



BOOK OF THE WEEK

Marvellous eye for tiny, telling details

The Innocence of Roast Chicken

By Jo-Anne Richards

Reviewed by Michael Shafto

Not everyone, for a variety of reasons, liked the book *Mukitwa* – but few would give you an argument about the quality of Peter Godwin's writing. So when Godwin sings the praises of a fellow-writer you have to sit up and take note.

He calls Jo-Anne Richards, author of the debut novel, *The Innocence of Roast Chicken*, "one of the freshest voices to emerge from South African literature in years".

To expand on that is the reviewer's job and it is a task not lightly undertaken for this is a book of some complexity and addresses matters which, as South Africans, should be of special concern to us all.

But first a brief look at the bones of the plot – a story told on two levels. The novel's time frame stretches from the middle 60s to 1989. The latter represents time present – a few months at the tail-end of that year – which is used as a vehicle to bring the story to its climax. But of equal if not greater importance is the year 1966 during the three weeks preceding Christmas, for it is in this period that eight-year-old Kate experiences a catharsis that will change her life forever and determine the person she is to become. Twenty-three years later, she is in the midst of a not very happy, tottering marriage that has lasted eight years.

Be warned. This is a discomfiting book. It looks at issues four-square and makes few, if any, concessions – be they in matters personal or political.

Kate's husband, Joe, a labour relations lawyer, may be somewhat weak-kneed and guilty of wearing the bleeding heart of his liberalism on his sleeve, but his wife's constant sniping and the cruelty of her bitchiness are sure to make you wince. Candidly, most of the time she's a right royal pain.

But what happened to Kate that fateful Christmas holiday of 1966 on her grandparents' Eastern Cape farm, inland from the family home in Port Elizabeth? What was it that so wounded and scarred her emotionally that she now finds it virtually impossible to live by ordinary standards? The answer lies somewhere in the days leading up to and including Christmas Day, and Richards cleverly plays with her readers' emotions as she drops one teasing hint after another before delivering the shattering coup de grâce.

The adult Kate's story as her husband battles to come to terms with the disappointments with which his

somewhat naive idealism inevitably confronts him, is a lot less interesting than her eight-year-old alter ego.

These are by far the best parts of the novel. Richards has a marvellous eye for tiny, telling details. The writing here is often lyrical, quite beautiful in its evocation of simple things keenly felt. There are passages reminiscent of the best of the early Lessing and they give Richards' prose an edgy, disturbing quality that reaches pitches of remarkable brilliance. It shines. She has the knack of finding exactly the right word.

Kate, in one of her many moments of irritation with Joe's perceived ineffectiveness, describes his hands as "drooling at his sides". She writes of Kate's two large, loose-skinned dogs – (they) "tumbled down the hill then, racing and rolling with each other".

There are many such vignettes of perfect, accurate recall. And there's Ouma – a decent, upright person at heart – with her tacit acceptance of the way of things: her position as unquestioned matriarch of the farm, her "boys" whom she treats firmly but well and from whom she expects total, unswerving loyalty.

The novel is skilfully structured with no loose ends. It's all there from the beginning; she never cheats or cuts corners.

Her ear for childhood dialogue is spot on. What a pity the adult dialogue is spoiled by a too-obvious setting up of arguments to illustrate the rights and wrongs of the country's political setup. That and an over-long, over-solemn leader page article in the local newspaper on the labour dispute Joe is working on, are two weaknesses the novel could have done without.

But these are quibbles of personal taste ... and overall Godwin is right – there's a truly exciting freshness here and what is more real portents of even better to come.

■ *The Innocence of Roast Chicken* is published by Hodder Headline at R69.95.

■ Turn to Tonight for three pages of StarBooks.