

The New Richmond Reader

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Our Literary News from the Heart
of the Karoo



April 2026

Johannesburg

Dearest Karoosters,

Greetings Karoosters

Even though both Peter and I celebrate our birthdays in March, the month did not get off to a great start for us. The Proteas faltered yet again in a semi- final and broke the hearts of a nation yet again. To add to my misery, I dreamt about their hammering to the Kiwi's the night before. Ashwin Desai will testify that I told him about my dream of the New Zealand batsmen smashing us to every corner of the field. And so, it turned out to be. This, after our boys played some of the finest cricket ever. Still, we live in hope that God wants this same team to lift the World Cup on home soil next year. But I think there should be a national year of prayer for our players. I am convinced there is some curse on our cricketers. No psychologist in the world has been able to sort out the problems. I therefore say it with a straight and serious face. We must light candles and pray for our cricketers for the next 18 months. It might take that long!!!

On a happier note. I don't know if you've noticed but Richmond has really been in the news lately. A lot. On Easter Monday, I am sure you may have read that the wee little town of Richmond has the fastest internet speed in the land. Out of all the accolades, I never saw that one coming.

Clearly the fibre network must have rubbed off on me because I can proudly announce that the list of speakers for Madibaland @ BookBedonnerd was ready in the last week of March. That is the fastest we've ever been in 20 long years. Can you believe it. We're celebrating our 20th anniversary as South Africa's only Booktown this year. I've been so excited I've finalised this programme with seven months to spare, yet two of my earlier festivals are anything but organised.

With this festival, we went out of our way to invite the people who've walked with us through the difficult years. Hence, we've invited the late Nico Moolman's daughter to deliver the Nico Moolman Memorial Lecture; Fanie Olivier, my ex- colleague in Afrikaans who in one year paid for his own accommodation just so that Booktown Richmond could keep going, will be warmly welcomed. So too will be the likes of Chris Marais and Julienne du Toit, who were there when Patrick Mynhardt inaugurated the only Booktown on the African continent. Ashwin Desai will hopefully join us. Etienne van Heerden was last in Richmond in 2010, but LitNet have been such supporters over the years. Deon Meyer has been a great friend of Booktown Richmond. As have Louis Botha and Clinton du Plessis. And how can we forget Tracy Going who stood in for me the year I had to attend my daughter's matric ball? Just the other night I spotted a very young Paul Weinberg photo in Richmond. And then there is Robert Ian Caldwell who was such a stalwart of our JM Coetzee & Nobel Laureates Festival.

In later years, when you -know- who were stealing money instead of funding deserving organisations like us, Anton Krueger would use his hard- earned research money to sponsor a few Rhodes authors. Karina Szczurek would do the same for the writers from Karavan Press in recent years.

And look at me how old I'm getting. I almost forgot Antony Osler, who has provided us with so many heart- warming moments. As will my previous H.O.D Dietloff van der Berg, who is enjoying a purple patch as an Afrikaans poet. Naomi Morgan, one of my biggest supporters, has promised that only death will keep her away from this year's festival. And Tom Dreyer, another old friend of Booktown Richmond, persuaded me that even though he's written a 'brief' at 40 000 feet, nothing can top the highs of speaking at BookBedonnerd. Never forget that flattery will get you everywhere - especially at BookBedonnerd.

But I am also excited about the overseas writers I've just discovered. I had an idea for a novel that I was researching in a traffic jam. And I serendipitously stumbled upon a Canadian author Suzette Mayr who I texted in the self- same traffic jam. And I will put my head on the block and say - this will be a highlight.

Earlier, I discovered a Moroccan author Brahim Benmbark writing on desert literature. And I thought to myself - why is it that we in the Karoo have never thought of our literature as desert literature. And it was while spying on his Facebook page that I discovered another Moroccan, Laoucine Aammari, with a book on British Travel Writers in Morocco. Now I don't know about you, but I've always had a love affair with Morocco.

