

Dayal Kaur Khalsa: The art of remembering

Gail Edwards

Résumé: Dans son analyse de l'oeuvre de Dayal Kaur Khalsa, G. Edwards étudie le contenu et la signification des détails visuels et, en particulier, la manière dont ceux-ci influencent notre compréhension des sous-entendus du texte: ainsi, l'exagération des illustrations de D. Khalsa transforme les vérités apparentes en de charmants mensonges paradoxaux.

In the space of three years in the late eighties, Dayal Kaur Khalsa wrote and illustrated a series of picture books that constitute a visual (auto)biography. In these books, Khalsa explores the meaning and reliability of memory, and the importance of family context in life history. By evoking popular culture and its artifacts in her illustrations, Khalsa provides a fully realised, time-specific world for her character May to inhabit. Furthermore, through the device of self-referential visual quotations, by means of which characters and settings reappear from book to book, Khalsa creates a form of "visual intertextuality" unique in the canon of Canadian picture books.

Khalsa's cycle begins with *Tales of a gambling grandma*, which establishes the frame of reference to family life stories, and the importance (and unreliability) of memory. *I want a dog*, *My family vacation*, *How pizza came to our town*, and *Cowboy dreams* extend the theme of family stories, and can be seen as a continuation of the narrative of *Tales*.¹ A close examination of the illustrations in the seven picture books, in the order in which they were published, reveals her growing self-confidence as an artist, and an ability to manipulate the conventional boundaries of the picture book text.

In *Tales of a gambling grandma*, the first of the series, Khalsa maintains a sense of ironic distance through a sophisticated interplay between the story told by the grandmother, the understanding of the child listening to the story, and the adult perceptions of the narrative voice, amplified by the illustrations. The opening sentence "This is the story of her life as she told it to me and as I remember it" casts immediate doubts about the external veracity of the story. Clearly, it tells us, we may be dealing with two unreliable narrators: the grandmother and the granddaughter have both filtered the historical "truth" of their story through the lens of time.

Khalsa makes this explicit by the illustration on the title page: a framed view of the earth, surrounded by a starry sky. In the middle of the ocean is a straw-filled

cart, with two feet protruding, one foot encased in a black shoe. The reader is presented with the child's imaginative vision of grandma's story: "So she escaped to America wearing only one little black shoe, hiding in a hay cart drawn by a tired white horse, all the way across the wide, slate-green Atlantic Ocean." And then the adult narrator interjects, "At least that's how she told the story to me."

This sense of the unreliability of grandma's stories, filtered through the equally vivid imagination of the childhood self of the narrator, is enhanced by Khalsa's use of cultural clichés. According to her story, grandpa was hired by Dutch Schultz, a big time gangster, to fix the pipes in his hideout, while grandma played poker to supplement the family income. The illustration of the hideout is filled with classic gangster images from Hollywood films of the early 1930s. Two sinister black figures in trench coats and fedoras lurk, one leaning against the wall by the door, the other on the roof. A getaway car waits outside. Through the upstairs windows, one sees Louis fixing the plumbing by candlelight, while in the next room grandma plays poker. The silhouette of the Brooklyn Bridge dominates the dark blue night sky, and provides both a strong decorative element and a reference to the specific location mentioned in the text. Did grandma see this episode of her life in cinematic terms, or is the adult Khalsa reinterpreting the story within the visual conventions of a narrative genre and childhood exaggeration?

The answer seems to come in subsequent pages. After the death of her husband, Grandma moves to a new house in Queens with her daughter and son-in-law, where the narrator was born. In contrast to the restricted urban spaces of the opening pages, the illustration of grandma and the narrator in the front yard is dominated by the green of the willow tree and grass. A sense of privacy and enclosure is created by the tree: grandma and the narrator, seen for the first time, sit together in close physical proximity in the lower right quarter of the picture, the space visually bounded by the hedge that surrounds them. The textual



Figure 1

narrative on the facing page reads "She told me stories of her life and gave me two important pieces of advice." On the two subsequent pages the folk wisdom of grandma is given a comically literal visualization by the childhood self, while at the same time the adult narrator highlights the patent absurdity of grandma's important advice. In the first of these pictures, the narrator, dressed in a fringed cowboy jacket, toy gun drawn, watches from behind a tree, as the gypsies she has been warned about set obvious and cartoon-like traps for her (figure 1).

The dangerous holes awaiting the unwary who stray into the woods are arranged as decorative polka dots on the grass, and the sense of theatricality is heightened by the rather artificial shadows cast by the rope lasso, the trees, and the gypsy woman in profile to the extreme right of the picture, who brandishes a hook in the manner of classic vaudeville. In subsequent pages the narrator reveals that she attends the movies and vaudeville with grandma, confirming that both grandma's story, and the perceptions of the child may be subject to re-interpretation according to pre-existing genres of narrative.

