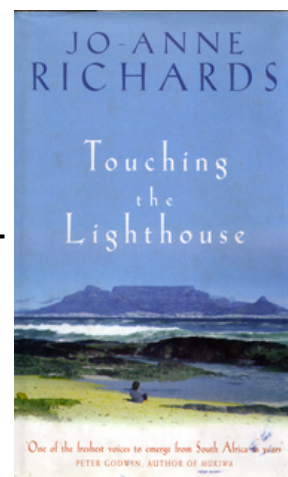


Touching the Lighthouse Press Clippings



LEISURE, OCTOBER 24, 1998

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BOOK SHELF

Brilliant, but no easy read

TOUCHING THE LIGHTHOUSE, by Jo-Anne Richards (Headline Book Publishing)

HER writing has been described as "remarkably brilliant and disturbing". It is because of this disturbing quality I found it so intensely difficult to complete reading this novel.

Yes, it is brilliant: the prose is tightly and majestically controlled, the writing is highly evocative and the attention to

detail simply marvellous. But above all, the novel is NOT easy on the reader; this is not escapist literature.

On one level, the novel is the story of two young women, Susan and Jennifer, who are politically aware and concerned about the injustices of the apartheid system. Their struggle for maturity is set against the backdrop of the wider struggle for the liberation of South Africa itself.

Caught up in the tide of history, Susan and Jennifer find

their friendship affected by the conflict mounting around them and their desire to be a part of the process of change, at a time when justice itself is on trial.

Jennifer, at a much later stage, gives the reader her impressions of life in England. The very contrast in the spirits of the two countries is presented with genius.

Born and brought up in the Eastern Cape, Jo-Anne Richards graduated with a B Journ (Hons) from Rhodes University in 1979. She observed the years of apartheid as a journalist on four major South African newspapers. The film rights to Jo-Anne's first novel, *The Innocence of Roast Chicken*, have been bought by Pinewood Studios in London.

Touching The Lighthouse is written with the same sure sense of place and time which gave her first novel its impact and is a worthy successor.

Kathy Paton

Marlette Dodd

Interesting look at famous event

THE SOWETO UPRISINGS: Counter-memories of June 1976, by Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu (Ravan Press R39,95)

This is the first of the Local History Series focusing on a particular place in South Africa which has been defined by a significant event or series of events,

as recalled by the author.

When the uprisings took place, author Sifiso Ndlovu was a 14-year-old pupil and through his own personal account, he provides us with a "counter-memory" of the momentous events of that time. It is an interesting look beyond the official versions of what really happened.

Crowded house

Jennifer is in search of her life. A young lawyer, in her early twenties, "the offspring of Eastern Cape respectability, with all its wholesomeness and grass-banked suburbs", she flees the claustrophobia and racism of her background and moves to Cape Town, "the city of the wild and the possible." There she moves into a house with her friend Susan, a chain-smoking painter who never actually paints and newly-divorced from a dipso husband, where the two of them embark upon as many meandering and neurotic sexual, political and artistic encounters as they can find. This isn't supposed to



TOUCHING THE LIGHTHOUSE
By Jo-Anne Richards
Headline Review,
£16.99
(Fiction)
ISBN 0 7472 1816 1

be the story of me, says Jennifer. It is supposed to be the story of our black cleaner, Maud. But Maud remains ever in the wings as Jennifer, centre stage, complains of a lack of identity; an egocentric ty

which she justifies as just another product of warped politics.

Sounds confused, self indulgent? *Touching the Lighthouse* is a really odd novel, one which sets up in its opening chapter the notion of vastness, of towering themes and bulging concerns, and then withdraws into the adolescent self-absorption of its central characters. The narrative displays much of the same intense confusion as Jennifer and Susan do themselves, which gives it a slightly - and I would guess unintentional - narcissistic feel. Jennifer refers often to the way in which the politics of apartheid seep into every area of life, but

evidence of this never rings true, and what is supposed to be the bedrock of the narrative becomes merely an adjunct.

I'm not sure what this failure stems from; very possibly from a talented writer trying to do too much at once. For although Richards suffers at times from whimsy she is capable of acutely expressive and intimate prose, of exposing in very few words the size and scale of an emotion or the impact of one person upon another. She is a lovely writer, but perhaps not so adroit a storyteller, and while the two abilities do not often co-exist in equal measure, they do need to meet if a novel is to be a success.

