

# The Foundling of the Long Kloof

## FIELA'S CHILD

By Dalene Matthee.  
350 pp. New York:  
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By Francis Levy

**S**ET in rural South Africa in the 19th century, Dalene Matthee's novel "Fiela's Child" deals with a white foundling raised by a black family. One night in 1865 Fiela Komoetie, the family's matriarch, awakes to find a young boy standing at her back door. Nine years later, the boy, now known as Ben, has become an integral part of the Komoetie farm, Wolwekraal. The family explains the difference in his skin color to neighbors by little more than the fact that he is "his parents' hand-child. Like the hand-lamb the ewe does not want that has to be hand-fed." "If you took a lamb and reared it, who's going to tell you whose sheep it is?" Fiela Komoetie asks when the question of the real mother is raised.

At first the Komoeties are able to fend off such curiosity. Fiela Komoetie is a powerful figure, a survivor who has crossed perilous mountain trails with an infant on her back to save her husband, Selling, from wasting away on a convict gang. And for a time she maintains for her family a pristine and protected way of life in

which color doesn't matter. "In the Kloof over the years everyone, white and Coloured, had had to give way before her tongue; she had made them keep out of Wolwekraal's affairs. The Kloof had got used to the child being with her."

However, the outside world does intrude when census takers arrive for the first time and discover the white boy living with a black family. It is soon suspected Ben may be Lukas van Rooyen, a 3-year-old who was lost in the faraway and densely overgrown section known as the Forest around the time Ben was found.

Dalene Matthee, a South African short-story writer and the author of five earlier novels, including "Circles in a Forest," which appeared in the United States in 1984, has chosen a crucial transitional period in her country's history as the background for "Fiela's Child." From the moment

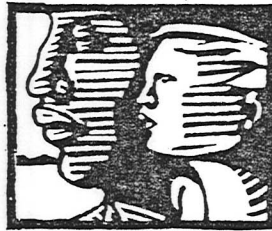
Ben's idyllic world falls apart, it is apparent that his loss of innocence has symbolic as well as literal significance. As the drama of his search for identity unfolds—a coming of age that takes him back and forth over the breadth of his country and raises the specter of incestuous passion—the author continually relates that search to fundamental changes affecting the white and black families who claim him.

The farms of the Long Kloof, scattered across a

barren landscape of "stones and dust and wagon trees and rhinoceros bush and aloes," may be different from the houses in the lush Forest, where woodcutting and hunting are the primary pursuits. But the personalities that drive both families, Fiela Komoetie and Elias van Rooyen, have much in common. Within his small community, Elias van Rooyen dreams of the profits he will make shooting elephants and is "the only one that earned real money instead of having to barter for everything with the two wood buyers in the village." Similarly, Fiela Komoetie has hopes of breeding ostriches and making enough money from their feathers to buy her more idle neighbor's land. Fiela's and Elias's ambition to move beyond mere subsistence is symptomatic of the spirit of entrepreneurial capitalism that will transform rural South Africa forever.

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The author uses the abundant natural life of her characters' world to dramatize their experience. Whether it's a hawk catching "the most beautiful chicken of the whole brood" or the puff adder that "had taken a dozen blows to smash its head in," there is no shortage of signs and portents indicating the costs of progress. At times this symbolism seems contrived and the plot schematic. But for the most part Dalene Matthee treats the enormously complex issues of her country's past in a beguilingly simple way. At its best "Fiela's Child" is a parable that broadens and humanizes our understanding of the conflicts still affecting South Africa today. □



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Francis Levy is a humorist and critic.