In the picture of the Cossacks invading the narrator's kitchen in Queens, the threat implied by the drawn swords is completely negated by the cozy domesticity of the scene.² The narrator, in her Brownie uniform, has taken her grandma's advice,³ and cheerfully helps to serve soup from a fridge entirely filled with jars of bright pink borscht. Dirty soup plates, in a blue willow-type pattern, are tidily soaking in the sink. The time is specific: four o'clock according to the clock over the fridge, and the table with chrome legs, and the style of the mixmaster on the counter place the scene firmly in the late 1940s or early 1950s. Khalsa plays the bright yellow of the kitchen cabinets against the red shirts and blue trousers of the Cossacks. The flecked linoleum on the floor, the decoratively scalloped valance over the window, and the house plants all provide pattern and texture to the illustration, and enhance the specificity of the image.

It's clear that Grandma's dire warnings, delivered in the best "old wives' tale" manner, have been interpreted within the everyday life of the childhood narrator, who contextualizes the scene according to the familiar constructs of her reality. Cossacks have no extrinsic meaning or threat for the child, apart from the threat implied by grandma's stories, so it is not unexpected that the child imagines the invasion as a social situation requiring the hospitality normally shown to guests, despite the somewhat unorthodox manners implied by the unsheathing of a sword in the kitchen. But it is Khalsa the adult illustrator who interposes a level of comic vision between the story and the reader, and brings into sharp focus the unreliability of both grandma's advice and the child's interpretation of that advice.

The exaggerated, folkloric quality of grandma's storytelling is perfectly visualized in the scene of the luxurious train trip to California, during which "she spent the whole trip soaking in a big white tub full of fresh orange juice." Surrounded in her bath by baskets of oranges, Grandma is flanked by two formally posed uniformed attendants who pour silver pitchers of orange juice, freshly squeezed by the machine at the left of the picture, into the claw-footed bathtub. At this point grandma's skin is still pink, but by the time she reaches California on the next page she is bright orange. The textual reference to the Santa Fe Chief is echoed by the "Navaho" patterned carpet and the cactus seen through the train windows. Again, childish imagination, filtered through adult sensibility, interprets the symbolic markers of grandma's definition of luxury literally, and presents the reader with an image both opulent in its abundance and

faintly ridiculous.

It is during grandma's trip to California that she wins a diamond ring in a poker game. Pictured during the two-week long marathon poker game organised in her honour, grandma wears a green eye shade and sun glasses, and her tropical palm-motif dress echoes the palm branches overhead. The rough, broken texture of the orange brown walls of the previous page gives way to saturated and intense hues of bright blue, shocking pink, red, and jungle green that successfully evoke a sense of holiday relaxation and freedom.

The ring won in the poker game becomes the token of continuity with the past, and a physical reminder of the unreliability of the past. The alert reader might notice that Khalsa's description "a bright shiny gold ring with two glittering diamond chips" is couched in the language of childhood enthusiasm, and gives a strong hint that childish perceptions are at play. Doubts about the value of the ring, which is consigned to a green velvet bag in grandma's bedside table drawer, are also raised by the narrator's previous enumeration of grandma's other "treasures" hidden in the same drawer: old pennies, a tiny bottle of *Evening in Paris* cologne, a snapshot of grandma holding the narrator as a baby, hairpins, and false teeth, all precious memorabilia of no real extrinsic worth.

When grandma returns from California, she teaches the narrator to play cards at the dining room table, below a reproduction of Paul Cezanne's *The card players*.⁴ The narrator previously hinted that grandma's afternoon card games with the Sunshine Ladies neighbourhood club might have been less than entirely honest. Grandma's suggestion that the ladies gamble for "trifles" to make the game more interesting is somewhat suspicious, since grandma always won. The same choice of the rather ambiguous word "interesting" is again used in reference to the card games played by grandma and the narrator. It is at this point that the reader may remember that grandma learned to mark cards while playing with Dutch Schultz. Ambiguity extends from memories of the past to the actions of individuals in that past.

The only moment of inter-generational conflict occurs when the narrator's desire for a Ping Pong Pow bazooka gun runs headlong into grandma's expectations of appropriate gender role activities. The confrontation in Macy's toy department occurs in front of a friezelike arrangement of lines of teddy bears, dolls, pull-toy dogs, and doll houses. The gun is the same size as the narrator, and its disproportionate size suggests that the adult illustrator looking back saw the humour of the situation. Grandma's posture, feet rooted firmly to the floor, Betsy-Wetsy doll in hand, vividly suggests the complete and immutable firmness with which she offers yet another friendly piece of advice. Laws of Life are clearly not open to debate.

