

11/4/84
Tucson Arizona Daily Star

'Circles in a Forest' is universal story

CIRCLES IN A FOREST by Dalene Matthee, Alfred A. Knopf, \$14.95, 305 pp.

The woodcutters can't see the Knysna Forest for the trees. The wood buyers see gold.

Saul Barnard sees a never-ending circle.

"Circles in a Forest" is a lovely novel, rich with symbolism that applies to anyone. Its South African forest can be a desert, a city or a farm in the heart of America.

Saul, the son of Joram the woodcutter, represents anyone who must grow up in a rapidly changing time that has no room for the past or its values.

Saul sees beyond his beloved forest to the sea, the way out.

He's ready to set sail aboard the Pictor when he hears the news that his nephew has been killed and Old Foot, a feared elephant, has been blamed. Woodcutter Fred Terblans is on Old Foot's trail.

Saul doesn't believe Old Foot is the killer and sets out to find Old Foot, his animal brother, before Terblans does.

While hunting the elephant, Saul reflects on his past. What he finds is himself.

Saul can't live the lies his people do. His life has been one of questions since the day as a child he cut open the head of a blue buck to discover that its gall was not there.

Don't question local beliefs, the woodcutters say. Don't question the fact that they are killing the forest, their livelihood, they say.

In late-1880s South Africa, the woodcutters provide wood to two British buyers who live in the village on the beach. The buyers see to it that the woodcutters never get out of their debt.

The woodcutters supplement their lack of income by illegally killing elephants to sell the tusks, again to the wood buyers.

Review

Saul is turned out as a teen when he chastises his father for groveling to Mr. MacDonald, one of the wood buyers. Saul says the woodcutters can ask any price because the wood buyers have no choice but to pay. But the woodcutters can't see that.

The woodcutters will die with the forest and the elephants they're killing, Saul says.

Saul goes to the village to work for MacDonald, who pays Saul nothing because Joram is in his debt. Saul lives in a woodshed behind the house and eats scraps.

Saul's only friend is Kate, MacDonald's daughter, who teaches him to read.

Saul is trapped between two worlds — he can't join Kate's and he can't go back to his own, where he is perceived as a spy and a traitor.

As an adult, Saul leaves MacDonald to become a gold prospector, a rather prosperous one. Kate leaves for the Cape for schooling.

Saul's new life pays and paves his way partly into village society and affections. But his heart is for Kate.

Kate's father makes it impossible for them to be together. Fed up with the gold rush and MacDonald's plotting, Saul books passage on the Pictor.

Criticisms of the novel are few. One must read the book jacket to know for certain that the Knysna Forest is in South Africa, and that the woodcutters are of Dutch ancestry.

Hints in the novel are many, but unless the reader is a history buff, he or she must resort to the jacket. That's a small price for good reading.

— Marti Ledyard
The Arizona Daily Star