

provide such an analysis, and does not contribute to the knowledge base of feminist studies.

However, the book has practical merits. First, there is value in Caine's en-

couraging mothers to use support groups to share doubts and feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. Second, she makes the important point that Supermom is about as real as TV's Superman, and that

it is time women stopped flagellating themselves for not achieving the impossible.

NO KIDDING: INSIDE THE WORLD OF TEENAGE GIRLS

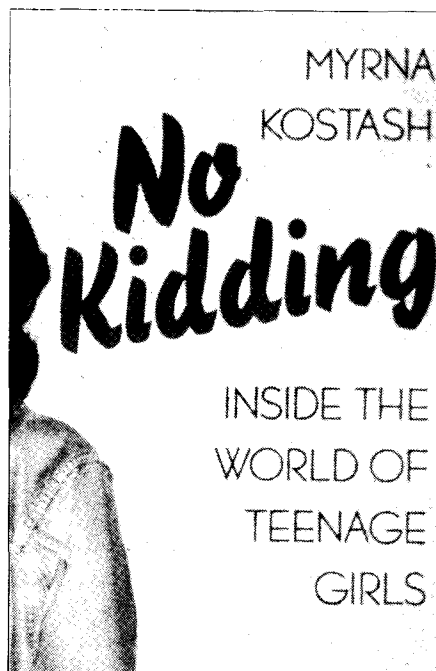
Myrna Kostash. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987.

Barbara Warme

It all comes tumbling out in a cascade of confessions, diary excerpts, 60s flashbacks, statistics, sociological speculations, philosophical musings, girlish gossip, and four-letter words — an unusual mix, but it works. To answer the middle-aged question, "What is the world coming to?" Myrna Kostash gathered newspaper clippings, read the literature on adolescence, talked with youth workers and school officials, and haunted adolescent habitats. The core of *No Kidding*, however, comes from the long, intense conversations she had with approximately fifty girls in Edmonton, Vancouver and Toronto, and it is their voices which give the lie to the romantic view of adolescence as a psycho-social moratorium afforded by an affluent, industrialized society. This is not moratorium: coming of age in Canada, it would seem, is grim work for most young females.

Affectionately drawn portraits of twelve girls from diverse backgrounds are interspersed with 'theme chapters' in which Kostash examines the contexts which shape the lives of her subjects: schools, jobs, families, leisure subcultures and, more broadly, 'the system' which both creates, and attempts ineffectually to patch up, adolescent problems. Not surprisingly, she has discovered not one teenage world, but many, and they mirror the unbudging class and ethnic divisions of the wider society. The sisterhood of the young, no less than that of adult women, is extended to one's own kind, while the 'free spirits' exercise their lonely freedom for remote causes like peace and anti-apartheid, causes which keep them undernourished and isolated from their peers.

Kostash makes it clear that sexual innocence was not buried, at the end of the fifties, with the brush rollers, the girdles, and the white gloves. Although sexual activity now begins earlier, stringent codes of conduct still inhibit the early use of contraceptives. ("Later, maybe, you



can pick up the pill; if you're lucky, you can get it without an internal exam and a whole bunch of questions about your personal life, you can hide it without your mother finding it, and you can take it without your boyfriend freaking out: 'Hey, what kind of a girl are you, anyway?') The double standard has been only slightly refashioned, dictating that while boys, of course, 'do it' out of lust, nice girls do it only out of love. The risks of love — sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, abortion or single parenthood — are not to be coolly calculated. In any case, are these girls in a position to make calculations, if their information/misinformation is derived largely from friends, from Harlequins, and from pornography? Kostash deplores the withholding of sex education from teenagers as a form of "generational sadism" in a consumer culture that flaunts sexual liberation.

It is not just for the failure to provide sex education that schools stand accused. Kostash finds little evidence that, for all the rhetoric, they are re-directing female students in any substantial way. Middle-class schools, while encouraging scholastic achievement among girls, still send out signals that the proper areas of study are the humanities and social sciences ("girls are interested in people, not things") as preparation for an 'enriched' but traditional family role. Schools with working-

class populations confine vocational preparation to the lower-level skills, and unambitiously measure institutional success in terms of drop-out rates and the capacity to maintain discipline. Kostash's discussion of unemployment and the ghettoized job scene makes one wonder: does graduation make much difference?

To anyone knowledgeable about subjects such as the labour force participation of women, drug abuse among the young, sex-role stereotyping, family violence, etc., *No Kidding* will bring few surprises. Academic knowledge, however, ill prepares the reader for the shock of hearing research findings confirmed — rarely challenged — in the riveting words of the girls themselves. Feminists will find fuel, but little comfort, in their stories. Comfort, if it is to be found at all, perhaps can be drawn from their attitudes. There is indignation here, a deep sense of unfairness, and a resolve to make things different. Independence? It is seen as a given, but what does it mean?

Grown up, girls will be working for a living, will be heads of families. But this seems hardly to be liberating. The single woman, treading the circuit between office, singles bar, and bachelor apartment, is seen as merely lonely. The career woman, bereft of networks, vulnerable to harassment and exploitation, under hostile or skeptical male surveillance, is seen as profoundly on her own. The superwoman, managing career and family life, is all too often burned-out, exhausted, at the end of her tether.

Yet, most of Kostash's young women welcome the inevitability of some kind of independence, and premise their dreams on having it.

What explains their bedrock optimism? For most, the gulf between where they are and where they want to be is daunting, but they do not seem daunted. The obstacles to their succeeding are depressing but, planning and scheming, they are not depressed. Kostash, though unabashedly fond of her teenagers, does not deceive herself or the reader about their probable futures. A fundamental restructuring of economic, social and political relationships must occur, she argues, before these achingly fine adolescent visions can be realized. But the book is not about restructuring. It is about dreams and nightmares and dogged persistence.