A Man and His Forests

CIRCLES IN THE FOREST
By Dolene Matthee
Alfred A. Knopf; 305 pages; $14.95

REVIEWED BY LUCIA BERLIN

Good forest story elicits the same deeply instinctual response as a good book about the sea. "Circles in the Forest" is about one man's connectedness to this world and his responsibility to it. In this case it is a forest in Kynsna, Africa, in the 1880s. Two tightly interwoven stories involve Saul Barnard, son of generations of woodcutters who had migrated from Holland. The first story tells of his childhood in the forest, his breaking away from it and subsequent returns.

In his early teens Saul rebels against the futility of the backbreaking work and the cutters' oppression by the wood buyers. He questions the superstitions and insularity of the cutters, who themselves are destroying the forest, relentlessly chopping down trees and killing elephants. Barnard is branded as a traitor, yet when he leaves the forest for the 'world outside he finds himself equally trapped, unable to escape his "cutter" heritage. His reputation there, too, is of a rebel.

The second story, and the most immediately gripping one, brings us an older Saul Barnard and his search for Big Foot, the most dreaded of elephants, a patriarchal figure with whom the man has identified all his life. Big Foot is accused of having gored a child to death and Saul wants to protect him from being killed by "outsiders," the massive tusks hacked from his corpse.

We are drawn into these two stories totally, in spite of the Dickensian misery of the first one and the over-insistent suspense of the second. (Not another elephant spoor!) And we are immersed from the beginning in the forest itself, where "Your eyes see things you did not see yesterday: the gossamer-fine moss twining round the blue buck rope...the specks of mauve in the feathers of the grey cuckoo-shrike, the same mauve as the moss on the saffron's bark...You suddenly realize that the old leaves do not fall from the Forest roof...they flutter to the ground like wings without bodies."

We learn about the white pear, the stinkwood and the assagai trees, the lourie birds and the bush bucks. And, of course, the elephants, ever more awesome when, except for the snap of a twig, 20 of them move through the forest in utter silence.

But this lovely book is just too carefully crafted, the circles too complete. The hero is always noble, his love, Kate, always true, the villains unmercifully cruel. The lyrical passion with which the forests and elephants are drawn doesn't spark over to the people. This may be partly due to the dialogue, written by a South African. It often seems stilted and phony to the American ear, but it also could be because no one ever says anything not directly related to the plot. No one ever surprises us, a quality E.M. Forster says is vital to a good fictional character.

Nevertheless, we respond at a primitive and spiritual level to the devastation and corruption of the forest. Saul's final return and commitment to it makes this a profoundly moving and, indeed, comforting, book.

Oakland short story writer Lucia Berlin's latest book is "Phantom Pain."