





WALKING IN WORDS

WORDS **GARETH PRETORIUS** PHOTOGRAPHS **LISA LESLIE**

THE STORIES OF BEST-SELLING AUTHOR **DALENE MATTHEE**, INSPIRED BY THE HISTORY AND PEOPLE OF THE KNYSNA FOREST, ARE BEING BROUGHT BACK TO LIFE IN A GUIDED WALK IN THE ENVIRONMENT WHERE HER STORIES ORIGINATED AND PLAYED OUT.



It is early morning and the sun has not yet hit the gorge near Jubilee Creek, the scene of Knysna's short-lived gold rush in the late 1800s and backdrop to Dalene Matthee's first forest book, *Kringe in 'n Bos* (*Circles in a Forest*).

The stream bubbling at our feet was once frequented by numerous pan-handling prospectors, driven by the hope of making their fortune. Were it not for the relative small amounts of gold discovered, the largest remaining untouched section of indigenous forest in South Africa may have been destroyed and the trail we are on would not exist.

Equally important, Knysna's forests, gold and people may never have gained prominence were it not for Dalene's love of nature, passion for conservation and compulsion to write. Her forest books were prescribed reading material for generations of school children, sparking a flame of fascination for the forest, its long-suffering elephants and the lives of woodcutters and goldminers alike.

Today, I'm taking a 3.4km guided hike with registered forest site guide and Rheenendal local Meagan Vermaas, whose love of the Millwood Goldfields forest at the edge of her house and Dalene's research-driven, image-evoking stories have inspired the three-hour tour on foot she gives to tourists and school groups.

We meet at the Dalene Matthee memorial at the foot of a 900-year-old Outeniqua yellowwood named for her at Krisjan-se-Nek. Dalene died in 2005 of heart failure and her ashes were scattered in this forest.

At the unveiling of the memorial – a joint undertaking by the Matthee children, SANParks and Tafelberg Publishers – in 2008, the tree and the hiking trail starting there were renamed for Dalene. “This was her favourite yellowwood,” says Meagan, “She used to love coming here to take inspiration for her stories. Apparently, when she was finished with a book, she used to return here to read her stories to the forest.”

As we walk, Meagan retells the stories of Dalene's characters and how the very path we are walking on, on this beautiful crisp, winter morning features in the books. Like the monkey ropes that wrap themselves around a neighbouring sapling and wait for a lift to the top of the canopy – a journey that can take decades – so the author and the guide's voices seemingly twirl into each other through time.

As a loerie calls from above – perhaps warning the real locals, some duiker or a family





of bushpigs, of the arrival of humans – we stop at the foot of another yellowwood. “Yellowwoods, which she also called *Kalanders*, feature very strongly in her books. In *Circles in a Forest* the main character, Saul Barnard, considers the giant yellowwoods in the forest to be the Biblical tree of good and evil.

Dalene did four years, and more, research and background work for each book, and always translated the first draft of her books into English herself to ensure the correct transfer of culture-specific information. “She got to know the forest extremely well. She treated the indigenous woodcutters, who by then were living in Karatara after being relocated in 1939, with great respect. They were a very close knit community who weren’t treated very well by the townspeople. Acknowledging her understanding and ‘feel’ for the forest, and in recognition of her respect, the woodcutters shared their forest world, and some of its secrets

with her, and called her ‘*Bostannie*’ (Forest Aunty), which is a very high accolade.”

As the first morning light slices through the canopy and the steam of our breath intermingles with tendrils of mist wafting up from the ferns, we are genially regaled with lessons about the various trees and forest flora.

Meagan tells about the inherent qualities various trees have developed over time to assist in their survival, such as the slow-growing stinkwood tree for instance, which grows only 0.5cm per year. “So, in order to give itself a boost, it coppices, which roughly means the young sapling grows out from the base or roots of an older tree, thus saving itself many years of having to establish itself in the very full forest floor.”

