

like, "Okay, okay, Tom. You've been well and truly vindicated. You were right, weren't you?" But the conceit works, and by the time we reach the second half of the novel, narrated by Thomas, his "book" has become another character; one through which the myriad perspectives on loyalty and betrayal are refracted.

Keeping such a plot readable, as Richards effortlessly does, is a feat in itself. And yet below these entanglements is another layer, one that reaches to the core of a country at odds with itself. Perhaps this is best cast as a question: set against the backdrop of the Eastern Cape in the 1960s, the radical student politics of the 1980s, and the Johannesburg of today, how could *My Brother's Book* not end up being a novel about race?

Richards admits to the inevitability of it. "I suppose that's true," she says. "I would hope it's not overtly about race. I would hope it's about love and about people. But yes, you set out to write about love, and it [race] comes through. It's part of our make-up."

To the extent that her characters are rich and full on the page, Richards restricts her polemics to the sidelines. Race in *My Brother's Book* is not something that the reader is beaten across the brow with. There is instead a slow and steady seeping, a lingering at the edges. The theme is present in social interactions and attitudes, a low-level hum that rises imperceptibly in pitch until the shock of the ending — where everything that came before is thrown into stark relief.

Still, whether it's done overtly or not, race may be the most difficult subject a white South African author ever confronts. It's not just the subtlety of the characterisation that saves *My Brother's Book* from cliché (or worse). Neither is it just that Richards is the antithesis of the didactic writer; that, having done this thing for a while, she knows her strengths and limitations. "Writing for me is exploration, not exposition," she says. "I hold no grand placards airing my views."

Above these attributes, what makes *My Brother's Book* a worthy addition to the canon of contemporary race-involved, white-authored fiction (championed, perhaps, by Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*) is the novel's strong and visceral sense of "place" — its rootedness in the finely wrought detail of a certain scene at a certain time.

For South Africans of all castes, there is much that is familiar in *My Brother's Book*. If you grew up in suburbia before the 1990s you'll recognise the language: spaz, tit, jeez, kiff. If you've been to a rural town in the Eastern Cape you'll recognise the smells: jasmine, suurbessie, peach blossom, droog my kiel. And if you've been to the Johannesburg Botanical Gardens on a crisp morning in September you'll recognise just about everything:

"I parked outside the east gate, breathing more easily. Before us lay the parkland, breaking into the mauves and whites of early spring. Yellow veld stretched as far as the Melville Koppies. Two hadedas, started by a border collie, rose shrieking over the Braamfontein spruit, nearly empty now from lack of rain."

Passages like these abound in the book, and owe a lot to Richards's influences. When she was growing up she was drawn to the great