

BOOK HEAVEN

Karoo charm is the Richmond magnet

Once you hit Richmond in the Northern Cape, writes MICHÈLE MEYER. It's much more than just a quick fuel stop in the Karoo: it's a book town - the first and only one in the country - which hosts a Book-drunk festival every year, and home to an astonishing art collection for which you don't have a ticket.

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7 MIN TO READ

[Michèle Meyer](#)



HERE CAN MAN READ ...and talk about books. MARLIZA VAN DEN BERG

IT'S a good eight hour drive from Pretoria here. About 20 km from the village lies the last beacon. Giant red flags of the Karoo road stable waved to the right of the road. You only pass by if you are a hasty ambulance driver, because here is marmalade, olive oil, the very best lamb pies, even wine from Prieska.

We take the entrance to town at the Caltex gas station, take the turn onto Loop Street, the main street. When unpacking, fine Karoo powder on the boot smells of afternoon sun and bushes. Then lie in the milk-white room for a while, which makes the flashes in your head go away from the tar for a day. Later, a glass of wine while pausing, overlooking Loop Street things.

Across the street are Stoepstories. This book heaven is a maze of 17 rooms full of second-hand (sometimes probably multi-hand) books. For months now, I have been looking forward to a porch story.

Dinner from our overnight place's Karoo Kitchen is generous. A heavy, warm loaf with shiny lubricated crust arrives, alongside old-fashioned tomato salad: ripe red tomato slices, onion circles floating in brown vinegar topped with brown sugar, salt and white pepper.



CALM IN A KAROO ROOM ... at Richmond Café and Rooms. MARLIZA VAN DEN BERG

Add to this the lamb curry with ginger potato and we conclude with bulky slices of milk tart as city people do not know it. In Richmond, you eat kosher, not haute cuisine.

A long walk is already advice after eating. The early evening bites are ready. It looks like someone pulled a sail across town after the day. Walking Street is completely deserted, we walk down the street past the beautiful church, village library and Huis Driefontein, the ACCV's home for the elderly with its old-fashioned benches on the veranda. Past The Supper Club, Vetmuis's Farm Kitchen and a supermarket.

In the town square, a bow rises light pink roses. Across the square grows a team of massive eucalyptus that you can smell downwind. Further on is the Modern Art Project South Africa.

When we turn back, the first stars flicker shamelessly into the vast deep blue night. The day was long and the town's drowsiness wrapped around us. The church bell sounded nine times, and a village barking back. Then only the silence of the night sounds.