Another remarkable tree Meagan points out is a sweet young rock elder, the only tree in the forest that loses all its leaves - which feeds from the maximised mineral recycling from the fallen leaves. This is also one of the many trees named specifically in Dalene’s books; *Fiela se Kind* (*Fiela’s Child*) in this instance.

The trees don’t get all the glamour, however, and we hear a great lecture on ferns. “Many of these are edible, some even taste like spinach, but without expert knowledge, trying them out is not recommended, because some have high levels of cyanide,” says Meagan.

The elephants, which play such prominent roles in the forest books, feature in Meagan’s talk too. There have been confirmed sightings of Knysna’s last elephants right here where



THE FOREST BOOKS

Dalene Matthee's forest books are based on the real lives and circumstances of people who lived in the indigenous forests surrounding Knysna, including the gold rush of the late 1800s, government eviction of woodcutters from the forest, and the luring of Italians to establish a silkworm industry in the unyielding Gouna forest. The books have been translated into 14 languages and two of the books were made into films.

Kringe in 'n Bos/Circles in a Forest (1984)

Fiela se Kind/Fiela's Child (1985)

Moerbeibos/Mulberry Forest (1987)

Toorbos/Dream Forest (2003)

All except *Mulberry Forest* are available in print in shops and online. All are available as e-books.



we walk, but the actual number of elephants remain a point of debate.

Meagan says when elephants eat ferns, they consume some clay with it to bind the cyanide and mitigate the poison effect. There are, however, plenty of medicinal plants in the forest, from the tree fuchsia, whose leaves can be used to treat ear infections, to the bark of the stinkwood tree, which can be ground up and used to treat headaches.

Dalene was living in Hartenbos outside Mossel Bay when she started writing her forest books. The inspiration for researching and writing stories about the forest and its varied inhabitants came to Dalene during a hike, a part of which we are walking on now. At the end of 1978, while on the Outeniqua Hiking Trail with family, she noticed alien oak trees in the middle of the indigenous forest near the Millwood overnight hut. She decided there and then to figure out how it came to be there. Her love affair with the forest had begun.

"The forest is an entity, with a soul of its own," Dalene said in an interview after the release of her first book. "When I walk in, I get a feeling right here," she said, pointing to her stomach.

We pause for a short while next to a picturesque waterfall and drink fresh water from the stream while being regaled with more stories. From the miners and the hardships they encountered to anecdotes of modern day encounters with leopards, it is like being transported into the pages of a novel. Stories shimmer at the periphery of our vision; we can almost catch a glimpse of the woodcutters and the great glorious elephants that once roamed the forests in great numbers.

The love Meagan has for the forest is infectious and her talks are well-informed. "I love all four of Dalene's books, which I have read many times, and have read and watched all the interviews and documentaries I could find. I spoke to Dalene's daughter, Hillary, and locals who knew her, and spent months training with forest guide Hynie Tredoux before he retired."

Her guided walks allow many to see beneath and beyond the obvious initial layer of trees, bushes and a bird or two. As we stroll back from the waterfall with the whispers of Dalene Matthee's characters swirling around us, Meagan reveals an observation and tenderness usually reserved for a nurse. She stops to remove fallen branches or logs that were pinning down little plants. All the while, the forest watches, waits and continues along its own journey.

WIN A SET OF FOREST BOOKS.
SEE PAGE 91 FOR DETAILS.

CONTACT

Meagan Vermaas owns Forest Guided Tours, a company specialising in forest-based walks custom-made to suit the hiker's preferred pace, interests and abilities. She is the official Dalene Matthee guide endorsed by the writer's commemorative website.

Dalene Matthee "*Circles in a Forest*" tour

Knysna Forest Flora, Fauna, Legends and Lore tour

Bees and Trees tour

Knysna Forests Histories and Mysteries tour

Full- and half-day package tours

Forest picnics on order

073 363 6522

forestguidedtours.co.za ■ dalenematthee.co.za

