

BOOKS • Peter Grosvenor

Dalene strikes gold in the forest

IMAGINE a forest so dense and crowded with tall trees that even under a blazing sun you must strike a match to see where you are.

That is the mysterious Knysna Forest on the southern coast of South Africa.

And though the 500 wild elephants of a century ago have been reduced to a dozen or less by greedy ivory hunters — it is still a dangerous place.

The Bigfoot, as the old woodcutters called the elephants and their cows, can trample a man to death in seconds without warning.

All in all, the forest is a strange place for a middle-aged housewife to spend weeks and months exploring — often spending the night in a sleeping bag.

But that is how Dalene Matthee, 45-year-old mother of three and a descendant on her British side of Sir Walter Scott, came to write her haunting novel **CIRCLES IN A FOREST** (Viking, £8.95).

Bubbly

Set in the South African gold rush days of the 1880s — it is the part romance and part adventure story of a proud and stubborn woodcutter's son, Saul, who tries to stop the destruction of the forest by woodcutters and gold prospectors alike.

In London for the launch of her novel, which has already earned her £150,000 in 10 different countries, plump,



Dalene . . . adventure

bubbly Dalene told me: "It was only after the birth of my three daughters that I began writing — short stories for women's magazines and that kind of thing.

"We lived near the forest and it always fascinated me

even though much has now been chopped down.

She fell in love with the independent way of life of the old Afrikaaner woodcutters who earned a pittance for a whole oxcart load of wood for railway sleepers. They were exploited by the unscrupulous Scottish and Irish wood buyers who kept them constantly in debt.

It was a kind of apartheid in reverse with the Brits treating the Boers like "wild and dirty" animals.

So much so that when Saul's father is abused by MacDonald the wood buyer, young Saul asks in bewilderment: "Pa, are we white people?"

Vengeful

They certainly weren't treated like whites.

You can imagine the complications when Saul falls for MacDonald's beautiful daughter Kate — and when vengeful hunters set out to kill his beloved elephant Bigfoot with which he has developed a sort of psychic brotherhood.

Though true love eventually finds its way, the forest largely perishes and so too does the noble Bigfoot, at the hands of unscrupulous gunmen — a scene poignant enough to bring tears to the eyes.

How sad, too, that the fiercely proud Afrikaaners, once so cruelly exploited by the Brits, are now themselves equally the exploiters of the black people.