

Breaking family bonds

JENNIFER CROCKER

believes author

Jo-Anne Richards has produced her best offering to date

MY BROTHER'S BOOK

Jo-Anne Richards
Picador Africa

READERS feel a frisson of dread when they pick up one of their favourite author's new books. Will they have written a book as good as the previous ones you loved? Will you like the characters in the new one as much as you liked the characters in the last one?

Happily, Jo-Anne Richards's new novel, *My Brother's Book*, provides all the thrills of reading one of SA's great writers, and more besides: in this, her fourth book, Richards has upped her game from a pretty high point and written her best book yet.

She is known for writing books about "ordinary people", does extensive research before writing her books and really gets to know her characters.

Does she start with an idea or a grand plan to write a book about a specific topic? "No," says Richards, "the ideas for my books come from mysterious things I have heard, from observing ordinary life."

The genesis of *My Brother's Book* lies in a conversation she had with a fellow writer during the Harare Festival of Arts. They were challenging each other to come up with opening lines of books, and the one that Richards struck on was: "I was born on page 23 of my brother's book..."

The character born on page 23 is Lily and her brother is Tom. The siblings are raised by their father in Eastern Cape. "I modelled a lot of Pop on a friend's father who had been a South African champion boxer, and while my character is not the friend's father, I borrowed from his story in creating the character," says Richards.

Lily and Tom live a somewhat nomadic life with their unconventional father, travelling through small towns and stopping wherever their father can find work, or work a fairly innocent scam.

They are the outsiders in every town — not attending the fancy schools, and burdened with a father who claims that he has spiritual gifts. Often things go pear-shaped and they are forced to flee the town.

As an adult, Tom writes a book



OUT OF THE PRESS: Former journalist Jo-Anne Richards delves into themes of family and betrayal in her latest novel, *My Brother's Book*. Picture: SIMON MATHEBULA



Richards was able to explore in this book a topic that fascinates her, "how it is that two children who have the same upbringing can turn out totally different", and she does so quite ably and undramatically. She merely rests her critical gaze on her characters and lets them take on a life of their own.

"I am not a campaigning writer," Richards says, but inevitably, given Tom's political career and the consequences that it holds for the rest of his life, issues that are relevant to SA do arise. But in Richards's skilled hands, betrayal, misunderstanding and the breaking-of-familial-bonds become a universal subject.

Tom is an emotionally damaged man, but he controls the damage and keeps it essentially to himself. However, when his career takes a wrong turn, his confusion and pain are visceral as he realises how much of his life he has invested in causes. Lily, on the other hand, has stayed in touch with her family, and she forces things to a head when she brings her father to visit Tom.

Richards first wrote the book as three sections — then, now, and

the future — and then found she had to rewrite it to insert a bridging device that moved the story along. She resolved the problem by introducing the concept of letters about Tom and his book between Lily and his former girlfriend.

That process of reworking a body of work is the unseen part of writing, the part of it that makes it a craft and not something that can be slapped together just because someone thinks they have a good idea for a story.

Richards also has the gift of evoking time and place in her novels. For those of us who grew up in the '60s and '70s there will be a host of cultural references, including sweets, music and fashion, that suck the reader into another time.

Is Lily anything like her creator as a young girl? "In parts," says Richards, "in others not."

I suspect every reader will take away a different aspect of this story to turn over in their minds.

My Brother's Book is a big book, not necessarily in terms of length, but in terms of the ideas that arise out of it. It is a generous gift of a book.

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