Despite this brief moment of conflict, the connectedness and mutual affection of the narrator and her grandmother is the overwhelming emotion of the book, nowhere better described than in the illustration of grandma waiting with lunch for the narrator (figure 2).

The composition creates a tight oval, with the eye being lead inevitably back to the outstretched arm of grandma, proffering a sandwich to the narrator, who stretches out her arm to take it.⁵ The formal symmetry of the living room beyond, and the framing device of the arched dining-room doorway, create a sense of repose and harmony, and help to make explicit the mutually interdependent relationship of the two characters, grandma calmly supporting the self-imposed childhood rituals of the self-absorbed narrator.

The sense of grandma's unqualified love is all the more poignant when, turning the page, the reader discovers that grandma has suddenly died. The totemic objects that represent family memory are

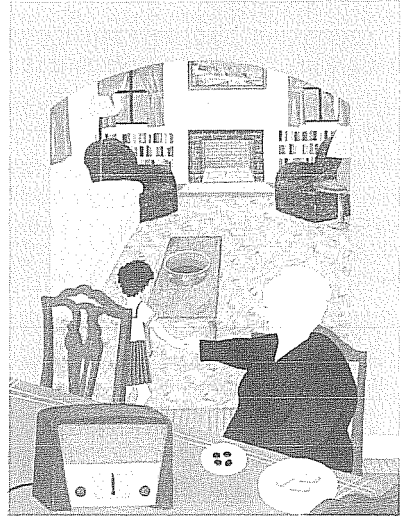


Figure 2

visible for the first time in the opened drawer of the bedside table, and the bleak neatness of the room contrasts with the earlier scene in which the narrator is cozily tented in grandma's bed. Without the dynamic and colourful presence of grandma the room seems pallid and subdued. All that can be seen of the narrator is her arms embracing grandma's dresses in the closet. The text emphasises the disjunctive experience of the narrator without the protection of grandma: her childhood rituals are not respected at the neighbour's house where she has lunch on the day grandma dies.

"And that's the story of my grandma's life as she told it to me and as I remember it." Both the narrator and the grandmother are unreliable witnesses to the past. The adult narrator discovers that the diamond ring is neither diamond nor gold, although love confirms the inheritance as valuable—an idea emphasised by the final illustration, a vignette of the ring resting on its green velvet pouch on a hand of face cards, the King of Hearts in the centre. The adult narrator has inherited the responsibility for the telling of family stories, as well as the ring, and is now the keeper of the treasures in the bedside table.

I want a dog, published in 1987, develops some of the themes present in *Tales of a gambling grandma*, as Khalsa more fully explores the interplay between childhood and adult perception, and the possibilities of pictorial and textual narrative telling different versions of the same story. In *I want a dog*, Khalsa uses paintings by other artists as a device to amplify the narrative, while at the same time sharing a visual joke with the sophisticated reader.

The front cover establishes the use of visual quotation to humorous effect: the heroine May, wearing her cowboy jacket and saddle shoes, her pair of roller skates beside her, sits in peaceful bliss in the centre of a parody of George

Seurat's *L'après-midi à l'Isle de la Grande Jatte*,⁶ here transformed into a dog-lover's paradise. The cover illustration, in combination with the title, immediately fixes the reader's attention on the depth of May's passion.

The title page has a line of dogs, graduated in size from the largest on the right to the smallest on the left, with a roller skate on the extreme left. The combination of the line of dogs with the play of the white pickets against the flat bright green grass creates a strong rhythmic progression that moves the reader to turn the page to find out why the roller skate is included.

The narrative shifts from the reminiscent first person of *Tales*, to third person: "May wanted a dog more than anything else in the world." As May has the same curly red hair and fringed cowboy jacket as the unnamed narrator of *Tales*, the reader assumes that they may be the same character. The opening illustrations quickly establish for a very observant reader that the story is set at some point in the early 1950s, although the time period is never mentioned in the text. There are saddle shoes and copies of *Life* magazine on the carpet in May's bedroom, which seems to be a shrine to dogs; the *Nights in Paris* Beauty Salon advertises Poodle Cuts; and May's classmates are dressed in clothing typical for the period.



Figure 3

However, her classmates have one anomalous feature, not typical of the 1950s: they all have dog heads. May "sat in school daydreaming about dogs" and Khalsa presents the reader with a visual amplification of the text. The dog/girl to the left in front of the blackboard holds up an assignment "Our friend the dog," and the books on the shelf on the back wall include *Run Spot run*, and *Lassie*. Clearly the reader is being allowed to share May's dog-obsessed vision of the world.