Perhaps if Richards had stuck to the disturbing quality of her characters' friendship, and not felt so self-consciously the need to write a novel about South Africa, then the

sights and smells of a country rank with corruption and injustice would have emerged more naturally and convincingly as the backdrop to a febrile and unresolved love affair. As it is, nothing in *Touching the Lighthouse* receives quite the attention it deserves; its pages are too busy and crowded, leaving its characters and its themes clamouring for recognition.

Mary Loudon

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follows all the conventions, except that the spending has indeed been on so colossal a scale that one accepts the illusion of seeing a huge ship break up and sink. I freely confess that some of the social and love scenes — for which the disaster is a frame — were so ill-conceived, so melodramatic, that I waited with some impatience for the appearance of the fateful iceberg.

The inordinate length of the film enabled me to watch it and simultaneously imagine how it could have been differently made: perhaps, above all, by using roaming cameras to capture the human gulf between the gilded upper floors and the doomed, barracks-like, below-the-waterline universe of transients and their suffocating poverty.

That strategy, though, implies an altogether different film; one in which personalities do not predominate, a tale told in the manner, say, of certain art films. No-one, though, was going to spend \$200m on such an unsaleable, if estimable, product.

The film intermittently offers superb cinema. The sense of silent menace as the gigantic mechanism sluices through the bitter Apartheid contrasts wrenchingly with the observed life of what Hardy termed "opulence," a glamour so profound that simplistic relegations of its significance — making the liner a symbolic "ship of fools" — fail. And when one of the lifeboats returns to search for survivors, and must draw its wake through the acres of frozen dead, the imagery is so unflinching, so harsh, that the seed of fear evoked by the very name *Titanic* is made to stir in the viewer's heart.

Such moments are betrayed by the film's catastrophic commitment to trash; they are lost in a welter of jarring styles and what can only be described as an increasing consciousness on the part of the filmmakers that they are desperate men. All that money sunk! They deserve an Oscar.

Peter Wilton

BOOKS

An SA tale of two women

■ *Touching the Lighthouse*

by Jo-Anne Richards
(Jonathan Ball, 249 pp,
R89.95)



Jo-Anne Richards' contemporary SA novel is hard work at first. Her overly descriptive style doesn't allow the copy to flow easily and it takes a while to settle into the disjointed pace of the elaborate prose.

The story line is typically home-grown and contains enough of the ingredient to keep interest piqued until the end. In a nutshell, it tells the tale of two young women who move into a house together in Cape Town and experience the painful transition to maturity at a time when SA is being torn apart by apartheid.

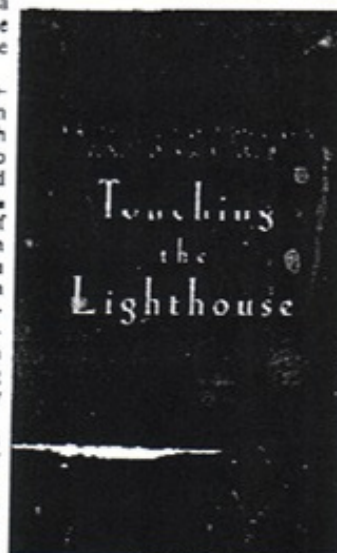
The plot unfolds through the eyes of Jennifer, a self-deprecating, "liberal" who moves to the Western Cape from her sheltered life in the Eastern Cape, in search of "my life." She has just completed articles at a firm of a friend of her father's and moves into an old house in the heart of Observatory with her angsty, recently divorced and long-time childhood friend.

They immediately begin to wrap themselves in the safety blanket of their sisterhood but the stress of growing up and the political times in SA tears it apart strip by strip. Jennifer initially views herself as the safe-keeper of Susan's fragility and vulnerability but when that strength is tested, realises that

it is far from unassailable.

Maud, the cleaner who used to work for Susan and her former artist husband, enters the lives of the two women when she comes to work for them part-time. She becomes a trigger and catalyst of profound changes in their lives.

