

# She talks to the forest

For YOU

## Angela van Schalkwyk interviews a best- selling writer

**DALENE MATTHEE** talks to the trees and they do listen to her. Every time she goes into the Knysna Forest she greets them. Her daughters admonish her for this habit: "Ag ma, people will say you're mad."

Nee wat, all Dalene cares about is what the forest thinks of her. The forest is choosy about who will be its friends. Not everyone is allowed past its Coke-tin edge, she explains. Some people cannot bear its primeval lushness and feel smothered by it.

It will also not allow her to become proud, she says, about her book, "Circles in a Forest" which sold out its first printing within three weeks in South Africa.

The rights to the book have also been sold to Britain, the United States, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden, an edition will also appear in France, Israel, Italy, Portugal, Brazil and Iceland.

### Soul of its own

But it is the forest, not the success of her book, that Dalene most enjoys talking about.

"It is an entity, with a soul of its own," she says. "When I walk in, I get a feeling right here," she says, pointing to her stomach.

It is an experience the hero of her book, Saul Barnard, knows well: "The more the Forest closed round him, the lighter his body felt. He wanted to stretch out his hands and touch the nearest trees. He wanted to sit down and feel the cool, clammy moss under his fingers. He drew the forest air deep into his lungs as if to fill himself with it."

It is Dalene Matthee's personality which strikes one first. She is a comfortable family-size, with vivacity in likewise proportions.

Although she is still recovering from a sleepless night on the plane from London, she is able to create within the four walls of the five-star hotel room an atmosphere which buzzes with tales of

the forest, the woodcutters, elephants and London, where she and her husband have just attended the launching of her book.

She has the storyteller's gift even in speech, and she punctuates her many anecdotes with wide gestures, smiles, or just a significant narrowing of the eyes.

She often insists, "Now this is off the record . . ." because she does not want to hurt those she loves — her forest people and the folk in the village nearby, some of whom still insist that the royal blood of George Rex courses through their veins.

She is a little embarrassed that her publishers have made it known she is the descendant of Sir Walter Scott. She was a Miss Scott, born in 1938 in Riversdale, some 33 km from Cape Town. At school she excelled at nothing but her essay writing and piano playing.

### Encouragement

It is hard to pin her down, but she returns naturally to the subject of her beloved forest.

This serious love affair with the forest — encouraged by her husband, Larius, and children Amanda (25), Toni (22) and Hilary (19) — began while they stayed in Uniondale in the Langkloof area, where she would head for the forest along a shortcut route, luring her family along with the promise of wonderful picnic food.

Today she lives in Hartenbos, a quiet coastal resort in comfortable driv-

ing distance from the Knysna Forest.

More than three years ago she began an 11-month stint of painstaking research of the forest, its language, layers, herbs, seasons, different tree types and inhabitants.

She made a point of interviewing every old woodcutter who could recall the period before 1939, when the community was moved out of the Forest. She also drew on the memories of the descendants of the townspeople.

"These lovely old people wrote the book," she says.

It's strongest theme is the devastation of the Forest and the thoughtless killing of the Knysna elephant.

"There was a time during my research when all this terrible destruction began to affect me very badly. I felt a deep anger and I lost track of where I was going.

"This period lasted about two months, and what helped me finally was to see the conservation going on today. I always tell the younger foresters they are the old woodcutters come back to look after the forest."

It is with deep-felt hurt she speaks about the elephant. "One hundred years ago there were between 400 and 500. Today there are only three. The

Knysna elephant is the most beautiful in the world."

### Next book

Her new book, to be published next year, is based on a true story about a young boy who is lost in the forest.

"But there is another book I must write one day. It will be about the stupidity of women. I've had all this feminist nonsense. I'm worried about where modern woman is going. How can we expect to compete with a man? A man can't compete with us.

"Man is the more intelligent being of the two. Ja, but wait for my tail-piece — I always have one. Women have wisdom. Where have you ever heard of a man with wisdom?"

"Nee, wat, I'll take the feminists on one by one. We can't succeed against the God-law, the law of nature.

"Man should know how to keep woman in her place. You see Larius, my husband, there, don't think I'm the boss, he is." Larius smiles benignly back at her.

"But when I'm finished with women," and her eyes twinkle with the sheer devilry of her ideas, "I'll climb into men."

● *Circles in a Forest* by Dalene Matthee (Viking, R19,95).



Author DALENE MATTHEE has had a long love-affair with the Knysna Forest.

Photograph by Jennifer Turner