The physical location of the story is established when May tries her first ruse to acquire a dog, trailing a slice of salami behind her on the street. The accompanying illustration of her house is the familiar brick and clapboard siding house of *Tales*. The kitchen from *Tales* also reappears, this time in two shades of a bright lime green.

The kitchen picture shows that May's attempts to give her mother a dog for a birthday present have failed: even though mother is only visible from her neck to her knees, her posture clearly indicates her displeasure. Khalsa alters her frame of view for the first time in this illustration, using a medium close-up from below to bring the reader closer into the action.⁷ The various compositional elements shift in size relative to their importance in the picture: the puppy is nearly the same size as May, and mother is a giant in comparison to the refrigerator.

From a careful examination of details one may infer that the time period in which *I want a dog* is set is slightly later than *Tales*. For example, the living room we see in the next picture has become more "modern." Furniture with spindle legs, chairs with tropical printed fabric, contemporary lamps and venetian blinds replace the cozy, rather overstuffed look of the earlier book. Edward Hopper's *Early Sunday morning*⁸ hangs on apricot coloured walls over the lime green sofa, set on a bright turquoise carpet. Khalsa plays clashing vivid colours against one another, creating a slight feeling of unease. Despite the *New York times* casually strewn on the floor and the copy of Faulkner's *Light in August* on a hassock, this is a tidy, self-disciplined room, and it is not difficult to understand why May's parents don't want her to bring a dog into the house.

The use of detail to anchor a scene in specificity and build a framework of contextualized references recurs throughout Khalsa's work. The double-page spread of the basement with May's carefully constructed training course for walking her roller skate is filled with minutely described objects that serve a similar totemic function to the bedside table drawer in *Tales*. May wears the same black and white fringed cowboy jacket seen in the gypsy scene of the earlier book, and the blanket patterned with horse heads and horseshoes anticipates the cowboy motif of *Cowboy dreams*. The dollhouse on the right hand side seems to bear a close relationship to the one pictured in the toy department of Macy's, as do the pull-toy dog and the black and white teddy in May's room, seen earlier. Khalsa quotes three famous paintings, reproductions of which hang on the panelled walls of the basement: Van Gogh's *The bridge at Arles*, Gilbert Stuart's *Portrait of George Washington*, and Kasushika Huokusai's *The great wave off Kanagawa*.⁹ The books that support the ramps of the training course have legible spine titles or authors, including *Daisy Miller*, *The good earth*, *Kipling*, *The last tycoon*, *Laura*, *Main street*, *Milton*, *Swann's way*, *World book*, *The wings of the dove*. One assumes that these are works of significance to Khalsa, and act as signposts to the path between the child depicted and the adult narrator, devices that aid in the construction of memory.

My family vacation, published in 1988, establishes the theme of remembering with the ambiguity of its title. The story is about May, told in the third person, and yet the title uses the first person possessive "my." Does this refer to May, or to the adult Khalsa, who narrates the story, and is remembering her vacation? The endpapers further the image of memory.¹⁰ Khalsa first experimented with decorated endpapers thematically linked to the text in *Sleepers*, (published earlier the same year) where she scattered stars on a dark blue background. Here the endpapers are not only thematically linked but amplify the text, allowing the reader to share the souvenirs that May has assiduously collected during her holiday. Souvenirs literally are things that help one to remember, to recollect. Postcards also permit the recipient to share vicariously in the voyage, and thus the postcard endpapers invite the reader to join in the process of remembering.

The illustration facing the title page anticipates the voyage. May and her parents and brother all examine travel brochures of Florida, the ultimate destination of the family vacation. The dining room chairs are familiar from *Tales*. Two scenes of calm domesticity and bourgeois contentment, Vermeer's *The cook* and *Young woman with a water jug*,¹¹ hang on either side of the red curtained window. The round table, around which the family is clustered, serves to unify the figural group, creating a sense of connection.

The illustration of the Texaco station which follows, places the reader firmly in the mid-1950s. The winter that dad is eager to escape is evoked by the vast pale blue sky, flecked with snow. May is thrilled with the snow, and isn't sure that she wants to participate in the vacation. Lacking previous experience with a family vacation, she has no memories to draw on to reassure her that the new experience will be as pleasurable as the familiar and favoured snow. Mom reassures her "Just wait until we get to Florida ... you'll forget all about snow."

