Axes to Grind

CIRCLES IN A FOREST
By Dalene Matthee
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By Alice Digilio

Dalene Matthee's principal achievement in "Circles in a Forest" is her re-creation 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 alternate, 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. Saul also learns the lore of the forest: "About the trees, the difference between a kalaneder—the Outeniqua yellowwood—and an upright, the real yellowwood... They lead you to know birds... some by their calls long before they saw them in the thickets."

There are dangers in the forest, too; 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. Before he finds out his mistake, you run for your life or climb the best tree you can find as quickly as you can."

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 the 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 presents—the English who exploit and humiliate the woodcutters. Finally, he rebels against the waste and pilage 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 stream 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. Just to remind us of the connection, Saul's first foray into reading English is with "David Copperfield," lent to him by the dastardly MacDon-ald's beautiful young daughter Kate, who, of course, develops a strong attachment for the rough woodman working for her father.

Matthee has a Dickensian taste for melodrama, 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. "Man is merciful as long as it suits him, and as long as his mercy doesn't stand between him and other things," he intones to the beautiful Kate. 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. There is also little moral ambiguity. The good characters may be difficult, occasionally narrow-minded and prickly, but they are always right; the villain relentlessly evil. If only the rest of the world were so straightforward. Th

The reviewer is managing editor of The Washington Post Book World.