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Truth is a question of who you speak to

July 27, 2008 *Edition 1*

Karina Magdalena Szczurek

My Brother's Book

by Jo-Anne Richards RRRliiccchhaarrddss

(Picador Africa) R159

Review by **Karina Magdalena Szczurek**

Best known for her bestselling debut novel, *The Innocence of Roast Chicken* (1996), Jo-Anne Richards is also the author of *Touching the Lighthouse* (1997), *Sad at the Edges* (2003) and most recently, *My Brother's Book*. This opens with the intriguing line "I was born on page 23 of my brother's book. On page 52, before the whole world, I betrayed him." The rest of the book is an exploration of this betrayal and its consequences for the lives of Tom, his sister Lily and the people around them.

My Brother's Book has a bit of a schizophrenic feel about it. It is divided into three parts, of which the first two are equally long and span most of the novel while the third comprises only a few pages. Each part has a different narrator and operates on different time levels, switching between the period when Lily and Tom were kids in the 1960s to the years when they were young adults and to the recent present. Mostly this disjointed storytelling works well and the various perspectives illuminate the plot in a way that a straightforward single point of view wouldn't have, but there are moments, especially in Lily's piece, when the multitude of narrative angles becomes taxing.

Lily's story forms the first part of *My Brother's Book* and is mostly a reaction to the publication of her brother's titular book, a memoir. She desperately wants to preserve the memories of their childhood in a more positive light than the one which transpires from her brother's descriptions, which are often referred to but never quoted directly: "I don't care what you wrote, Tom. That's how it really was."

Burdened by the early unexplained disappearance of their mother and stuck with a father who means well but is not exactly suited to being a parent, the children struggle along mostly on their own. The responsibility for their wellbeing comes to rest on Tom's much too young shoulders. The broken family moves around a lot in the Eastern Cape, with the father - an ex-boxing champion, a raconteur, a gambler, even a lay preacher and miracle healer - trying to make a living somehow.

Whereas Lily sees their life as an adventure and admires their struggling father, Tom is angry at their situation, swearing that he would never become like Pop. But, proverbially, the apple never falls far from the tree: the irony of how much he has inherited from his father is one of the things that Tom has to come to terms with in his adult life, and one that Lily does not fail to point out to him.

Always the more irrational and wild of the two siblings, Lily never understood the oppressiveness of the responsibility thrust on her brother. Self-absorbed and focused on her own ordeal, she even manages to blame him for her own failings: "But sometimes I think it



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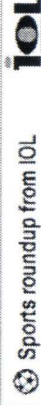
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