When the car breaks down en route, it is mom's map that locates them spatially and metaphorically "right smack in the middle of nowhere." Cows watch over the fence as dad tries to determine what has gone wrong with the engine. When it cannot be fixed, a bright pink replacement that seems to be symbolic of the tropical brightness awaiting the family is purchased from a used car lot. It is appropriate that the journey require a transformation, as they move from nowhere to somewhere. And at each stop, May collects remembrances: "May loved souvenirs. They were her favorite part of the trip."

When the family arrives in Florida, they immediately begin sightseeing. The image of May and her family during their visit to the Parrot Jungle resembles a souvenir snapshot. May, Dad, and her brother Richie all wear T-shirts emblazoned with a palm tree and the word Florida. The family poses in front of bright green palm trees, looking straight out at the reader, each echoing the other's frozen formal position, arms extended above their heads, parrots perching on their hands and hair. Of course May adds parrot feathers to her growing collection of memorabilia.

The car trip, like all lengthy car trips, is boring, and May and her brother, who

do not have a close rapport, begin to quarrel. They look small and isolated in the back seat, while through the dashboard window the empty road, bordered by palm trees, stretches to the horizon. Mom's comment, "I can't wait to get to the hotel so they'll have other children to play with," that is, and be away from the adults, is somewhat ambiguous when one remembers that this is a family vacation. The greater irony is that when they do arrive at the hotel, May and her brother hide among the potted plants from the special children's social director, not wanting to be part of activities that they view as childish.

May finally wins her brother's respect by diving off the high board at the hotel's swimming pool. A strongly decorative rhythmic pattern is established in the picture of this scene by the line of palms and the striped deck chairs lined up at the side of the pool, and by the scalloped edge of the pool. The tiny figure of May is isolated against a huge expanse of blue sky and turquoise sea. Richie, wearing his snorkel, is the only person swimming. The adults only want to lie beside the pool, in undifferentiated rows, highlighting the difference between the expectations of a child and those of an adult about the perfect holiday activity.

United in escaping the adult's idea of holiday activity, May and Richie win permission to go sightseeing on their own. The family in the family vacation has been redefined. They play ski ball at a penny arcade, and go bowling at "an alley that usually didn't allow children." As the illustration makes clear, the bowling alley is otherwise deserted, so the manager's bending of the rules is hardly generous. They play miniature golf amidst reproductions of the Statue of Liberty and the Great Sphinx, and Richie becomes involved in collecting souvenirs for May. The perceptive reader will appreciate the irony that the things that May and Richie enjoyed as "sightseeing" could have been done at home, with the possible exception of miniature golf. For the children, sightseeing is not synonymous with seeing the sights of a specific geographic place.

On the last night of the vacation the whole family goes to a nightclub, where May has one last chance to collect souvenir paper parasols from the pineapple juice drinks served in coconut shells. Finally, the family arrives home from their vacation, back to the snow. The vignette of the house, with the new pink car parked in the driveway, shows May peering out of the window: "May was surprised to see the snow. She had forgotten all about it. 'But I'll never forget my family vacation,' she said, and hurried into the house to arrange her souvenirs."

Throughout the story the emphasis is on souvenirs. May collects ephemera of value only to her, in the same way that grandma's treasures had no extrinsic worth. The reader may wonder if May will remember the family vacation, as she has forgotten the snow so quickly. Obviously the adult narrator has not forgotten, and is able to conjure from her memory objects and events that give specificity to the past.

How pizza came to our town, published in 1989, is another third-person story about May. The opening sentence casts the story in language reminiscent of fairy

tales: “Long ago, before there were pizza stands and pizzerias and frozen pizza and pizza mixes, there was hardly anything good to eat in May’s town.” The flying pizzas on the endpapers, interspersed among fluffy white clouds in a blue sky, further enhance the sense of fantasy.

When May and her friends, the three Penny girls, set out to cheer Mrs. Pelligrino, their sad visitor from Italy, by performing a “special play with a happy ending,” the fairy tale motif recurs: Little Red Riding Hood, a fairy queen with a crown and a star-tipped wand, and a witch share the stage with May, wearing her cowboy jacket, hat and boots. Khalsa’s artwork has a new vitality and the early, rather nervous handling of texture through small fidgety detail is now self-assuredly open and loose. The illustration of the children in their pyjamas catching fireflies on the lawn is lyrical in its evocation of a warm summer evening. The joyous dancing motions of the children contrast with Mrs. Pelligrino sitting impassively in her wicker chair, mute in her unhappiness. The girls go to the library to research how to make pizza to cheer Mrs. Pelligrino (figure 4). Many of the books are carefully titled, as they were in *I want a dog*. The books comprise a mixture of all of Khalsa’s own works, both published and unpublished at the time (including the 1992 *Snow cat*), and classics of Western

and Eastern literature, including titles by Herman Melville, Henry James, Jack Kerouac, Malcolm Lowry, Charlotte Brontë, Virginia Woolf, Pushkin, Gogol, Chekov, George Eliot, Guru Nanak, and Zane Grey! Clearly these titles have been chosen for their significance to the adult illustrator, as they neither comprise an expected and established canon, nor are an entirely random selection.

