

# THE MAKING OF A NOVELIST:

## Dalene Matthee



WALKING DEEP in the Outeniqua forest, Dalene Matthee came upon the overgrown ruins that were once a town called Millwood. Why was it built there? Why had the people left? What had become of them? Dalene's burning need to uncover the story of the place led her on a quest which resulted in *Circles in a Forest* and two other novels, one of which is already complete.

Finding her own answers has been Dalene's central concern since a school friend died after her appendix burst. 'She's gone to hell,' Dalene was told, 'because she swore and she was bad.' Dalene's whole being rebelled against this explanation, and from then on she became almost fanatically committed to penetrating to the heart of things, rejecting narrow interpretations.

You have to lay yourself open, says Dalene. You will find the answer when the time is right for you - it might have been sitting under your nose for years. And the answer will not be the same for everybody. Dalene has found meaning in works not generally held to be deeply significant - among them *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull* and Ayn Rand's *The Romantic Manifesto*. More conventional sources include Plato and Pythagoras.

The metaphysical side of Dalene's life is balanced with an earthy *joie de vivre*. She's not above irreverent pranks, especially in the face of social pretensions. She's full of power, passion, and housewifely good sense, an example of the adage that your roots must be bedded in the earth if your head is to reach the clouds.

Dalene has distinguished family connections but ruefully admits she has always been a black sheep. Her paternal grandmother was relat-

ed to President Steyn and very conscious of her social standing. She found Dalene intractable: the child wouldn't concentrate on her embroidery and had no aptitude for lady-like manners. Dalene's father boasts a drop or two of Sir Walter Scott's blood and though her mother comes from a jollier, more down-to-earth family than the Steyns, she is a stickler for conventions who was fiercely ambitious for her children.

By adolescence Dalene's only claim to fame was that she was the naughtiest child in Riversdale. That was when she met Larius Matthee. They were married when she was 18. His job as a bank official took them from her home town to Oudtshoorn, Darling, Graaff-Reinet, and Uniondale.

In these peregrinations, Dalene met people who were to have a lasting influence on her. Geologist Japie Dekenah (famous for his discoveries of prehistoric man), who was also a photographer and a metaphysicist, shared the riches of his mind and his library with her. There was a German librarian who always wore black and prescribed difficult tomes to Dalene and then quizzed her to make sure she'd read, learnt, and inwardly digested their contents.

In Graaff-Reinet there was Sister Felix who encouraged Dalene to resume the music lessons she'd started at school. For Sister Felix, only perfection was good enough. Dalene played the piano every single day until she started work on 'Circles'. She hasn't played since - yet another of those fascinating mysteries of the creative psyche.

During these years of personal growth and moving house, Dalene produced three daughters and learnt to value the secure anchor Larius provided. 'He's my safety belt,' she says.

When he retired, she was to decide where they'd settle because until then his work had always pre-empted any choice. Dalene picked Stellenbosch because the girls could go to university there. Larius said fine, as long as they could first have a three-month holiday at Hartenbos (near Knysna). They rented a modest A-frame house . . . and they've been living there ever since. It proved to Dalene what she already believed: There is a grand pattern which will lead her where she needs to go if she doesn't disturb its rhythms.

At Hartenbos, she discovered the plight of the forest, the tragedy of the elephants and the story which had to be told. A writer is obliged to pass on her special awareness, Dalene says.

She has always written. In retrospect, she thinks that she started as a means of voicing an inner life that no one comprehended. Many women are trapped in a similar situation, she says. 'We are so clever at protecting ourselves, we often don't recognise the person behind the emotional asbestos suit.'

For a long time, Dalene's ambition was to produce a short story as good as those by Jack London.

Her first published book was a collection of short stories called *Die Judasbok*, still closest to her heart because into it went the distillation of 25 years of experiences, feelings, thoughts and questions. That was followed by two 'popular' novels, *Die huis van Nadia* and *Petronella van Aarde*, both originally written for television. Dalene is not a literary snob. These novels might be a light read, but they deal with the real problems in a community. When the stories failed to make the box, the practical side of Dalene came to the fore. Why waste good work? Why not alter the

manuscripts and try them on a book publisher?

Dalene reserves the hours between nine and twelve for writing but 'when it's coming thickly' sneaks in extra time.

'I'll cook the family a gorgeous meal and then settle them in front of the TV - and steal off to work. You can write under the blankets with your back to your man if you have to.'

A book begins with a period of tireless research. For 'Circles' she spent months in the forest, studying the minutest details of the fauna and flora, double checking what she observed with the locals and all available documents. She tracked down anyone connected to the people who had lived there during the period she was researching.

'I never wrote in the forest,' she pooh-poohs the romantic picture of a writer on a ferny bank warbling wood-notes wild. She worked in the forest, brought the material back home and then sifted and checked it.

In her study the first draft of the story went down in yellow pencil in a series of notebooks. Then the entire novel was typed. 'This is when I add the vanilla,' she says.

After all the research was done, 'Circles' took 11 months to write. She lets the work run, but keeps a hand on the reins. Sometimes she and the story go down a cul-de-sac and then they have to come back a little way and start again. There are no short cuts. ♣

By CATHY KNOX