

Close enough

Novelist and journalist Jo-Anne Richards is one of the many writers speaking at the Time of the Writer Festival which opens on Tuesday. Ingrid Shevlin asks the questions

JO-ANNE RICHARDS HIT THE jackpot with her first novel, *The Innocence of Roast Chicken*. Not only did it top the South African bestseller list for 15 weeks, it was also short-listed for the M-Net Book Prize, and nominated for the Impac International Dublin Literary Award. Film rights to it have since been sold to a British production company. Richards, who is now the convener of the Honours course in Journalism and Media studies at Wits University, earned her journalism stripes at the *Star*, the now defunct *Sunday Express* and the *Cape Times*. She has also written for such prestigious publications as *Vanity Fair* (US) and the *Guardian* (UK).

Since her first novel she has written three more. The latest, *My Brother's Book*, will be launched at the Time of the Writer festival. On a personal front, she grew up in Port Elizabeth, and now lives in Johannesburg with her two children, and partner, Fred de Vries, a Dutch writer and journalist. "Lackily he writes non-fiction so we don't compete," she says, wryly.

Are you happy to be launching *My Brother's Book* at the Time of the Writer Festival?

Yes, I'm thrilled to be launching at such a prestigious festival. This is, I hope, my best book. This is how it begins:

"I was born on Page 23 of my brother's book. On Page 53, before the whole world, I betrayed him."

It's a story of betrayal and atonement – and of course, family, with all the fraught love and loss that often accompanies our closest relationships.

It follows the lives of two siblings from their nomadic East Cape childhood to their adulthood in 2004 in Johannesburg. As Lily struggles with guilt over her careless betrayal of her brother, Tom, he writes a memoir. Both Lily and Tom's former lover take issue with the way his book remembers their pasts. The two women begin to unravel "the way it really was".

Then, as they begin unpicking, Lily uncovers a secret... I'll have to leave you there, I'm afraid.

I assume from your previous books that they are all based on your experience of living in South Africa during apartheid. I've heard this genre described as fictional autobiography or literary memoirs. Is this how you would describe your books?

No. My books are novels. Perhaps it's because I try to climb inside my characters and sometimes (but not always) write in the first person. People are always asking whether my books are memoirs.

Although I did grow up in the apartheid years, that period, and those that have followed, are just such a gift for story-tellers. I've always been fascinated by the idea of "ordinary" people, living in extraordinary circumstances. In some way, that sums up all my books.

Every writer takes a little from life, but in my books it's often the incidentals – the feel of a time, the atmosphere at a rally, the smell of coal smoke, life on a particular street.

friendship... oh, and a series of letters from the young accused in a political trial... but the plot and the things that happened to them are made up and carefully researched.

Since I'm always being asked if I draw from life, I've considered planting people in Jo'burg coffee bars to whisper randomly. "How do you feel about being so thinly disguised in *My Brother's Book*?" That should sell a good few copies.

Many white South

Africans feel the shame of benefiting from apartheid. Do you – and if you do, is it cathartic to write about it?

I'm not sure. As I said, my books aren't personal, but I suppose any book is cathartic in some way. Writing should always be a "seeking to understand" rather than a way of grabbing people by the collar and forcing them to understand what you think you already know. In some way I need to explore how we came to create the society we did – and how that society in turn has affected who we are.

Most white South Africans want to forget about apartheid. So what reaction has there been to your books and your raking over the coals of the past, so to say?

I try to deal with the kinds of feelings and reactions that many of us have experienced. So, most people's reactions have tended to be positive: that they felt "exactly like" this character or that, or identified with their feelings.

*What set you to writing novels? Most journalists dream of making a fortune by selling film rights, as you did with *The Innocence of Roast Chicken*, but mostly it's just dreaming.*

That's the trouble. It's easy to dream of it without doing it – and that was me for years. While a book remains in your head, it's always the Great South African novel. It's only when you begin that it mocks you for your tragic lack of talent. (Or so it seems when you're starting to write.)

I always, always wanted to write. But I was completely paralysed by the fear that I might look at the first word I'd written, and think: "uh oh, there goes your life's dream. You have no talent."

One day a friend of mine said, "Are you intending to carve this book in stone, or has your computer lost its delete button?" And that was it. I decided to begin, but not to judge myself on it.

Richards's books
The Innocence of Roast Chicken: Set in an idyllic South African childhood and also a generation later, the story confronts the reality of apartheid in its death throes, while deftly evoking the beauty of the South African landscape.

Touching the Lighthouse: Looks at the intense friendships young women coming of age can form. "Normal, universal experiences, but lived out under apartheid, they change the course of their lives."

Sad at the Edges: Her third book dealt with the way one's past can creep in and damage one's present if it's not faced down, and the different ways people have been affected by changes within the new society who we are.

Most white South Africans want to forget about apartheid. So what reaction has there been to your books and your raking over the coals of the past, so to say?

I think books and reading will survive. But the nature of "the book" may change.

We're in a state of extraordinary flux. The young people I'm in contact with do read, but their patterns have changed. We do need to encourage reading. It's incredibly important. A society that doesn't read quickly becomes insular and ignorant of everything outside of itself.

** See Time of the Writer programme on Page 5.*



It's not about my life, insists author Jo-Anne Richards about her writings, but 'the incidentals – the feel of a time, the atmosphere at a rally, the smell of coal smoke...'

Sometimes I include something I've heard or seen, for example, the denouement in my first book I took from a court case I covered as a journalist for the *Cape Times*.

All my books are thoroughly researched. I need to know a time, place or character inside out before I can begin to write, otherwise I feel really constricted. I have to "climb inside them", almost become them – writing's like acting, in this way. *Even Touching the Lighthouse, which feels intensely real!*

I take that as a compliment, though I have to say there's nothing much personal about it at all. As I said, some of the incidentals were real. The feel of a street in Obs, the closeness of a coming-of-age