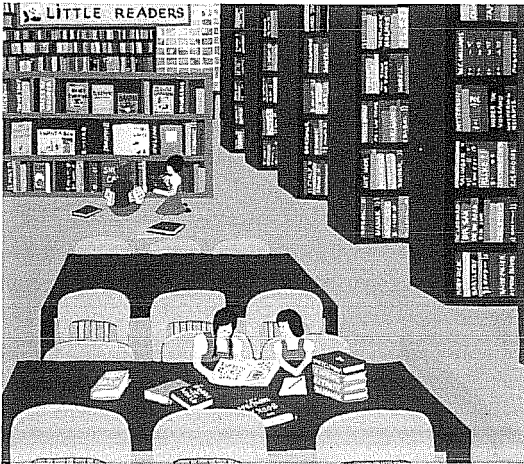


Figure 4

An internal chronology places this story earlier than *My family vacation* and *I want a dog*. At the library, May and Linda Penny look at books in the Little Readers section while Judy and Peggy do the reading and notetaking. Clearly Linda is the youngest of the sisters: are she and May just beginning to read? There is another clue to the chronology: when the pizza is ready to be taken from the oven, “May called her grandma to come over,” and she is the same grandma from *Tales*. The story is less overtly nostalgic than Khalsa’s other titles about May, but it nonetheless paints a clear picture of the neighbourhood and its close relationships.

Cowboy dreams was published posthumously, in 1990. It is a summation of Khalsa's life stories about May, and she reverts to the first person narrative of *Tales*. It seems clear that Khalsa intends the reader to identify May and the narrator as one and the same person for the purposes of the story.

Cowboy dreams has the most sophisticated book design of all of Khalsa's works. Each individual component of the design is integrated into a thematic whole that seamlessly unifies picture and text, at the same time amplifying the narrative. The front cover establishes the play of memory and fantasy that characterises the illustrations. In the lower right-hand corner, May, wearing her cowboy jacket and boots and riding a toy horse on wheels, looks up at a cowboy riding a bucking bronco on a rainbow between letters of the title. The endpapers extend the imaginative interplay. May, this time on a real horse that rears up on its hind legs, tips her hat to the reader, while to her left cowboys on horses are carefully interspersed among giant cactus, below clouds that resemble cowboy hats. The title page continues the cowboy motif in the choice of an "old west" typeface. Bands with decorative motifs of stetsons, horse heads and cowboy boots frame the text. The colophon page, bordered by cactus and cowboy boots, shows May on her toy horse, flanked on either side by silhouettes of running horses. The cowboy on a bucking horse from the front cover is rendered at the top of the page in rainbow stripes, against a dark blue sky spangled with stars. The same slightly obsessed vision that informed *I want a dog* in relation to dogs is transferred here to cowboys.

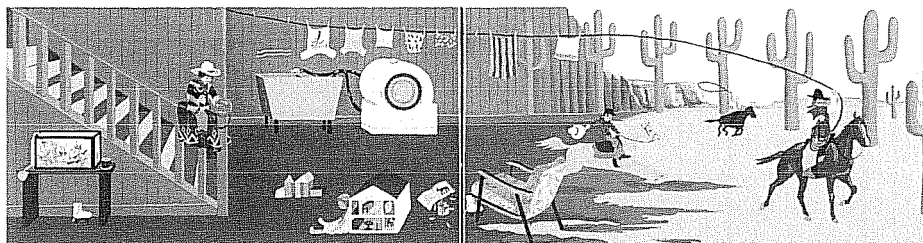
As the story begins, "my earliest memories" recall the red-headed toddler of *Sleepers*. The series of small illustrations on the left-hand side of the page resemble snapshots from a family album. They establish the sense that the narrator is constructing reality for the reader of her life story.

Each subsequent page introduces characters, themes and motifs from her earlier works, in a summation of artistic vision and continuing narrative. A quotation from a famous painting, Rosa Bonheur's *The horse fair*, highlights May's visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. At the movies, Gene Autry with his guitar, horse, and covered wagon fills the black and white screen. May is identifiable in the lower right-hand seat, as she is the only red-head in a sea of black crescents. The chronology of the story within the larger life story, set in the idyllic world when Grandma was alive, is established when the narrator lists the members of her family "all week long I practiced jumping out at my mother, brother, grandma and the cat..."