Maud spends most of the time relaying stories about the people she works for over a cup of tea. Through her we are given voyeuristic accounts of Susan's ex-hubby's sexual encounters, which fill out to include other, more distant, households and eventually draws all players into a web of



intrigue. Only at the end do the 25 year olds realise that Maud's appetite for skinner is not biased and all who encounter her become the rich material that add texture to her bigger tale of life.

Within this context, Richards touches on the theme of finding a personal political space in SA when the issues of right and wrong seem indistinct. The journey to political awareness is personified by Mandla — the "Botswana connection" of the United Democratic Front — who enters the two women's lives. In the end, his fate high-

lights the tangled web their lives have become and the bitter repercussions that stem from some of their choices.

The author explores the nature of relationships, both friendships and love affairs, and the consequences of blurring the boundaries between the two.

Jennifer and Susan, both different characters but with a similar burning need to push it to the limit, muddle through the issues; are mostly overwhelmed by them; and reach a painful conclusion as adults when the attempt to make some sense of their rite of passage.

Jennifer's deep political unease is tempered by an all-embracing, and eventually smothering, relationship with exuberant Sixties guitar man, Martin. She plunges herself into a whirlwind romance destined to fail, but has no regard for the inevitable outcome. In the end she doesn't have to make any choices. She is introduced to the Cape Town arty set, who shy away from the political realities of SA by throwing a creative net around themselves.

But Jennifer doesn't belong there either. Her search for the meaning of life extends through her troubled marriage and new placid English home environment until she confronts her anxieties with her "Sister."

Sharon Wood

BOOKS

History as a thriller

■ *The Von Veltheim File*

by Valerie Rosenberg
(Human & Rousseau, 1997,
270pp, R69.95)



Barney Barnato disappears at sea in 1889; his nephew Woolf Joel is murdered nine months later. Valerie Rosenberg, after 23 years of research, unearths a

BOOKS OF THE YEAR



Israel but back to the Jewish East End of London, which had vanished, along with Rodinsky, some time in the 1960s, taken over by a new wave of poor immigrants from India and Bangladesh. I was lucky enough to have worked in the dress trade in the East End before this happened, and this book brought back many happy memories of the warm, vibrant, protective Jewish community that had a home there for the best part of a century. I personally found Iain Sinclair's contribution to the book, in which he attempts to put Lichtenstein's researches into some kind of context, unnecessary, and it is her voice which comes across loud and clear. A moving and memorable read.

Philip Hoare

DON'T ya' m, but a fin de siècle assidue came to me in 1999. Perhaps it was a result of delving too deeply into my own past, but I found consolation in the drifting shadows of former decadents and aesthetes come back to haunt the end of the century: the kohled-up Marchesa Casati in Ryerson and Yaccarino's biography of the legendary prowler of St Mark's Square, *Infinite Variety* (Viridian Books, £18); and Cecil Beaton's account of his rooco rural idyll, *Ashcombe* (gloriously republished by Dovecot, £8.95). Judith Watt's *Penguin Book of 20th-Century Fashion Writing* (£25) provided sartorial provenance for the mythic figures of the period; Richard Davenport-Hines's fantastic *Gothic* (Fourth Estate, £20) excavated the morbid excesses which shape the modern era. Dave Haslam's fine *Manchester, England* (Fourth Estate, £12.99) expanded a Northern pop consciousness explored by Michael Bracewell, whose essential *England Is Mine* appeared in paperback (HarperCollins, £7.99).

Fictional city angst informed Jo-Anne Richard's novel of pre-election Cape Town, *Touching the Lighthouse* (Review, £6.99), with its intense relationship between two women played out against a backdrop of a febrile, hypersensitized, schizophrenic city where emotions grow and decline like gusts of the Cape Doctor winds. A must-read for anyone familiar with the place. And Annie Proulx's sublime *Brokeback Mountain* reappeared in *Close Range* (Fourth Estate, £12), further evidence of her ability, like Willa Cather before her, to create humanity out of America's yawning expanses. Which is where I come in...

Francis King

MY fiction choice for the year is Sheena Mackay's volume of short stories, *The World's Smallest Unicorn* (Cape, £12.99). Mackay has never struck me as a marathon winner in the literary Olympic games; but as a sparky, spunky sprinter she is the champ. She writes of one of her characters in this lat-