

Sexual incontinence fails to banish those pesky post-liberation blues

SAD AT THE EDGES

by Jo-Anne Richards

(Stephan Phillips)

Review: Michiel Heyns

After the novels of apartheid and of the state of emergency have come the novels of transition: Nadine Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me*, Ivan Vladislavic's *The Restless Supermarket*, André Brink's *Rights of Desire* and, of course, JM Coetzee's *Disgrace*. Jo-Anne Richards's third novel sits squarely in this tradition, set in 1996 and concerned with the issues preoccupying white people of a certain class in that period: roughly, whether or not to run for Perth.

Richards's novel, like Gordimer's and Vladislavic's, is set in Johannesburg - or rather, Jozi, the gritty, glitzy mix of Yeoville and Melville (with cautious detours past Phaswane Mpe's Hillbrow). The characters are, in the main, old "lefties" of the eighties, struggle yuppies who have since settled down to suburbia, bad marriages and book clubs.

Into this mix comes Megan, too young to have experienced the struggle and slightly resentful about it, fresh from a sojourn in Britain, eager to experience the new South Africa and envious of her cousin Francesca, who has the distinction of having been detained during the emergency.

The novel is seen largely through the eyes of Megan and Francesca, with periodic flashes to somebody referred to only as The Man, brooding over life and his past, somewhere on the Eastern Cape coast with his five sons and his weary wife.

As in her first novel, *The Innocence of Roast Chicken*, Richards gives us characters who have been damaged by their past and are looking for some form of healing. Also, as in that novel, she is very good at rendering the self-centred obsessiveness that characterises people trapped in their own histories and, in Megan's case, the equally self-obsessed exploration of the power of her own sexuality. "the callous power of the girl who knew she was wanted more than she wanted back".

Francesca's best friends, Penny and Buli, are struggling with marital problems and a drug habit respectively. The women in the novel are sad at the edges. The male characters are hardly more exuberant. Apart from the brooding Man, there are the unsatisfactory husbands of these unsatisfied wives, whingeing about the rising crime rate and the falling rand. Though not likeable

husbands are not exactly *the Joy of Sex* personified either: there is Nicholas, the sleazy "struggle stud" fast turning into a "suit", and Anthony, the self-hating, ineffectual ex-glamour-boy Marxist intellectual, who has kept his beads but not his principles. Toboga, Megan's black lover, is "sweet", which is to say he's not very exciting.

Francesca, who thinks of herself as "Super-Pollyanna" for being the only voice of optimism at the morose little crime-statistics dinners and post-hijack gatherings, may be the first person ever to get expelled from a book club; and Megan has the novel problem of not wanting Toboga's baby in case the baby turns out white, thanks to Nicholas's intervention in the rainbow affair.

Francesca, like Katie in *Roast Chicken*, takes the guilt of the past on herself, in this instance for breaking under interrogation while in detention. As suffering goes, it's relatively mild, a point Richards makes by cutting to testimonies before the

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Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In the end, the anguish and self-recriminations of the characters do not seem very real, but that might be the point: that guilt does not need real culpability to feed on.

The writing is competent, though at times over-reaching itself into vacuous gorgeousness, notably when The Man appears: "The spume showed luminous through the gloom. One white ship glowed blindly, clutched in the last, jealous grip of the sun." Why blindly? Why jealous? Richards's metaphors tend to collapse under interrogation, unable to sustain their own claims: "Why did she choose to slip silently into his consciousness, like the sand in his old fishing takkies, to chafe and rub at his view of himself and his life."

All in all, *Sad at the Edges* is a readable, relatively upbeat exploration of a new urban class and an optimistic evocation of a new future in which the past can be forgotten or at least forgiven, at any rate on a national scale. Domestically things