STOEPSIT IN LOOPSTREET ... Richmond is book heaven. MARLIZE VAN DEN BERG

Book town of Richmond

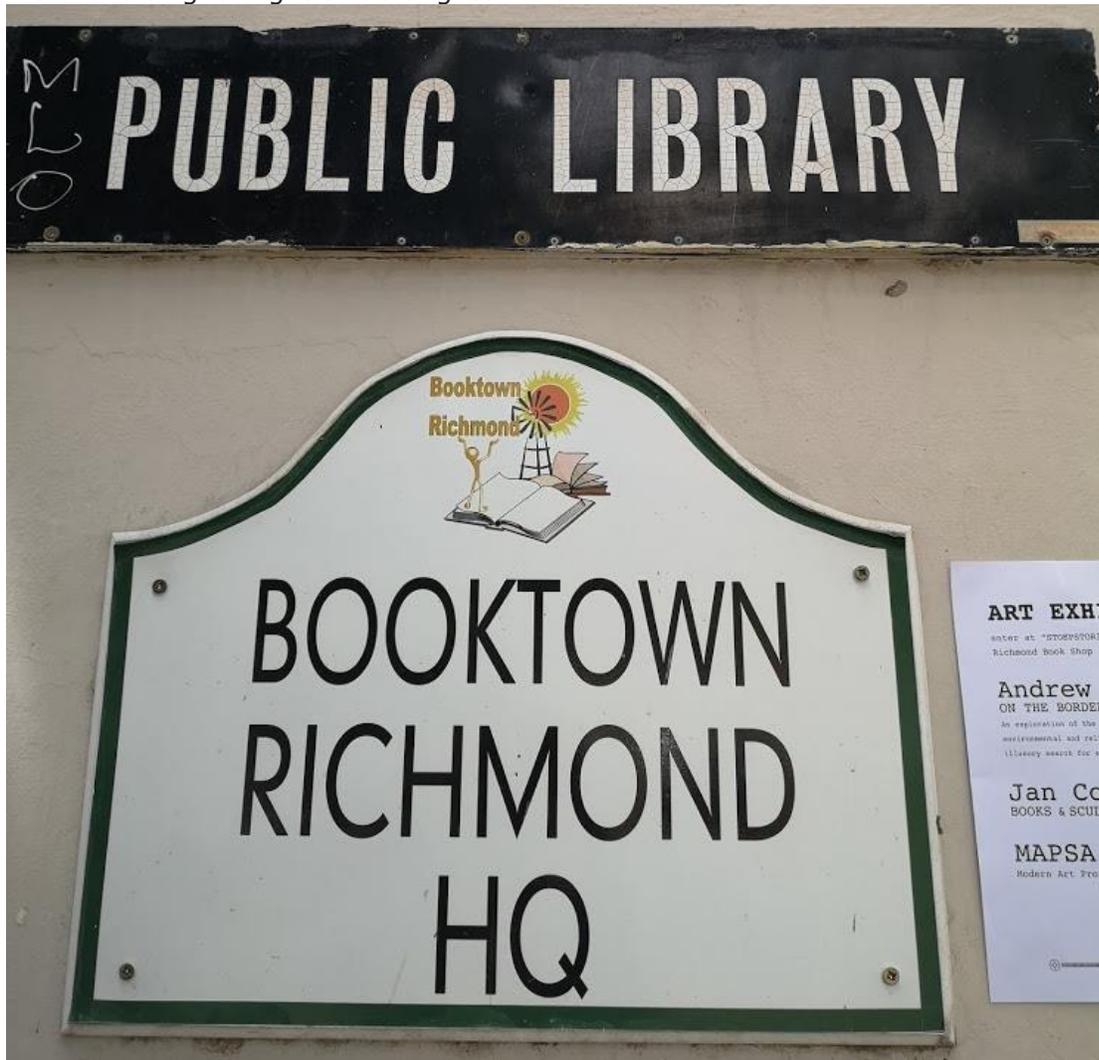
It's not just any town that can write the status "book town" before its name. The concept of the "book town" was coined by Welsh bookseller Richard Booth. His pursuit and success in declaring Hay-On-Wye as Wales's book town has been proven to be such a successful tourism injection for sleepy rural villages.

To qualify as a book town, a town must be able to reverse decades of economic decline. The idea is to use second-hand books in particular as an attraction to stimulate the town's

economy on several levels. Accommodation facilities, places to eat, infrastructure and literacy projects must be created and grow.

Determining factors for the qualification are low property prices and easy accessibility. These features attract investors to invest in local property while book-loving visitors simply want to get on with it.

In 2007, two unique characters' orbits crossed - a cosmic encounter that predicted that Richmond's light might shine brighter.



BOOK VILLAGE ... Richmond is the first and only town in the country to enjoy this status. The public library is the heart of the Boekondonnerd festival.

Dr. Peter Baker, a Canadian veterinarian, decided after a lot of research to buy properties in Richmond, thus encouraging the town's revival. Darryl David, then a lecturer in Afrikaans at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, came across the word "book town" during his PhD in literary tourism and thus discovered his passion.

His search for the right village to declare a book town takes him to several promising from Aberdeen to Philippolis. As Baker and David's paths crossed, the bullet was through the church. Richmond would become the country's first and only book town.

