

Down on the farm

The Innocence of Roast Chicken

by Jo-Anne Richards
224pp, Headline, £16.99

Kate Herbert

THE title of Jo-Anne Richards's first novel is a natural kooky name contest contender. But *The Innocence of Roast Chicken* makes sense on a farm where children do not connect cherished farmyard pets, albeit chickens, with what is served up on the table. To discover the connection is to realise one of the unpalatable truths about growing up. And these roast chickens provide an analogy for harsher truths in a story of innocence suddenly and brutally lost.

Kate is a bright young South African woman rendered incapable of sharing her country's hope and optimism by her experiences one Christmas on her grandparents' farm. A cynical and despairing adult, she cannot stomach the naivety of her liberal husband and friends as apartheid looks set to end. Cleverly constructed, Kate's story switches between an account of her own loss of innocence that Christmas holiday

and the current breakdown in her relationship with her husband and country.

Richards is best when describing, through the eyes of the seven-year-old Kate, the original Eden that is life on the East Cape farm. The farm comes alive through evocative and personal descriptions with such a close attention to detail it is easy to presume the novel is at least partly autobiographical (which it is not). The sections focusing on the older Kate's destructive relationship with her easy-going husband are interesting and necessary, but you itch to get back to the farm and the build-up to the specific incident that shattered the young child's dreams.

Unlike many South African books of the last two decades, this novel does not appear to be of political intent. It provides a slice in the life of ordinary middle-class whites living in South Africa in the turbulent last days of apartheid. Such politics as it has are drawn along the fine line between hope and despair so central to children in general and South African adults in particular.

The treatment of English liberals is fresh in its frankness; neither martyrs or heroes, Richards's ordinary folk are loyal and optimistic — and naive and self-important. Not many writers would have been in a position to criticise the great liberal cause before 1989-90.

With luck, *The Innocence of Roast Chicken* will help pave the way for a new genre of simple and honest South African story-telling.

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