Similarly, the literary gods led me to Becky Cerling Power. And I will stake my reputation as having an eye for a good story by saying - this is going to be one of the talks of this year's festival. What a book. Becky might even fly out from the US to join us.

Oh, and our very own guardian angel, Angie Butler, who could not see Booktown Richmond die in 2024 because of a lack of funding - and put her hand in her pocket and bailed us out. Angie will be launching her new book at this year's festival. And I've already told her that I want to interview her. But this is what makes Booktown Richmond special. I think we are universally loved - except by all the influential book critics who write for influential newspapers who have not once covered the Booktown phenomenon in South Africa. But hey, who needs them when you have friends like Angie Butler. Who now also helps secure many of the UK writers such as Manni Coe and Jonathan Slaght.

And people like Jo Els, who more than makes up for the lack of support from influential newspapers by singing our praises on all the influential websites.

People often speak about a loyal following. And in Booktown Richmond, we don't just have loyal followers. We have fanatic followers.

And lastly, who can forget that old stalwart Peter Baker. Never missed a single festival. In 19 long years. I think I must steal the mayoral garb and confer on Peter Baker the Freedom of the City. Peter was the man who put up the money for Patrick Mynhardt for our launch years ago and whose Supper Klub and Chef Gary put on our famous High Teas.

I hope you're beginning to see why we call ourselves the last of the amateurs. Some claim our festival looks chaotic. We prefer to think of it as organised chaos.

I think Shukri Conrad should phone Peter and I up and employ us on a contingency basis to strategize on an organised chaos approach for the Proteas. That's what I think.

Below, our list of writers for Madibaland @ BookBedonnerd 2026.

PROGRAMME

BookBedonnerd 2026

1. Ian Smit - Grenslose vers
2. Roger Lucey - How to build a house in the mountains.
3. Angie Butler -
4. Clinton V. du Plessis -
5. Caity Venniker - Unleashed
6. Louis Botha - Karoo
7. Peter & Beverly Pickford - To the Edges of the Earth - Journeys into Wild Land.
8. Jonathan Slaght. Tigers Between Empires - The Journey to Save the Siberian Tiger

9. Manni Coe (UK) - Little Ruins.
10. Jake Hoddinott- Migrations Beneath a Baobab.
11. Deon Meyer - Skorpion
12. Brahim Benbark (Morocco) - Desert Imaginations.
13. Lahoucine Aammari (Morocco) - British Travel Writers in Morocco...
14. Arshay Cooper - A Most Beautiful Thing. T.B.C.
15. Becky Cerling Power (US) - Forbidden Orphanage Outside the Forbidden City.
16. Chris Marais/ Julianne du Toit - Klein Karoo.
17. Neeltjie Swanepoel - Outotografiese lewenskrywing in Antjie Krog se Plunder (2022)

18. Jann Bader T.B.C. / Shamila Ramsookbhai - Eat, Pray, Die
19. Anton Krueger -
20. Tracy Going -
21. Melanie Moolman -
22. Kate/ Jeanne - Richmond letters.
23. Antony Osler -
24. Dietloff van der Berg - Feesmaalgang
25. Alec Connah UK - Where the fish fly and the birds swim
26. Gail Gilbride - An Unsuitable Woman
27. Sheryl & Sandy James - Unbridling
28. Etienne van Heerden -
29. Robert Caldwell -
30. Zbyszek Mischak (Poland) - Anchors Down in Africa
31. Nicole Engelbrecht - Bare Bones - Cold Cases
32. Tom Dreyer - Brief op veertig-duisend voet
33. Suzette Mayr (Canada). The Sleeping Car Porter
34. Fanie Olivier - Die mooiste Afrikaanse gedigte van die laaste eeu
35. Ashwin Desai - Belonging
36. Paul Weinberg - Documentary
37. Naomi Morgan - Die ander dogter / vertaling van Annie Ernaux &

Waiting for Godot -die veelbekroonde vertaling.