In September 2007 - shortly before the iconic actor's death - Patrick Mynhardt officially launched Booktown Richmond. The town cannot afford membership of the Organization of Booktowns - it would swallow the book festival's total annual budget, but is nevertheless recognized by the Booktown community.



STOP STORIES ... a store full of high-end books where you can lose yourself. MICHÈLE MEYER

Bookless with no ticket office

This year was Boekdorp Richmond's 12th book festival, so Book Fair XII. Bookless is undoubtedly the most flexible festival of its kind I've ever experienced. Our rooms were already booked in March, but nowhere was a program or even confirmation of the 2019 festival to be found.

Not that it bothered. Our circle of friends agreed: We are going to Richmond, party or not anyway. It's a lovely town with fat lambs and plenty of wine, rooms full of books, a great museum and that amazing collection of art.

"The program is a bit all over the show. You come and you see what happens. "

We are pleasantly surprised. Book-obsessed XII was celebrated with dedication and perhaps the unregulated nature of the festival is precisely part of the charm. The program was often

changed without notice to accommodate speakers' coming and going. No Computicket in sight and all sessions are free.

Richmond's public library is the heart of Boekondonnerd. Between shelves and old newspaper stands, roughly 75 unpaired chairs stand in skewed rows. A ranking of which our income earners were oblivious does exist. Some regulars have a chair and basta aiming to sit on it.

However, we learn quickly. One buddy stays in place while the rest pours and makes sure the offer is the one shown on the (current) program. If not, take a look at our art or go for a book search.

Angie Gallagher has been living in Richmond for three years and this is her third Book Fair. "The program is a bit all over the show. You come and you see what happens. In other places it would be totally unacceptable. Here it works. "



KAROO DREAM ... in a village fueled by reading. MARLIZA VAN DEN BERG

Books build bridges

Elize du Randt of Melville, Johannesburg, tells us this year is her and her girlfriends' seventh Book Fair. They know how the festival rolls out and her comments about tickets sold make

sense. "The moment tickets cost money, you're going to lose those from the bottom of the sum. You can't expect people with significantly lower incomes to pay for offers.

This year it was clear to Elize that people were concerned about what was going on in South Africa. "Regardless of race, creed or belief, it shows that people are tired; it is less about politics than about the economy. People want to stand together and get things going. "

With conversations about Bosasa, Steinhoff, Eskom and presentations by writers such as Charl-Pierre Naudé, Jan van Tonder and Atholl Williams, there are things you do not want to miss.

But not everyone is satisfied. Philip Mans has been a Richmonder for five years. He feels the community can be more holistically involved.

"We would like to be part of the planning of the festival. I'm an artist and I would love to exhibit, but I haven't been approached in five years. We have great respect for Peter; he is the driving force behind the success of Boekondonnerd. One can only go more integrally, arrange things like a township crawl, take visitors there, show what life looks like. "



