

African dreams and dust

Africa elicits as many responses as it has voices and consistently challenges our conventional wisdom. Few areas in the world can match the bigness and resonance of its stories, or its complex (and vexed) mental and geographical canvas, where a colonial past and contemporary politics jostle for space with a capricious spirit world.

Ancestors sweeps its reader into a region inhabited by the spirits and the quasi-priestly territory of the bardic utterance. In 1850, Miriro is born in a village hut, but she is both deaf and dumb. "In the hearts of those present, it was another journey to death." Her life, therefore, is destined to be one of painful isolation — "she was one vast silence which speaks its more than a century later, her ghostly voice sounds loudly in the ear of a young man whose family has abandoned their homeland and traditions.

Myth, time, dream, warning and incantation are fused in an exhilarating and episodic narrative. Inspired by the Shona language and its storytelling tradition, the book requires patience both to piece together what is going on and to absorb the idiom. As a coherent work, *Ancestors* is not completely convincing, but it is worth persisting for its fluid, unimpeded, often beautiful, language and its sensuous imagery.

ANCESTORS
CHENJERAI HOVE

Picador, £5.99
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THE INNOCENCE OF
ROAST CHICKEN

JO-ANNE RICHARDS

Headline Review, £16.99
ISBN 0 7472 1815 3

BY ELIZABETH BUCHAN

In contrast, Jo-Anne Richards's first novel, *The Innocence of Roast Chicken*, is the story of Christmas 1966 on a farm on the Eastern Cape seen through the eyes of an adventurous eight-year-old girl, counterpointed with the autumn of 1989 and the woman into which she has grown. In between the division of time and of sensibility, for the adult has become both cynical and despairing, lies the memory of a cataclysmic piece of violence which changed her life.

Anyone who wants a taste of this kind of African upbringing would do well to bury themselves in this rapturous and tactile evocation of dust, food, noises and a childhood domain, rendered with a marked empathy for the child and the magical properties of a child's stamping ground. However, the novel falls down with the author's



Richards: "rapturous and tactile evocation" of an African childhood

decision to devote half of it to the portrait of an uneasily married woman railing at life, husband and the racial situation in South Africa. It is an awkward and well-worn device, with the result that

the delicate infrastructures of the fiction are trampled underfoot by its political freight. It is not that the latter has no place in the novel, only that it could have been more subtle and telling.