

# BOOK REVIEWS

## Post-apartheid family dynamic shakes novel out of a potential lost-lefty tedium

**Book** • *My Brother's Book*

**Author** • Jo-Anne Richards

**Reviewer** • Pat Louw

"Coming to terms with one's past" in the South African context can set one's teeth on edge. It is becoming a predictably familiar theme of much contemporary South African writing, and yet it is inevitable, considering the dramatic transition in our society from apartheid to democracy and the burden of guilt which is carried by many white South Africans. Much as one wants writers to look forward, there is too much damage in the past that has to be worked through, explained and recorded for it to be simply erased. The past is "too much with us", and will continue to be remoulded and rewritten in order to explain the present and to heal and restore.

Jo-Anne Richards's latest novel, *My Brother's Book*, revisits the themes of betrayal and atonement. This is immediately apparent in the opening sentences: "I was born on page 23 of my brother's book. On page 52, before the whole world, I betrayed him." It is not explained what the betrayal involves, and so one waits for this crucial event to unfold.

As in *The Innocence of Roast Chicken*, Richards attempts to create suspense by hinting about some terrible event which happened in the past and then building up to it slowly.

Here the focus is on the relationship between this girl and her brother. Towards the end of the book she says: "You know, all this time I thought and thought of something I could do to make it all up to you. For betraying you and everything. And then this just fell in my lap and I thought: well, here's one thing that I actually can do for you. To make everything right for you again." The tragedy is that she can't ever make everything right again – all of them have been damaged in some way by the events, by the race laws, and by each other.

The past events are pieced together in a complex collage of contested views. The brother, Tom, has written a book in order to "come to terms with his past". However, this version of the past is challenged, both by Lily, his sister, and Miranda, his previous partner. The irony of the title is that one never sees the brother's book, but only their reactions to it. It becomes a search for the "truth" of what happened, with different narrative voices in the three main sections of the novel, reflecting the three main characters: Lily, her brother Tom, and their father, Bert. Comments from Miranda are interspersed throughout the book as she reminisces about the past in a series of letters to both Tom and Lily.

A similarity with Richards' previous novels is her manipulation of time and space. She alternates between the Eastern Cape of the sixties and Johannesburg of the 2000s: pre- and



post-liberation South Africa. Her description of Bedford, a small escarpment town 90km north-west of Grahamstown, is her strength. The landscape, the smells, the people, their language – all are captured with an authenticity and immediacy that marks her writing.

A strong theme in the book is the issue of belonging. Lily's greatest wish as a child is to stay in one town and to belong to a community. Tom's realization at the end of the novel is that he belongs nowhere: neither with ordinary white South Africans nor with black or coloured South Africans. It is the dilemma of the white South African "leftie". Richards's portrayal of post-apartheid Jo'burg lefties is sometimes tedious, however, with the exception of the amusing rendering of Tom's coloured friend, Melvin, in the second section of the book.

If I had to say that this book is about the iniquities of apartheid race laws and the way they damaged people – even white people – it would probably not encourage many people to read the book. But if I said it is about a fascinating family – two children and a father, and their relationships – it might. The former description is true, but it is conveyed through the latter which brings it alive, makes it individual and gives it human interest through the characters that are drawn. Also, there is the recording of a particular time and place which is worth reading for that alone.

Jo-Anne Richards launches her book with a lecture on SA writing at 11.30 on Monday 30 June, Launch Pad.