

African novel gets vote for year's best

CIRCLES IN A FOREST By Dalene Matthee. Alfred Knopf, 1984, 305 pages, \$14.95.

By Roland Bentwell
Book Editor

On a scale of one to 10, I would give this novel an unqualified 10 without a moment's hesitation. In fact, from my own view, I consider it to be the best novel that I have read in 1984.

This is a novel that deals, among other things, with prejudice.

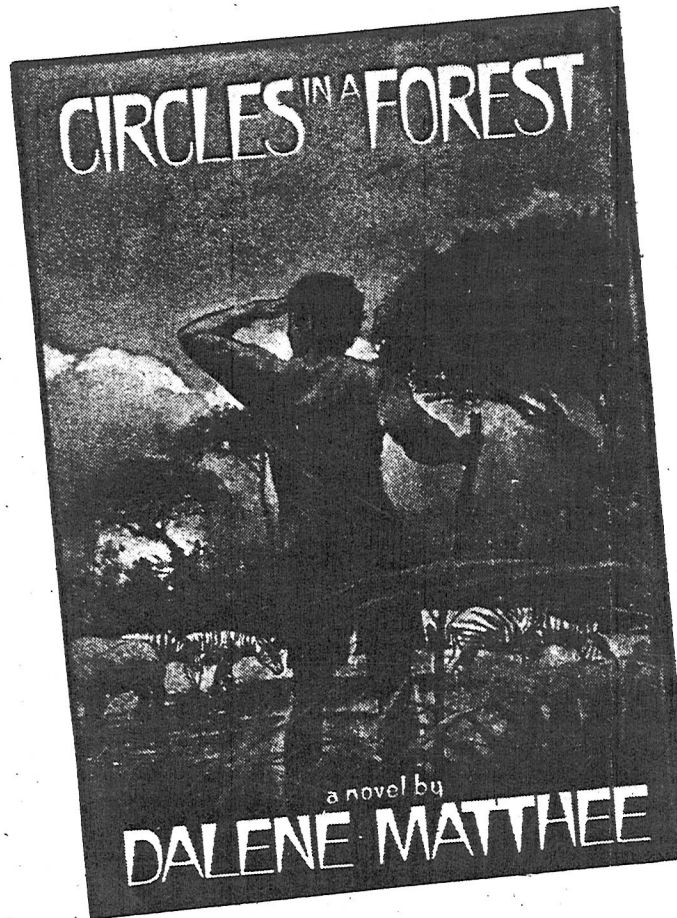
Prejudice exists in all levels of human society. A student from Haiti once told me that in his country the lighter-skinned blacks are looked down upon by their countrymen of a darker hue. In the history of our own nation, supposedly the "land of the free," the German, Italian and Jewish immigrants all had their turns as targets shot at by "the racially superior." The Statue of Liberty has been tarnished, not so much by the elements, as by our treatment of our black and Spanish-speaking citizens.

The setting of this novel is in South Africa. Thus when I say that one aspect of the book is prejudice, one almost immediately thinks of the policy of the ruling white government there of a strict separation of blacks and whites. It is not, however, black vs. white prejudice that is considered here.

Instead, Dalene Matthee writes about the condescending attitudes and feelings of superiority that existed among the city dwellers toward the Forest People, who by profession were woodcutters.

The city merchants, who bought the Forest People's wood constantly cheated them by underpaying them for the timber and overcharging them for goods they bought. They were considered "things to be used," rather than human beings. The Forest People passively took this type of treatment for fear that the businessmen would cease to purchase their wood and thus deprive them of their livelihood.

When Saul Barnard, a man who had grown up in their



midst, himself, the son of a woodcutter, came forward to be the champion of their cause, they rejected him for fear that he would upset the status quo.

In the beginning of the story, Barnard is about to leave the land of his birth. He puts off his departure for another five days when he hears that a ruthless hunter is out to track down Oldfoot, a majestic elephant who has often terrorized the Forest People. Knowing that all the hunter is after are the massive ivory tusks of the animal, Barnard sets off to hunt the beast himself so that the animal might die with dignity.

There had always existed a strange sort of kinship between Saul Barnard and Oldfoot. According to South African lore, an elephant will often choose a human being as a sort of man-brother. At different times in his life, when something of importance was about to happen to Saul, Oldfoot had always made an appearance. This led him to believe that he had been picked by Oldfoot for this man-brother relationship. Whether or not he succeeds in his mission is something the reader should find out for himself.

The author constantly employs flashbacks in her narrative. At one moment we are in the 1890s tracking Oldfoot with Barnard and the next moment we are transported back in time to experiences in his youth. Usually I find this disconcerting, but Matthee uses this method with such skill that it actually adds to the fine weave of the novel.

The style of this author reminds this reviewer very much of the works of Scandinavian or Russian novelists of the late 1800s and early 1900s. There is that same sense of melancholy that seems to seep into one's very being that gives one the feeling that one is in some sort of a limbo-land — a little below laughter and a little above tears.

Born near Capetown, South Africa, Dalene Matthee has written short stories and four previous novels. One hopes that her career will be long. However, I fail to see how she will ever be able to surpass the sheer brilliance of this particular work.