Later, the familiar neighbourhood street outside her house is the setting for May to enjoy a ride on Tony the Pony Man's small brown pony. One of the Penny girls is among the group of onlooking children in this picture.

May has asked for a horse, although she knows that "my parents didn't even want a dog in the house." The illustration on the next page presents May's plan for stabling a horse in the garage, allowing the reader to share in May's fantasy world.

After a visit to FAO Schwartz toy store with her grandma, May focuses her imagination on the toy horse on wheels depicted on the cover. At this point, May's fantasy world becomes the narrative, as the familiar basement setting of *I want a dog* melts into a dream of the "land of the cowboys" (figure 5) that May has created from familiar songs. May moves from riding the handrail of the basement steps to the Technicolour world of cowboy movies, as the play of fantasy and imagination, announced on the front cover, is further developed. May, seated on the FAO Schwartz toy Appaloosa, looks down on a wagon train wending its way through a generic Death Valley-type desert, to the words of



"Home on the range." Khalsa captures the feeling of desert heat in the red-browns, oranges, pinks and purples of the landscape, against a pale blue sky.

The desert scene segues into a wordless double page spread of the deer and the antelope playing. The remarkable friezelike arrangement of animals, from the line of buffalo silhouetted on the crest of the hill to the leaping antelope, resembles nothing so much as knitted hunting-sweaters of the 1950s, or game-patterned wallpaper. The stylised, non-naturalistic handling of the animal forms evokes a sense of May's riotous imagination, which recasts the words of the song within the context of familiar images.

"I'm a Poor, Lonesome Cowboy" on the following page isolates May on her toy horse, wheeling through a naturalistic landscape of scrub vegetation and hills, under a huge blue sky. The sense of vast empty space receding into the distance is perfectly balanced against the melancholy words of the song, and leads the reader in a natural progression into the funeral from "The Streets of Larado" in the next page.

In procession from left to right in front of a streetscape of adobe houses, cowboys and cowgirls twirl their lassoes, while May, in the centre, walks her toy horse with five other cowgirls bearing flowers, preceded by the coffin carried by six cowboys. Angels wearing white sombreros hover above the coffin in poses reminiscent of Mexican folk art. To the far right, the yellow road winds off to a graveyard on the hillside, scattered with white tombstones. Despite the sombre nature of the song, the illustration is cheerful and bright, and the reader is thus not surprised by the vision of the "Red River Valley" which follows.

May, still on her toy horse, follows behind a cowboy on a real horse moving right, out of the picture. At the left, the valley has a vivid band of bright red flowing through it, and a spectacular sunset can be seen through the cleft of the

valley. The text concludes "I find myself humming one of those old sweet songs—and I feel as bold and brave and free as a cowboy again."

Khalsa was terminally ill at the time that she created *Cowboy dreams*, and the work has an elegiac quality, tempered by an unflinching cheerfulness in the face of death. Her work is summed up in its pages as the leading characters from her previous picture books make guest appearances. The overt narrative of the story stops as May is carried away into her dreams, and the reader is carried away with her. May's life story will continue to resonate in the reader's imagination after Khalsa's passing.¹²

In the end, whether or not May's story as realised in the series of picture books conforms in every detail to the externally verifiable events of Khalsa's life is not important.¹³ She creates a fully realised character, with a history within a specific physical setting and temporal location.

Nevertheless, Khalsa does play with the expectation that biography is objective and autobiography is subjective. May's story is seen simultaneously from within and from without, as the narrative moves from first to third person and back again.¹⁴

Recent studies of women's autobiographies have developed the idea that, unlike men's life stories, which are about separating from the family to achieve individuation within the context of a continuously developing linear narrative, women's life stories are disjunctive narratives that emphasise connection and continuity with the family story (O'Brien 125; Smith 12).

Khalsa's (auto)biographical stories of a character named May are deeply rooted in the life history of family members, specifically her grandmother, and in the accretion of detail, memory and tangible connections to the past. The accumulation of souvenirs is symbolic of May's need to be connected to her own past, to create her own bedside drawer of memories. Khalsa's use of other artists' works as visual quotations to amplify and comment on the textual narrative, and as private homage to her own significant cultural icons,¹⁵ is consistent with her self-reflexive quotation of her own art, which elicits the process of remembering in the reader. To follow the stories from the beginning to the end is to participate in an active process of making connections between books, between characters, and between parts of the larger life story.¹⁶

At the same time, the connections in her own narrative are not bound to a tight linear structure. It is never made clear how old May is during any given story, and it is left to the reader to sort the stories into some kind of satisfactory chronology, following internal clues, much as May listens to her grandma's stories, filled with immutable Laws of Life that exist outside time and place. Khalsa's picture books are indeed about the art of remembering.

