

writers of the American south, writers like Styron and Faulkner, who took a place and made it wholly their own. More recently, Richards says, she has become enamoured with the writing of Michael Chabon — “I am envious of the way I read his images.”

The truly extraordinary part of the genesis of Richards the writer, however, is that she was once branded a child with learning disabilities. School for her was torture. She hid in the library, had no friends, cried all the time. In Grade 1 the teachers told her mother she was retarded. They wanted to put her in a home. “Who is going to look after you when your mother is gone?” they asked.

Today Richards laughs with sympathy and affection for the girl she used to be — the teachers are remembered less fondly — but back then her immediate defence was to construct a fantasy life for herself.

In 1996, with the publication of her first novel *The Innocence of Roast Chicken*, her well-honed fluency in the codes of the imagination paid big dividends. The novel sold 27000 copies, was nominated for an Impac International Dublin Literary Award, was chosen as a Dillon’s Debut in the UK, and was short-listed for an M-Net Book Prize. It wasn’t without its detractors, though — Ronald Suresh Roberts in a review for the Sunday Independent said it “glorified white naïveté” — but it was representative of a new South African fiction that shunned the prescriptive bent of apartheid-era writing and celebrated the power of descriptive prose.

My Brother’s Book is a much better novel. It travels a lot further along the path that Richards mapped in 1996. The metaphors are more mature, it is expertly edited, the political allusions are subtler. There is in both books the sense that South Africa is a country doomed by its racial history to vacillate between the extremes of hope and despair; in the latest novel, though, Richards says much more about race by having her characters talk about it much less. — Kevin Bloom

■ *My Brother’s Book* by Jo-Anne Richards, is published by Picador Africa, R155

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