38. James Joyce - A Political Life

39. Darryl Earl David - Scribbler

40. Hannah Kent (Australia) 29th - Always Home, Always Homesick & Burial Rites (29th@9am to officially open festival)

41. Stephen Symons - The Algebra of Insignificance (Olive Schreiner Prize winner)

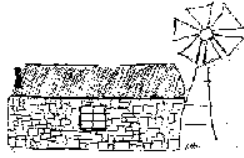
42. Karina Szczurek -

43.Nicholas Boggs - James Baldwin biography

44.Chloe Dalton - Raising Hare

And just in case you are planning to do the right thing and get away from the urban / suburban clutter, confusion and congestion....and crap, and you buy yourself a lekker little plek in the dorp, this little ditty may be a big help. Len Raymond is a Master Old House Restorer.





Karoo Architectural Network



The Richmond Heritage Foundation

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Guidelines to caring for your historic Karoo home

Bricks & Mortar (Exteriors)

Houses in the Karoo were built of local materials like stone and handmade bricks. Sometimes, a cobbing style technique was used as well – a mixture of sand, clay and straw much like that used in old Europe.

In the 1900's, builders began using cement and concrete which prevents the breathing and natural temperature control which natural materials provide. The traditional mud plaster of olden days is less maintenance and more cost effective.

A few lucky homeowners might find that their home is all of natural stone with only a half or third top section or no section at all with brick. The best thing to do is take off the plaster to expose this stone work and let the building breath. You might have to 'face' the stonework (the in-between-the-stones work). After this, the exterior walls will be virtually maintenance free.

If you have old bricks buried under layers of plaster, you can take the plaster off and use the mud wash recipe (*see Plaster below*). This is cost effective and natural looking. Over the years, you can build up the layers of the wash and the building will become textured and stronger.

Roofing

Before corrugated iron roofing sheets came in the late 1800's, roofing material was made primarily of thatching grass (collected from vleis), mud and straw and sometimes stone. You will have noticed that all the old flat roofed houses have very thick wooden beams for ceilings - that were supposed to support the heavy layer of mud. After every rain it was checked and another thin layer of mud was added.

Thatching is expensive but restores the authenticity of the building. Being a natural fiber, it creates natural temperature control and allows the building to breath. With the degradation of over 90% of South Africa's riverine habitats, natural thatching grass now has to be cultivated and is expensive. Three different grass species are used for thatching, depending if you are in a dry or wet region of South Africa. The grass is now treated for fireproofing so it is not as dangerous as

it once was – especially if you have a lightening rod. The more quality the construction, the longer it will last.

The early Karoo style homes (with a façade and a flat roof) do not have highly visible roofs and if the roofing is in good condition, it is advisable to leave it. Leave it clean and unpainted so you can harvest your precious rainwater.

Attics are found in older, original portions of homes which almost always have A-Frame roofs on the original portions. Often towns were created around one or more farm homesteads with such an attic. The attics were used for drying grapes and other fruit, making biltong, storage, etc.

Ceilings

WOOD The older houses have handcrafted, large yellowwood or Oregon pine beams and planks. From the early-mid 1800's, after the Industrial Revolution started, wood was work with machines and the Oregon pine and yellowwood became thinner and more 'perfect'. Look under your knotty-pine or white board ceilings and you might find a treasure!

On top of the planks was usually a layer of brackish mud about 3-4 centimeters thick. This was built for a) fire protection when there were thatched roofs, b) insulation & c) it kept the ceiling planks flat and level. As soon as corrugated iron roofs replaced the thatching, most homeowners removed the layer because of the dirt that came through the cracks. Now, we can see in many homes how the planks are curled up at the edges and uneven without the heavy layer of insulation above it. The protective layers above planks are once again being put back on.

