

It All Started at Rhodes...

GOING FROM STIGMATIZED TO GLOBALLY RECOGNIZED

Dr. Jo-Anne Richards -- Acclaimed South African Author, Academic, Writing Mentor and Journalist

In my first year of junior school, the principal informed my mother that I was 'retarded' and 'odd'. A few decades later, that odd child ended up an internationally published author with a PhD in Creative Writing from Wits University and an academic career.

Rhodes University had a lot to do with that. Naturally, it taught me critical thinking, honed my writing skills, and opened doors. My BJourn (Hons) degree gave me the technical foundation for my career in journalism and literature.

But what Rhodes really gave me was a place where difference wasn't a deficit. Where oddness was given space to flourish into creativity.

The first of my five novels, *The Innocence of Roast Chicken*, was, in 2019, re-released as a Picador Africa Heritage Classic, alongside the books of Nelson Mandela, Frank Chikane, Ellen Kuzwayo.

Former Minister Ronnie Kasrils noted it "broke the paradigm" and "helped to define the time." The novel earned nominations for the IMPAC International Dublin Literary Award and was shortlisted for the M-Net Book Prize, with film rights sold to Pinewood Studios.

My subsequent works garnered praise from Athol Fugard for my "trenchant observation of human behaviour," and Ivan Vladislavić, for my "acute sense of place." I've twice been nominated for the Sunday Times Literary Award, with short fiction appearing in six anthologies. My work has been translated into German. I was invited to speak on "Writing in a transitional society" at a German university and to speak in the independent bookstores of the United Kingdom.

As co-founder of All About Writing (2007-present), I have mentored would-be writers, whose work has produced more than 50 published books. Redi Tlhabi, winner of the 2013 Alan Paton Award, called our mentorship "inspirational," while Dr. Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon, shortlisted for the 2023 Sunday Times Literary Awards, said our mentorship was "invaluable in refining my narrative techniques".

At Wits University (2000-2015), I served as Academic Co-ordinator of the Honours Programme in Journalism and Media Studies and taught hundreds of students, most from disadvantaged backgrounds. I have lectured in Creative Writing at UCT Summer School and, in collaboration with the Gordon Institute of Business Science, created online business writing masterclasses. I have presented workshops at international journalism conferences and training institutes.

As a journalist, I worked full-time for four South African newspapers, covering stories such as an investigation that brought down a government minister and another that revealed the truth about the torture of detainees. I freelanced for numerous local newspapers and magazines and, internationally, my work has appeared in *The Guardian*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Talk*.

My most sustained community contribution has been in genetic healthcare advocacy. As National Chair of the Southern African Inherited Disorders Association and South African representative on the International Genetics Alliance (early 2000s-2014), I was central to bringing primary genetic care to under-served rural areas through community training initiatives, in partnership with Wits' Department of Human Genetics.

I authored training materials in plain language, and presented details of the project at international conferences in Delhi and Poland. I wrote and funded the translation of an information booklet into eight local languages for use in clinics and provincial hospitals.

Dr Jo-Anne Richards, BJournalism (Hons), Rhodes, PhD Creative Writing, Wits

Dr Jo-Anne Richards has distinguished herself as a novelist, journalist, educator, and community advocate whose work has impacted South African literature, journalism education, and genetic healthcare access.