

Acclaimed writer Dalene Matthee is dead – but

t REES hear what you say. That's why Dalene Matthee quickly shushed a visitor when he told her in her Hartenbos garden an oak tree couldn't grow in a pot. "Let's talk inside the house. I don't want the trees to hear you," she told TV director Jan Groenewald.

Dalene believed the trees also had voices. This beloved author and naturalist made a point of listening to the forest.

Soon after the release of her second forest novel, *Fiela se Kind* (Fiela's Child), filmmaker Katinka Heyns visited her to ask for permission to turn it into a film. Dalene's answer was: "The forest will decide . . ."

Together they headed into the trees where they spent a good two to three hours walking in silence. Only the next morning, after sitting in her "fairy garden" – an inner courtyard filled with ferns – and listening to the angels did she give Katinka her consent.

Now Dalene Matthee (66) is dead. She died in her sleep on 20 February in a Mossel Bay clinic from heart failure. But her books, which have been translated into 14 languages, live on. They continue to carry the magic of the indigenous Garden Route forests with their endangered elephants to countries far beyond our borders.

A Knysna forest guide tells of a group of British tourists who stood awestruck among the giant trees during their first visit. "I've been here before," one woman whispered. Then she explained she'd read Dalene's books.

IT all began when Dalene arrived at the Cape Town offices of Tafelberg Publishers with a shopping bag containing the manuscript of *Kringe in 'n Bos* (Circles in a Forest).

"She said she'd researched it for so long she was completely broke," says Charles Fryer, then head of fiction.

Her anger at the way timber merchants were exploiting the woodcutters in the Knysna forests inspired her.

"The elephant Oupoot started his journey and blazed a trail right through Afrikaans literature," Charles says. Then he set forth into the world after author André P Brink realised the book could be a worldwide best-



Silence in the forest

She was hailed around the world for her writing but she felt her greatest achievement was introducing the world to the forest and its people – and that children read her books

she'll live for ever among her beloved trees

seller and told his London agent about it.

Charles remembers Dalene as an eccentric who believed fairies lived in a tree in her backyard and fed cheese to wagtails.

"She didn't go looking for fame," actress Shaleen Surtie-Richards says of Dalene. "She had her feet planted firmly on the ground."

Shaleen met Dalene in 1985 when she was playing the lead in a production of *Fiela se Kind*. Director Suzanne van Wyk didn't like Shaleen in the part and her nerves were in shreds by the time she headed for Hartenbos to meet the writer.

"Dalene came out of her front door, opened her arms wide and told me, 'You're my Fiela,'"

This inspired Shaleen so much she kept a photo of Dalene in her dressing room.

Once, during a one-woman show on the Garden Route, Shaleen needed a doll. Dalene lent her her daughter Amanda's porcelain doll, called *Constipation*.

"The child didn't know what the name meant. Her mom told her only when she was about 12. She was very upset but by then the name had stuck," Shaleen says with a laugh.

"Dalene was famous all over the world but she was just a wife to Larius, a mom to her three daughters and the best friend you could ever have."

Katinka remembers the crowd of teddy bears that awaited her on the couch the first time she visited Dalene. They belonged to Dalene's daughter Hillary and Dalene stipulated in her *Fiela se Kind* movie contract that Katinka should give Hillary a special teddy bear.

Then another movie producer offered Dalene more money plus a teddy bear from Disneyland.

"How do you compete with a bear that flies in on a jet?" Katinka asks.

MAIN PICTURE: Dalene Matthee will be remembered as someone who never went looking for fame. She arrived at a publisher's office with the manuscript for *Kringe in 'n Bos* (Circles in a Forest) in a shopping bag. BELOW: Her deep love for Nature was reflected in her "forest" books.

Luckily Dalene decided she wanted a woman to make her film and Katinka clinched the contract with a "cute handmade little bear".

Another stipulation was that Dalene wouldn't have to attend a news conference or the opening night. But in the end she was there for the big occasion to see the movie in which she too had a small role as a forest woman.

Katinka last saw her about two years ago. "It was a different Dalene from the one I knew. She was very quiet and had lost a lot of weight. She wasn't well. Not being able to visit the forest was hard for her."

A month before she died they chatted on the phone about the possibility of filming *Moerbeibos* with an Italian co-producer.

"I got the feeling there wasn't a lot of time left. Everything was settled.

"She was the best friend you could ever have"

She'd done what she'd wanted to do."

DALENE didn't talk about being ill. "Whenever I inquired – she suffered from arthritis – she'd avoid answering," says Riana Barnard, editor of Dalene's last book, *Toorbos* (*Dream-Forest*). She remembers her as an "honest, direct person".

"You look wrong," the writer told her the first time they met, explaining she'd imagined her differently. "You must make some time for us to sit on a rock somewhere," she added.

Dalene wrote her books to music, Riana says. "The forest books required Rossini in the CD player. When she drove through a beautiful mountain pass she'd first stop to listen to a track. Then she'd say something like, 'Yes, the mountains will also like this music,'"

Dalene won international acclaim when in 1993 she was awarded a Swiss literary prize for her "energetic literary work and her passionate interest in Nature conservation". But

she regarded making the world aware of the forest and its people as her greatest achievement, Riana says. She was also proud so many children read her books, which are school setworks. "She left no stone unturned when it came to helping a child."

Annelie Botes, author of among others *Raaiselkind* (*Riddle Child*), was 14 when Dalene started giving her guitar lessons at Uniondale where Dalene's husband was a bank manager. She became her "spiritual mother" after Annelie lost her own mom when she was 17.

"She never helped me with my writing – 'It's you and you alone', she'd say – but she taught me the world didn't end with George or Oudtshoorn. She made me curious about life."

Dalene died soon after completing her last book, *Die Uitgespoeldes*, and its still untitled translation.

"The way I knew her she would've kept herself alive to finish the book," says Frederik de Jager, who came to know her in his job as an editor at Tafelberg Publishers.

"She had her own ideas, for instance about man's place in Nature. She knew how to put an idea like that into a story so you read the book for the story but got a lot more out of it than just that."

When she won the first of four prizes for popular prose Dalene bluntly said she was really glad about the money. "She was one of few South African authors who also did well financially," Frederik says. "She bought a nice house in Hartenbos and the last time I saw her she was driving a Mercedes."

But she also used her money for research. She headed to the Netherlands to research *Pieterella van die Kaap* (still in translation). "Lots of people write as a hobby but she was a real writer," Frederik says.

From the balcony of the flat she moved to after her husband died Dalene had a view of Mossel Bay's harbour. She loved the sea almost as much as she did the forest. She even knew the sea's birthday – spring tide in September.

"I just can't believe she isn't there any more," Katinka says. "But now she's with the angels, the fairies and the muse. And she probably has quite a few things to tell them." □

By Elretha Louw