Here's how Len Raymond says they make a newer, dust-free protective layver:

DARK CEILINGS Aloe juice was used as a fly preventative but it also preserved the wood. It looks similar to varnish and in rooms with out a fireplace– often mistaken as a mixture that included blood. Some rooms, especially with

fireplaces, have very dark brown ceilings. This is often an accumulation of smoke, etc. through the years. Some people chose to clean it (___sugar soap.....what to use???) and then apply Woodoc. Others chose to leave it as it does help preserve the wood. It depends if you want the new wood look or not.

REED One of the worst alien plant species in South Africa is Spanish Reed. One m² of the plant soaks up 3,000 liters of water each day. A good use has been found for them as they make excellent ceilings, resembling the old reed work. It is pricey – about the same as a pine ceiling – but very popular.

PRESSED TIN Victorian houses often have ornate pressed tin ceilings. These are beautiful and virtually maintenance free – provided the roof is not leaking above it and causing rust! They are a special and unique feature.

Direction If you are doing major renovations to your home, consider making your kitchen and bedroom north or east-facing. In the winter you get the nice warm sun, in the summer you avoid the western rays.

Energy Efficiency Karoo winters are typified by clear days and frosty nights. Make sure you have one warm room in which to spend your evenings during winter and minimize drafts in your home.

Most houses have charming Victorian coal fireplaces. Not only is coal messy and expensive, but these fireplaces lose over 50% of their heat up the chimney. Modern fireplace designs and alternative heating options are more efficient and cost effective.

Working shutters are great to block hot sun in summer and cold night air in winter. They also secure your home. If you don't have them, invest in heavy material for your curtains with lining (to prevent fading) to help keep out the heat and cold. Roman Blinds are not a good design for the Karoo – especially if your windows are not 100% sealed!

From solar cookers to geysers heated by panels, to battery chargers that run your lights and plugs, there is a wide range of great solar products on the market which consumers are loving. There are also lots of electrical, energy saving devices available – like instant water heaters. If you have a large erf and your town is not in a valley, there are wind-powered energy options as well.

With South Africa's growing energy crisis (accompanied by rising costs) be smart about the planning of your energy needs. Try to have just one geyser that serves your kitchen and bathroom – consider putting the geyser in the bathroom for a bit of heat in the winter. One of the most practical energy solutions is a dual purpose heat/cooking/hot water unit installed in your warm winter room.

Floors & Flooring

No historic home enthusiast would advise you to sand and seal the floors. Sand maybe, but certainly don't seal. The new products available are just that – new! We have no way to tell the impact over 100 years of suffocating the old wood with modern chemicals. Also, sanding floors that already have uneven planks will severely weaken the wood. Rather leave as is and put rugs with under padding in areas where the unevenness bothers you.

SHINE You would be surprised what a little bit of elbow grease can do to make your floors shine. Whether it is you or your maid that cleans your house, it's important to know the basics about polishing:

- 1) Cobra and other wax-based polishes are used for picking up dirt, not coating with a protective, dirt-trapping layer of wax. The secret is less is more AND don't skimp on good quality *lappies* or cleaning cloths (the thicker the better and preferably made of wool or cotton). The next secret is to go with the grain of the wood – this way you continuously make the floor shinier and smoother

and therefore easier to clean and maintain! A polishing brush is used behind the lappie and this brush must be kept clean.

- 2) If your floors are really dirty, you can wash them (but not with hot water, not with strong soaps and not with stiff brushes). The wood must not get waterlogged and if any cleaning products are used, they must be rinsed off well. You can also put a little Mineral Spirits or Turpentine on a cloth and wipe the boards clean.

Some Victorian to 1950's era houses have genuine linoleum flooring. This was made of cork and flax and today is very expensive. It is one of the warmest and longest lasting flooring materials so should be restored rather than removed.

Older homes in the Karoo are located closer to the former Cape Colony and some still have Batavian tiles. This is very special!

Garden

Many plants also thrive on the north and east wall of buildings. Most places are suitable for grape vines in the Karoo and almost everywhere one can grow stone fruits, figs, mulberries, nuts, etc. With the increasing trend in indigenous and waterwise gardening, you probably want to make the most out of indigenous plants and tress as far as possible. *Artemesia Africana* (Wildeals), *Sutherlandia frutescens* (Wildcure), various lilies, trees, grasses, flowering bossies and annual plants can all be incorporated into a water wise and indigenous scheme. Be sure you only purchase from a registered grower!

