

Circles In A Forest

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By **DALENE MATTHEE**
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A century ago, like today, South Africa was a place of cultural confrontation and crisis. The confrontations occurred on many levels, but chiefly between the British merchant-imperialists who were relative newcomers to the land; and Afrikaaner woodcutters, who had lived in, and upon, the forests for generations.

In the 1880s the forests were becoming depleted and their great wildlife resources — especially the elephants, regarded with a religious mixture of awe and fear by the Dutch-descended woodcutters — were becoming endangered.

Moreover, the foresters, tied deeply to old customs and beliefs and therefore themselves endangered, had become enslaved to the modern but culturally sterile mercantile system of the British.

This tragic and volatile situation came to something of a head with the concurrent discoveries of the gold and diamond fields. A tremendous influx of new immigrants — English, Irish,

Canadian, and Australian — driven by greed, insensitive to the land, and prepared to risk everything for the new-found wealth, descended on the country like a great storm.

Against this background, Dalene Matthee, herself an Afrikaaner (and, stunningly, her own translator), has written an evocative and moving historical novel which subtly explores the roots of contemporary South Africa's tragic social problems. At the same time, she brings to vivid life the world of the forests and the merchant towns and the people who inhabited both.

Saul Bernard is the child of woodcutters. Early on he starts to question the old ways and beliefs; he also begins to see what his father and the others cannot or will not see: that, in a real sense, the woodcutters have become the slaves of the merchants who keep them forever in debt by extending small bits of credit in return for substantial deliveries of wood. Saul sees too that the forests are disappearing, that the search for good trees takes his family farther and farther afield each year.

"Life was a crooked circle. The woodcutter killed the forest, the wood-buyer killed the woodcutter. Round and round and round you walked the crooked circle. Year in, year out."

Saul's unwillingness to accept things as they are leads him to be cast out, first by his own family, and then by the British to whom he turns for employment. Homeless, he is driven to the goldfields, the tragic symbol of the death of the forests and merchant greed, but also holding out the hope of financial salvation for himself and his people.

In a shattering climax, Saul is forced into a confrontation with all of the forces that have driven him from his roots: the British whom he hates, the woodcutters who hate him, and the forest itself, embodied in a single, great elephant — "Old Foot" — who has haunted Saul's consciousness, and with whom he has felt a mystical relationship, since childhood. Old Foot is sought by hunters for his massive ivory and for allegedly killing a child — Saul's own nephew — and Saul decides that he must intervene, to kill the protector of the forest himself, to save him from an ignominious end.

Dalene Matthee's narrative is powerful and poignant and thoroughly creditable. Her skillful evocation of the Knysna Forest reminds us of the role *place* plays in the imaginations of so many great storytellers. Her style and poetic language suggest the Alan Paton of "Cry, The Beloved Country." In all, she has given us an unusually fine novel that not only entertains, but compels us to think and brings to life another time and place with dazzling force and truth.

"Circles in a Forest" adds another name to the distinguished list of contemporary South African writers who confront their country's problems with potent imagination and language.

— Keith F. McLoughland



Detail of jacket painting by Daniel Maffia.

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