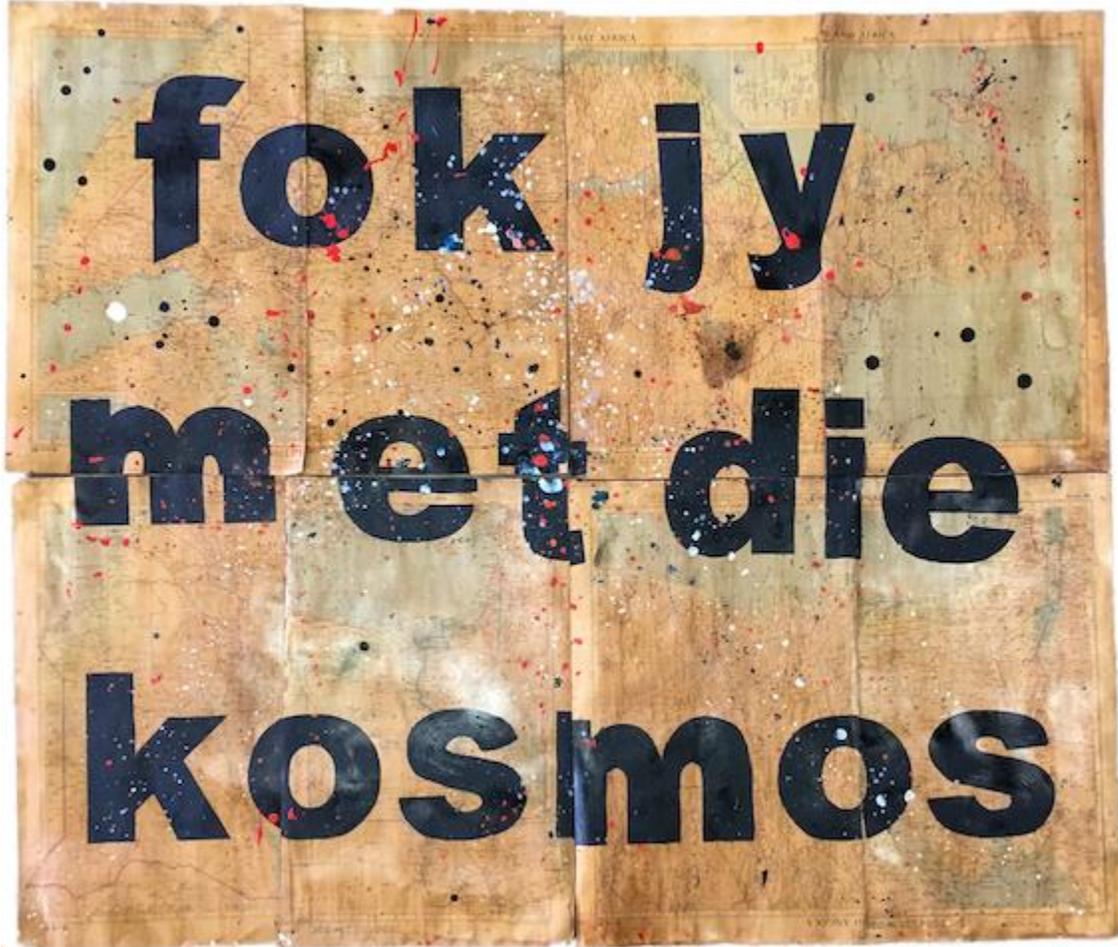
***BE WANTED ...** This wall with alphabet bricks by Willem Boshoff is a MAPSA outreach project with local brick maker Trevor Snyders. Mapsa*

And there is art

At the end of the main street are high walls behind which an astonishing South African art collection awaits. There you walk in without a ticket or coupon. On the way out, you will feel rich about what you have been given.

Modern Art Projects South Africa (MAPSA) is a registered nonprofit organization that has been promoting and supporting contemporary art since 2005 by seeking to develop a diverse community of artists in South Africa.

Art collector and owner, Harry Siertsema of Harrie's Pancakes fame, founded MAPSA with curator Abrie Fourie with the idea of creating creative opportunities for artists across South Africa. Together with Morné Ramsay, logistics director, and co-curator Seretse Moletsane, they run this impressive project.



OR HOW ... Liza Grobler and Andrew Ananda Voogel's 2017 work, *Fuck You with the Cosmos*, was painted with acrylic on pages from *The Times Atlas of the World*.

Richmond's location and community is at the heart of MAPSA's work. To this end, the extraordinary gallery and artist residence was started in 2007 in Richmond. Here you can marvel at masterful works of both big names and of a new generation of powerful artists.

The project has become the creative heartbeat of many art-focused projects. MAPSA annually joins forces with Boekondonnerd and an exceptional bookbinding training program is the result of this.

On the way home we and our cargo are heavier. Our wallets and spirit are considerably lighter. It was a fair barter. Next year we will do it again. If only we could get the program.