

# BOOKS

## CIRCLES IN A FOREST

By Dalene Matthee. 305 pp. \$14.95.  
Knopf, 201 East 50th Street,  
New York, N. Y. 10022.

Reviewed by Alice Digilio

**D**ALENE MATTHEE's principal achievement in "Circles in a Forest" is her recreation of the primitive world of the Dutch woodcutters who worked the forests of South Africa's Cape during the 19th century. They lived in the forests with their families in almost complete isolation except for occasional trips to nearby villages to sell their wood. With oxen and sledges, but mostly their own brute strength, they managed to haul out the raw material for the railroads and wagons of an expanding colony.

Two stories unfold against this landscape, one remembered by the novel's hero, Saul Barnard, as he looks back over his life in the Knysna Forest, the other a quest he has set for himself in the present. The two tales each have their separate strands, which Matthee skillfully alternates, until they converge in a dramatic confrontation between Saul's past and his present, between good and evil.

Saul is the second son of Joram Barnard. When he is little more than a toddler, he is on his father's team, helping cook the sweet potatoes, a mainstay of the woodcutters' diet, and brewing the men's coffee. Later, when he has some "flesh on his bones and bark on his skin," he learns to swing an ax.

There are dangers in the forest, and the greatest danger is the "Big Feet" or elephants, so feared that the superstitious woodcutters never utter the word "elephant" for fear of angering the animals. "If a big foot chases you, take off your jacket or your shirt and throw it down," Joram tells his sons. "He'll think it's you and trample that first."

Saul learns his lessons well, but with the arrival of manhood, he also learns what it means to be trapped — trapped by the kind of superstition that makes the word "elephant" taboo, by work that nearly tears the muscles off a grown man's back, and by an economic system that makes woodcutters little more than slaves to the English wood buyers.

At 14 Saul begins his rebellion, and the rest of his story is an account of a young man throwing himself against the constraints of a world in which he has no power. First he leaves his family, who have branded him as an uncooperative maverick, and goes to work for the stingy and sadistic wood buyer in the Knysna village, Mr. MacDonald. Then he rebels against the society that MacDonald represents — the English who exploit and humiliate the woodcutters. Finally, he rebels against the waste and pillage of the forest he loves. By the time he is a man, the forest is prey to overcutting, the elephants are targets of ivory hunters, and the discovery of gold in the woodland streams has set off an invasion by prospectors who stop at nothing to get at the precious metal they imagine lies under the earth.

There is a whiff of Dickens about "Circles in a Forest." In many ways Saul is a South African Oliver Twist, at war against the injustices of his own version of the 19th-century world. Matthee has a Dickensian taste for melodra-

ma, too. Unfortunately, she's heavy-handed, not only with the melodrama but with her fixation on human folly. As Saul Barnard's story unfolds, he takes on the tone of a scold, quick to deliver a sermon to whoever will listen. Before our eyes the curious and sensitive child grows into a sententious, self-righteous, and much less sympathetic man.

Matthee is best known in South Africa as an author of fiction for young people, and there is much here that we have come to associate with a certain type of children's literature — adventure, romance, nature with mythic qualities. The reader searching for the pleasures of escape will not be disappointed.

Alice Digilio is on the staff of *The Washington Post*.

## BEST SELLERS

The New York Times

This list is based on reports from more than 2,000 bookstores throughout the United States. Weeks on list are not necessarily consecutive.

### FICTION

This Week		Last Week	Weeks on List
1	THE TALISMAN, by Stephen King and Peter Straub .....	1	6
2	LOVE AND WAR, by John Jakes .....	2	7
3	THE SICILIAN, by Mario Puzo .....	3	3
4	THE FOURTH PROTOCOL, by Frederick Forsyth .....	6	16
5	STILLWATCH, by Mary Higgins Clark ..	4	6
6	STRONG MEDICINE, by Arthur Hailey	5	10
7	"...AND THE LADIES OF THE CLUB," by Helen Hoover Santmyer .....	7	25
8	THE LIFE AND HARD TIMES OF HEIDI ABROMOWITZ, by Joan Rivers .....	9	3
9	LIFE ITS OWNSELF, by Dan Jenkins ....	12	3
10	GOD KNOWS, by Joseph Heller .....	8	9
11	RIDE A PALE HORSE, by Helen MacInnes .....	10	4
12	LINCOLN, by Gore Vidal .....	11	24
13	ILLUSIONS OF LOVE, by Cynthia Freeman .....	—	1
14	NUTCRACKER, by E.T.A. Hoffmann ...	14	2
15	SUPERIOR WOMEN, by Alice Adams ..	13	8

### NONFICTION

1	IACocca: An Autobiography, by Lee Iacocca with William Novak .....	1	5
2	LOVING EACH OTHER, by Leo Buscaglia .....	2	14
3	PIECES OF MY MIND, by Andrew A. Rooney .....	4	12
4	MOSES THE KITTEN, by James Herriot .....	3	8
5	"THE GOOD WAR," by Studs Terkel ....	7	7
6	DR. BURNS' PRESCRIPTION FOR HAPPINESS, by George Burns .....	5	4
7	THE BRIDGE ACROSS FOREVER, by Richard Bach .....	6	13
8	HERITAGE, by Abba Eban .....	8	7
9	HEY, WAIT A MINUTE, I WROTE A BOOK! by John Madden with Dave Anderson .....	9	11
10	A LIGHT IN THE ATTIC, by Shel Silverstein .....	11	106
11	THE WEAKER VESSEL, by Antonia Fraser .....	10	7
12	THE KENNEDYS: An American Drama, by Peter Collier and David Horowitz .....	12	23
13	ELVIS IS DEAD AND I DON'T FEEL SO GOOD MYSELF, by Lewis Grizzard .....	13	2
14	CLOSE ENCOUNTERS, by Mike Wallace and Gary Paul Gates .....	14	9
15	ONE WRITER'S BEGINNINGS, by Eudora Welty .....	—	37

### ADVICE, HOW-TO AND MISCELLANEOUS

1	WHAT THEY DON'T TEACH YOU AT HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL, by Mark H. McCormack .....	1	11
2	THE ONE MINUTE SALES PERSON, by Spencer Johnson and Larry Wilson .....	2	7
3	NOTHING DOWN, by Robert Haas .....	3	3
4	CHEF PAUL PRUDHOMME'S LOUISIANA KITCHEN, by Paul Prudhomme .....	5	7
5	WEBSTER'S NEW WORLD DICTIONARY, SECOND COLLEGE EDITION .....	—	6