourhood cafe eating blueberry pie and decided to have a baby. As she looks at the people in the cafe, she is struck by the absolute mystery of another human life: "They all looked so beautiful. Human beings seemed like the most wonderful invention" (123). This perception contrasts, like opening and closing parentheses to the text of the book, with the opening scene of Polly's vision on a city bus:

Suddenly, in the cold fluorescent light, *everyone* looked distinctly odd, like Martians or Venusians who had missed one essential lesson on how to pass for Earthlings. She had noticed this before – how one day everyone looks normal, and the next day everyone on the bus and in the school halls and in the library looks like someone in a cult movie. (*Pick-up sticks* 4)

The progression of plot between the two scenes echoes the resolution of the mother-daughter conflict and the shared acceptance of each other's choices and needs. The movement from alienation to affirmation in the novel and in these two mirror scenes is complete as Polly thinks of her mother, "finding the world suddenly beautiful" (123), and choosing to have a child. Ellis, as she does

in all her novels, closes the story with a measure of solace, certitude, and faith in the changing patterns of human life.

For all the simplicity and understated grace of her writing style, Ellis returns again and again to complex themes. And although her novels are not dense with theme and subtext, they are serious, and demand a concentrated thoughtfulness from the reader. Although the three novels' denouements are satisfying, the fact that Ellis does, as she says, "write short" leaves, at points, a wish for a longer novel with more room for exploring theme and character to a fuller dimension.

Humour is also a major component of Ellis's writing. "I find lots of humour delightful," she explains, "from pratfalls to highly attenuated *New Yorker* cartoons. I like dry and wet humour. I really enjoy stand-up comedy and slapstick." Characters in Ellis's novels are surrounded by a low-key comic warmth, ranging from a sense of play and silliness to subtle irony and satire. The wit is both verbal and situational. Running jokes shared in families and among friends act as a private short-hand language, defining family closeness, the affectionate play that binds relationships, as in the teasing between Jessica and her father in *The baby project*. Jess's dad's tongue-in-cheek dinner-table monologue is an example of the running family gag:

'Jessica, *please*,' dad's voice filtered through. 'Could you pay some attention to eating? Dinner with this family is getting to be like eating with an order of silent monks, what with Mr. Wired-for-Sound over there and a daughter who is trying to find the answer to the universe in her peas. We could have a little conversation, you know. Some families share things at dinner. Some families discuss world affairs. We could even assign a topic if nothing leaped to mind. How about gerbils? You, the youth of today, could share a fresh modern perspective on gerbils. We, the older generation, could share experiences of gerbils of the past. I, for example, could tell you about my career as a door-to-door gerbil salesman.'...

'Your mother could talk about the computer applications of gerbils and then we could share some heart-warming stories of the gerbils we had when we were first married.'  
(*The baby project* 15-16)

Parody also has a place in Ellis's broad range of humourous writing, from *The baby project*'s tenant Charlene's attempts at country-and-western song-writing which drift up the hot air register:

'Like two socks from the dryer  
We used to stick together,  
But you left me for another  
But you left me for another  
And I'm living cling-free  
Cling-free, cling-free,  
That's the way it's gonna be,  
Cause you left me for another  
And I'm living cling-free.' (*The baby project* 85)

Eccentricity of character and outrageous situations are common elements in Ellis's writing. This gives her an opportunity, she says, to use a "sharper, more pointed wit. Charlene in *The baby project* and Ernie in *Pick-up sticks* march to different drummers. I have a low tolerance for other writers making up wacky characters for the sake of it. In my own writing I try to create major, whole-rounded characters most of the time. But at the periphery I like to find room for little cartoons."

The affectionate and sensitive portrayal of country-and-western singing Charlene and mentally-challenged Ernie, however, is quite different from the sharp satirical depiction of the Yuppie uncle's family in *Pick-up sticks*. Whereas Ellis depicts Mrs. Manning, the bigot in *Next-door neighbours*, with humanizing, insightful perception, drawing her a strapped-in lonely misery, in *Pick-up sticks*, some satirized figures come perilously close to stock characterization. Ellis addresses this: "The part about the Yuppie family got me in trouble with some critics and it was the part I enjoyed writing almost the most. I find it oppressive to be fair. It felt liberating to write about this family. I didn't want to make the uncle a deep person with a past; I just wanted to play."

In both her critical and creative writing, Ellis works toward a sensitivity that incorporates the child reader. She never forgets that children's books are read by real people. That knowledge, so obvious yet so often overlooked, lends value to her critical writing, and authenticity and appeal to her fiction. Ellis comments, "I'm pretty aware that I'm writing for children, for pubescent children. I have strong ethical feelings as a children's writer. I would never write genre fiction for children. I would be appalled. I couldn't do it. I'm very idealistic about writing well for children. But, in a sense, it's not for them. It's for me. I became a writer because I want to do something significant in the world. I didn't really become a writer for a career."

She considers her inner child as part of her characters and a critical reference point: "My child self, a girl about twelve, is still alive in me. I do reach back to her to check things out. My characters are a fictional construct of Jessica, Peggy, Polly and myself. Children's responses to my writing are surprising and touching. I like exploring their perceptions of what I have done. One girl in Quebec told me, 'When I'm reading your books I feel like I'm the person in them'. I was moved to tears. What is stimulating to me as a writer is communicating with another human being, creating the experience for the reader of feeling, 'Yes, that is what I've always thought, always felt'. If I can do that two or three times in a book, I feel I have that connection with a reader. And I figure I'll have a better chance with kids, of catching those fresh perceptions of life because children, as readers, aren't jaded or overly familiar with them."

Ellis's stories of growth and change offer both the child and adult reader engrossing experiences of complex personal epiphanies, simply and beautifully told. Each of her novels is touched by her craft as a writer and by her compas-

sion as a human being. Ellis's writing grows stronger and richer with every book.

## WORKS CITED

- Ellis, Sarah. *The baby project*. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1986. (Published in U.S. as *The family project*.)
- . Personal interviews with Judith Saltman. April 1989 and March 1992.
  - . "News from the North." *The horn book magazine*, LXIII (January/February 1987).
  - . *Next-door neighbours*. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1989.
  - . *Pick-up sticks*. Toronto/Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1991.
  - . *Putting up with Mitchell: My Vancouver scrapbook*. Illus. Barbara Wood. Vancouver: Brighthouse Press, 1989.

**Judith Saltman** teaches in the School of Library Science at the University of British Columbia. She co-authored, with Sheila Egoff, *The new republic of childhood: A critical guide to Canadian children's books in English (1990)*; she is the editor of *The riverside anthology of children's literature (1988)* and the author of *Modern Canadian children's books (1987)* and *Goldie and the sea (1987)*.