NOTES

- 1 The series also includes two books not discussed in detail here: *Sleepers* and *Julian*.
- 2 See the discussion of this illustration by Herman, 398-399.
- 3 And lives up to the Brownie duty to Lend a Hand, and the Girl Guide duty to Be Prepared.
- 4 Khalsa depicts the version in the Musée d'Orsay collection. A slightly different version of the painting hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.
- 5 For a discussion of the effect of composition see Moebius.
- 6 The Art Institute of Chicago.
- 7 See the discussion of cinematic technique in the illustration of picture books in Bachand and Turcotte.
- 8 The Whitney Museum, New York.
- 9 Van Gogh is at the Kröller-Müller Foundation; Stuart and Hokusai at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
- 10 For a discussion of the importance of endpapers see Harms.
- 11 The first is in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the second in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
- 12 Traditionally biographers have ended full-length biographies with the death of their subject This form of closure may be satisfying, but it is also another false ordering, implying that the biographer's text is co-terminous with the life" (O'Brien 130).
- 13 See Cutler for biographical details. "Autobiography masquerading as biography," a description used by Bell and Yalom (4), seems particularly appropriate to describe Khalsa's work.
- 14 One of the more obvious contextually motivated choices in our speech is that between first, second, and third 'person.' 'I' 'we' and 'you' are all terms reserved for the participants in an act of communication. To speak in the first person is to identify oneself as the immediate source of the communication" (Bruss 20-21).
- 15 For example, copies of Edward Hopper's paintings occur in *I want a dog*, *Sleepers* and *Julian*. According to May Cutler, Khalsa gave up art lessons in New York after seeing a Hopper exhibition because she felt she could never paint that well (259).
- 16 See, for example, Smith's discussion of the reader as the creator of the text (6), and Lewis on the active role of the reader (136-139).

WORKS CITED

- Bachand, Denis, and Marie-Andrée Turcotte. "Images d'enfants de l'image: L'illustration à l'ère audiovisuelle." *Canadian children's literature* 60 (1990): 34-44.
- Bell, Susan Groag, and Marilyn Yalom, eds. *Revealing lives: Autobiography, biography, and gender*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1990.
- Bruss, Elizabeth W. *Autobiographical acts: The changing situation of a literary genre*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- Cutler, May. "Dayal Kaur Khalsa (1943-1989): A publisher's tribute." *CM* 17.6 (1989): 258-59.
- Harms, Jeanne McLain, and Lucille Lettow. "Book design: Extending verbal and visual literacy." *Journal of youth services in libraries* 2.2 (1989): 136-42.
- Herman, Gertrude. "A picture is worth several hundred words." *Horn Book* (1989): 398-399.
- Khalsa, Dayal Kaur. *Tales of a gambling grandma*. Montreal: Tundra, 1986.
- . *I want a dog*. Montreal: Tundra, 1987.
- . *Sleepers*. Montreal: Tundra, 1988.
- . *My family vacation*. Montreal: Tundra, 1988.
- . *How pizza came to our town*. (American title: *How pizza came to Queens*.) Montreal: Tundra, 1989.
- . *Julian*. Montreal: Tundra, 1989.
- . *Cowboy dreams*. Montreal: Tundra, 1990.

- Lewis, David. "The constructedness of texts: Picturebooks and the metafictional." *Signal* 62 (1990): 131-46.
- Lyons, Terri L. "Dayal Kaur Khalsa." *Canadian children's literature* 59 (1990): 70-74.
- Moebius, William. "Introduction to picturebook codes." *Word and image* 2,2 (1986): 141-58.
- O'Brien, Sharon. "Feminist theory and literary biography." *Contesting the subject: Essays in the postmodern theory and practice of biography and biographical criticism*. Ed. William H. Epstein. West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue UP, 1991.
- Smith, Sidonie. *A poetics of women's autobiography: Marginality and the fictions of self-representation*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987.

Illustrations:

Figures 1 and 2: *Tales of a Gambling Grandma* © 1986 Dayal Kaur Khalsa, published by Tundra Books.

Figure 3: *I want a dog* © 1987 Dayal Kaur Khalsa, published by Tundra Books.

Figure 4: *How pizza came to our town* © 1989 Dayal Kaur Khalsa, published by Tundra Books.

Figure 5: *Cowboy dreams* © 1990 by the Estate of Dayal Kaur Khalsa, published by Tundra Books.

Gail Edwards holds a M.A in the History of Art, lectures on picture book art and design, and is currently pursuing a Master of Library Science degree at the University of British Columbia.