

Through the eyes and mind of a child

Most South African writers are dealing with the past through child protagonists. **Lesley Cowling** looks at the most recent

TO confront the past, South Africa is using commissions and court cases, reporting the stories of what really happened. Societies rewrite their histories by these means, but literature confronts history in a different way: through the individual, through the life and experiences of characters.

And the past, for many emerging writers, is represented by childhood, because younger writers grew up in that most limpid of eras, the Sixties and Seventies, when apartheid expressed itself in the kind of simple terms we now find incredible.

And it was normal. The world of a child, from a child's point of view, is always normal. Children accept what is given to them. Like little Siddharthas, they go ahead and have happy childhoods, unaware of the misery and suffering beyond the palace walls. Only in adolescence does the reality begin to dawn and the happy childhood is lost forever.

Childhood becomes a compelling problem, then, for white South African writers; the loss-of-innocence theme is both powerful metaphor and cliché, and writers must skate warily around it.

It is the problem Jo-Anne Richards has taken on in her novel *The Innocence of Roast Chicken* (Headline Review), following in the footsteps of writers like Mark Behr (*The Smell of Apples*) and Bryce Courtenay (*The Power of One*).

Richards's central character, Kate,

describes a summer holiday on her grandparents' farm in the Eastern Cape when she was a young girl, and intersperses that with descriptions of her adult life in the Johannesburg of the early Nineties.

The parallel narratives move towards, on one hand, a traumatic racial event, and on the other, a realisation of the effect of that experience on her adult self.

"I wasn't trying to write a reportage of events," says Richards, "but to write a book on South Africa with no politics in it is ridiculous. You cannot show how people are here without touching on politics."

She says she wanted her character to come face-to-face with the realities, but the first half of the childhood narrative shows the "happy childhood", where these realities are invisible.

"There are several levels of violence. Not just political violence, but farm violence. I mean, you eat food because it's dead. Kate couldn't come to terms with the violence — it hit her all at once."

There is a strong air of nostalgia in the childhood narrative, which is richly descriptive, especially of landscape. The contours of the Eastern Cape are evoked time and again, the landscape detailed.

In this, Richards follows the lead of many white African writers who are far more inclined to romanticise the land than



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are their black counterparts.

"When I lived in the Eastern Cape, I didn't notice the land and its distinctiveness," she says. But once she moved away, she realised she missed it, and that quality of nostalgia informs her description of the landscape.

She says: "I wonder if it isn't a way of demonstrating our connection to the country. White writers used it to show a link, a belonging, to root themselves here. Maybe black writers don't need to do that."

Of course, she didn't think about these kinds of issues when she began the novel. "I wrote about the Eastern Cape that way because I feel that way."

New body for local writers

Glynis O'Hara

SOUTH AFRICAN writers have, for the first time, a single body to represent all of them. Called the South African Writers' Federation (Sawfed), it unites a range of writers' organisations in one body. A national council and a transitional executive committee, consisting of Morakabe "Raks" Seakhoa (Congress of South African Writers), Walter Chakela (Windybrow Theatre director) and Menzi Ndaba (poet), were appointed to work on the constitution.

The main purpose of Sawfed is to represent writers (including journalists and scriptwriters) on the issue of copyright law and on relations with international writers and with satellite bodies.

"All over the world, writers have input on copyright laws, but it hasn't happened here. What about the Internet implications, for example?" asked Seakhoa.

Sawfed has nine organisations in its fold at present and writers involved include people like Nadine Gordimer, Don Mattera, Miriam Tlali, Keorapetse Kgositsile and Ettienne van der Heever.

The organisation was, in part, formed in response to calls on writers to form a national writers' organisation so they could "act in concert and speak with one voice", says their declaration of intent.

Speakers at their recent launch included John-Willy Rudolph of Kopinor, the Norwegian reproduction rights and collecting organisation and Dr Hanan Award, president of the Pen Centre of Palestinian Writers.

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