

Book Reviews

My Brother's Book

By Jo-Anne Richards

Jo-Anne Richards, Wits Journalism lecturer and author of three previous novels, among them *The Innocence of Roast Chicken*, has come up with an intricately patterned novel about love, race and betrayal called *My Brother's Book*.

From a writer's point of view, the novel is elegantly framed. The opening line reads:

"I was born on page 23 of my brother's book. On page 52, before the whole world, I betrayed him."

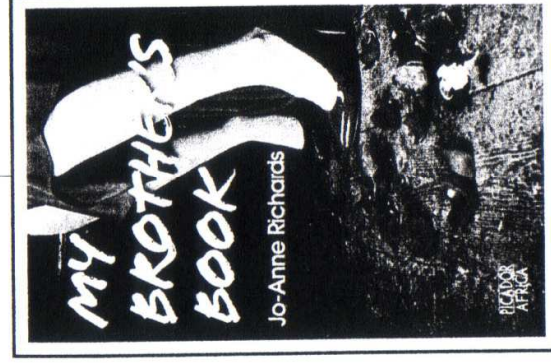
As I said to a group of writing students recently, with that kind of angle established, the novel almost writes itself. Almost. But the author still has the burden of making good on such an alluring opening gambit. She has to fill in the interplay between what her protagonist thinks she knows about herself and her life, and what the fictional brother's (fictional) book supposedly says about her and their life together.

The brother also has his own section of the novel, in which he narrates from a first-person point of view, and his business is also to debunk his sibling's 'wrong' view of things.

Behind all of this is Jo-Anne Richards, the ultimate author, whose difficult task it is to make her primary fiction convincing, consisting

as it does of contending perspectives that she must manipulate into shape.

The novel's first part works excellently. It recalls a childhood in Eastern Cape towns such as Bedford and Cathcart with a peripatetic, unreliable father. The mother has mysteriously disappeared. Richards aptly captures the language of a 'white' childhood with words like broeks, smaaked (as in 'preferred' or 'liked'), 'doing a leg-shiverer' (sex), 'blimming', and so on.



The childhood evocations of yearning, intensity and betrayal are superbly rendered, making the novel read flawlessly and engagingly.

The second part is more complex and difficult to handle, and although it is delicately carried off, the structure of narration, interleaved with correspondence, shows some strain at times.

There is a deft twist in the tale, better left to the reader to discover, making this novel a worthy contribution to serious South African writing about identity, becoming, and the complex (not to mention unexpected) processes of self-discovery.

Leon de Kock, Professor and Head of the School of Literature and Language Studies at Wits. **My Brother's Book** is published by Picador Africa, 2008.