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Painful excursion among outdated, cruel perceptions

REVIEW/BOOKS

THE INNOCENCE OF ROAST
CHICKEN by Jo-Anne Richards
(Headline Review, R89,95)

"I WILL go with you and be thy guide." This was the motto chosen for JM Dent's 1803 series of Everyman reprints.

The thought, in those days, was that a new mass readership would need to know how to plot their adventure in literacy and, with expert advice, make sense out of the multitude of signposts. It is as necessary now as a new wave of post-apartheid writers tell their stories.

Authors and poets have always been the antennae of the race. With massive seriousness or joking lightness, they create fields of wonder, expressing happiness or pain, giving wings to words just because they have discovered something they feel is worthy of expression. They

erate and to upset.

In her first novel, Jo-Anne Richards is making available her own thoughts on a particular time and locality. It is important to place the age and attitudes of Kati, her central character, in describing it. It is 1966, when the world of her Ouma's farm in the Eastern Cape is hedged with certainty. Holidays mean the love of a close-knit family with divergent political views, centred on a chicken-laden table; labourers Wilhelm and Johannes outside looking after the livestock; and Eggly Dora on duty at the Aga, even through the hottest summers.

The "innocence" of the title is a key word here. Kati was given the gift of a white childhood, protected from national issues of violence and dissent. She was allowed to be irresponsible and untroubled. That just does not happen now, for all young people are witnesses to bloody revolt and revolution on television from the moment they can be plunked down in front of the small screen.

Interspersed between the Christmas story of events which forever changed Kati's perception of the order of things are scenes from her married life 23 years later.

Here Richards spells out the hidden tenets of a generation only slowly learning how to adapt and reborn, to let go of taught and inherited moralities and behave without prejudice.

Thoughtful Joe is a lawyer who foresees a future in SA of infinite possibility and promise. He talks a nice self-consciously, and it is here that Richards can be seen as the beginner she is. The prose is stilted, skewed to the pedagogic and a trifle tedious, for Joe and his mining house friends are filled with the sort of liberal condescension that rapidly gets on Kati's

nerve. Richards manages to preserve, enshrine and give purpose to a past that was precious. The complex texture of human relationships, as seen by a sensitive and growing Kati, only hints at the impending mismatch between ideologies. How could it be any different?

A Calvinist God was at the centre of Ouma's life. For her grandchildren, there were cool wild figs to be eaten fresh off the tree, a meerkat to picnic from the bushes, dusty days and swimming in the reservoir. Yet Richards captures the growing helter-skelter of farm staff, the questioning of unresolvable dictates sensed but not understood by Kati.

This is a book that because of its subject matter must needs be provocative. Its youthful characters cannot be judged by their capacity for moral reasoning, but by their sincerity.

To appreciate what Richards is trying to do, one must accept old outlooks, plus an outdated, cruel perception of coloured folk in a frontier territory.

It is a painful excursion into the frankly scandalous as Richards