

Insight into 'privileged' 'whitehood'

BETH COOPER finds a good plot and believable characters in an unmistakably South African story.

THE INNOCENCE OF ROAST CHICKEN by Jo-Anne Richards (Headline Review):

IT'S been said there is nothing much left for serious South African authors to tackle after apartheid angst and political plots.

But then, debut author Jo-Anne Richards never saw her new book as post-apartheid, though it flits between the "pre-enlightened" past of the country and its present.

Instead, the former Port Elizabeth journalist has formulated a good plot — and believable characters — which is still unmistakably, painfully, South African.

"Everyone should have a farm like that in their childhood," says Kati of her upbringing in the Eastern Cape.

"The farm itself was untouched: by ugliness, unpleasantness, poverty, politics. Or so it seemed to me. Until that particular year, when it was spoiled. Everything was spoiled."

Like Rian Malan (*My Traitor's Heart*), Richards uses the tragic cause and effect of apartheid as a literary tool, and not a vehicle.

While local readers recognise the tense dance of black and white citizens around each other during the turbulent Sixties, anyone ignorant of our legacy would recognise the universality of human suffering.

Kati is a perceptive, clever girl whose "charmed and untouched" childhood is changed forever by an horrific incident on Christmas Day at her grandparents' farm.

Lulled into a sense of privileged, satiated existence, she slowly begins to notice the cracks in her own family and the fragile society around her.



Author Jo-Anne Richards.

"When I was older, I realised that, after all, I had been just a child, powerless to deflect the horror, not strong enough to be chosen as the cosmic goalie.

"Then I felt sorry for myself, until I was older still, and the guilt — more collective this time — settled again. That was when I locked myself away from all the complexing ugliness of life..."

In an interview last year, Richards told me *Innocence* was not autobiographical, but drew on the rich experience of holidays on "oupa and ourma's" farm in Gauteng, and her years in Port Elizabeth.

The author's strong point is an ability to get right inside a character, a scene or a situation — testimony to her powers of observation.

The political turmoil of the pre-election years are sketched by the adult Kati's conversations with her long-

suffering husband Joe and their "liberal Lefty" acquaintances.

The novel is divided between past and present narratives, each told from the viewpoint of Kati as child and adult.

To illustrate just how shattered Kati was by the rude awakening of a violent divided society, Richards expertly shifts emphasis of tone to show how divided child and adult have become.

Before her innocence is figuratively sullied, Kati's life is a pastiche of sensual images.

"I was carried, coiled in sleep, from the car, too dark and dreamy to join in the half-heard greetings and embraces.

"My cheek against his jersey, I could smell my father's strength in the comforting, sweetish sweat of his body.

"But the chill of the night air feathering my hair carried, inevitably, the essence of the farm — that fetid mixture of soil, coal smoke, chicken and pigs."

The same heavenly farm becomes hell when the child begins to discover the unfairness of life in her country.

Years later, the adult Kati — now a learned librarian and confirmed cynic — has lost all sense of beauty and sweeps from one biting intellectualism to another.

Her character is a well-rounded study of a woman too terrified to confront the demons of her past or find optimism in her future.

And the novel is a sensitive and refreshing insight into the paradox of privileged whitehood in South Africa.