Intrinsic Value

Until recently, most of the valuable houses in the Karoo were new and built from the 1940's onwards. Today, a new appreciation for Karoo architectural heritage has evolved. However, older does not mean more special. Technically, anything older than 60 years is a historic piece under legal protection. Just before the highly industrialized (and mass produced) era of Post-WWII, an era of high quality post-Art Deco homes were built. These are as unique and special as some of the earlier Cape vernacular examples.

Paint (See Wood Doors & Windows)

Plaster

Most likely, your home will have mud walls which have patches of Pollyfilla, cement and all kinds of hole fillers! You might even find whole mielie cobs in your walls. There is absolutely nothing wrong with the natural, breathable mud – unless it is in such a state of disrepair that you need to replaster.

How to make mud plaster (Len? Anyone..give your recipes)

Len Raymond's Exterior Mud Wash Mix:

Mix 10 wheelbarrows sand with 1 x 25kg bag builders lime (mix well together at least one day before hand, preferably 3 days). Then mix the water with 1 more 25kg bag builders lime with 1 spade cement. The thinner the mix, the better. The rougher the wall, the better.

Stoops

Quintessential to any Karoo home is your *stoop* or verhandah. No two are the same. Some lucky people will find the original stonework underneath a layer of cement. Newer homes often have tiling or a screeded & polished surface with the traditional and very South African red stoop polish.

Water

Every part of your design and planning should pay attention to water and energy efficiency. Step one is harvesting your rainwater. This entails have a clean roof,

gutters and a rain tank. Grey water from your kitchen and laundry can run out to your trees and garden – your plants will love the phosphates!

Great new products are on the market. Odorless, stylish, composting toilets which have a simple drawer that gets emptied once a month mean you don't have to build a septic tank.

Whitewash

Whitewash is the best thing for interior and exterior walls. Also the cheapest and most natural – even the colours you mix in are natural and mostly from South Africa!

Windows

Glass The old windows that appear blurry are actually required for a house to keep its authentic value in Europe. Though blurry, this heavy leaded glass is also more heat efficient than the thinner modern glass made today. Even more special is the old coloured glass – some of which have a wavy texture because the glass was actually poured onto water.

The original window panes used by early settlers were nothing more than a thin pieces of linen with a bees wax coating. If you find remnants of these threads in any of your outbuildings or in your home, then you know they are very old.

Style Sometimes there were square windows in place before sash windows - these add value and charm to your home. The thinner the middle sections of wood which hold the lock, the older they are.

Many have been replaced with steel windows which are less maintenance, easier to clean & provide unobstructed views.

Wood Doors and Windows

The first thing many new owners want to do when they buy a Karoo home is sand woodwork (often yellowwood, stinkwood or Oregon pine). Remember BEFORE

you sand that about ¼ centimeter of the wood is sanded off – this weakens and thins the boards.

With few exception, old wood doors and windows, woodwork and fireplaces, etc exterior and interior, were always painted. If the paint and wood underneath are in good condition, it is best to leave it. For untreated wood, Woodoc products are the best. Linseed oil can be done on exterior wood but a minimum of two coats has to be applied at least twice a year – it's much higher maintenance than paint! **North facing wood especially should not be left exposed.** Never sand if the paint is still good. Paint was made of lead so if it has to be removed, take care! Modern varnishes are a lot more maintenance than paint.

“One of the best things you can do to help preserve homes is show interest and appreciation for other peoples’ homes. Knock on the door and show some friends. Leave R10 with the exclamations of admiration for the building and you can be guaranteed that the homeowner or renter will start having more pride and care for their home. It’s really just about awareness”

Len Raymond

Forever BookBedonnerd

A Richmond Community Development Foundation Project

