

Judging the book

A B S T R A C T This article focuses on the extrinsic factors contributing to the popularity of novels in general and Dalene Matthee's Afrikaans "forest" novels in particular. Any group of agents involved in the production, dissemination and promotion of fiction comprises a literary institution. These literary institutions regulate the complex process of classifying and valuing a text as "literary fiction". The collective body of literary institutions constitutes the literary system in which each institution influences the way literature is viewed. Literary institutions perform a social function as "gatekeepers" between the book and its audience, thus influencing its publication and reception.

Keywords: novel, literary fiction, institutional approach

1. Introduction: The distinction between "high" and "low" texts

The distinction between "high" and "low" or literary and popular texts has long been debated. Literary scholars nowadays seem to advocate the view that serious and popular literature are categories in the same literary system and should be regarded as parallel categories which differ from each other in many respects but also have several characteristics in common (Malan 1983; Barsch 1996; Sutherland 2002).

Moreover, Barsch (1996: 696) contends that "dealing with literature in the classroom has to be put on another foundation" as there is no "automatic developmental sequence for reading from 'low' to 'high'". Literary scholars' and teachers' acceptance of "different, but functionally equivalent concepts of literature" would give equal significance to both "high" and "low" literature. The teacher's role is crucial in educating learners to deal with literature at school, as it "is likely to influence the way they look at and act on literature outside school and in later life" (Janssen & Rijlaarsdam 1996: 513).

A fresh view of popular versus serious literature is that it is the readers who are popular or sophisticated rather than the books they read (Hambidge 1990; Kraaykamp & Dijkstra 1999),

hence the current focus of some literary scholars on the attitude specific groups of readers have toward books (Kraaykamp & Dijkstra 1999; Van Rees & Vipond 2003). This latest focus does not exclude the institutional approach since publishers, reviewers, award committees, etc. are also groups of readers whose reading and related activities require further research.

Cultural criticism in its exploration of popular literature has recently shifted its attention away from "ideal" audiences and what they should be reading toward what "real people actually enjoy" (Hunter & Kaye 1997: 1). Literature is regarded as an integral part of society where books are seen as special products that can be used for various purposes (Barsch 1996: 693). The result is that previously "scorned" or popular literature is being considered anew, especially as "elite literature" could be regarded as revealing the beliefs of a particular section of the population only, not those of wholly different sections or groups: "... if accurate statements were to be made ... the popular literature produced for and consumed by large numbers ought to become the primary focus of culturally oriented scholarship" (Cushman Schurman & Johnson 2002: iv).

2. Challenging the gap

In challenging the "huge gap in scholarship that has resulted from the exclusionary attitude of elitist critics" (Cushman Schurman & Johnson 2002: x), the purpose of my research was to gauge the influence of extrinsic factors on the general popularisation of several popular South African Afrikaans novels written by Dalene Matthee, i.e. the forest triad: *Kringe in 'n bos* (1984), *Fiela se kind* (1985) and *Moerbeibos* (1987), as well as the recently published *Toorbos* (2003).

The methodology for my research comprised a dual approach: firstly, a quantitative approach which explored the relationship between texts and reviews of those texts, academic discussions, sales figures, publishers, etc. and secondly, a qualitative approach which focused on the criteria various institutions use when selecting texts.

The institutional approach to the popularisation of novels focuses on production and textual factors (Verdaasdonk 1985; Todd 1996; Kraaykamp & Dijkstra 1999), emphasising the role of literary institutions such as publishers, booksellers, reviewers, award committees, book clubs and public libraries. Todd (1996) and Jones (2002) agree that novels do not become popular purely on the basis of textual characteristics, but are supported by "huge marketing and budgeting strategies". Jones (2002), a Booker Prize judge, refused to shortlist such novels as he claimed he was "influenced only by text".

Despite the relatively recent shift in focus in the sociology of literature toward aspects of consumer behaviour regarding books and literary magazines (Van Rees & Vipond 2003: 151-154; Kraaykamp 2003: 235-257), new institutional analyses of the "modus operandi of parties in the book industry and the behavior of purchasers and borrowers of books have also been conducted with the objective of contributing to general theories of cultural behavior ..." (Van Rees & Verdaasdonk 1996: 660).

Some literary scholars refer to this approach in recent discussions of the popular novel (Van Rees & Verdaasdonk 1996, Sutherland 2002). The contention in this article is that an institutional analysis of Afrikaans novels is unique, since no research except for the thesis written by the author of a my study (Van der Westhuizen 1993) has to date been conducted on the institutional approach to South African Afrikaans novels.

The institutional approach focuses mainly on the economic function of the popular novel but the power of public opinion, as reflected in sales figures, should not be underestimated, since such factors may be "more powerful than the gatekeepers themselves" (Hall 1797: 101).

The point of departure in my research was that certain literary institutions such as those described by Verdaasdonk (1985), Kraaykamp and Dijkstra (1999) and Sutherland (2002) determine which books will eventually be offered to readers who in turn base their choices on the proffered books.

3. Literary institutions

A number of literary institutions function as gatekeepers to influence the popularisation of novels in general. The institutions discussed below include publishers and agents; book clubs; reading circles; public libraries; reviewers and censors; book awards; media such as television, radio, stage and film; and education institutions.

3.1 Publishers and agents

Some publishers market popular novels as special products to generate funds so that they can also publish serious literature which tends to generate lower sales. Consequently the role of publishers and literary agents as gatekeepers has far-reaching effects on the book industry. Agents even "auction literary property (typically before it is written) to the highest bidder" and this "breaks up the 'organic' relationship between publishers and authors" (Sutherland 2002: 26).

Publishers and their authors in South Africa generally know one another so intimately that there is seldom a need for agents. For instance, Annari van der Merwe, Dalene Matthee's publisher, even assisted her to search the Knysna forest for the red lilies which feature in *Moerbeibos* (1987).

The publisher's catalogue and newsletter represent a classification of the novels on offer (Verdaasdonk 1985; Barsch 1996) this classification influences the prospective buyer whose choice may be based on the publisher's classification. For example, Lapa Publishers in South Africa have a two-tiered structure and publish book-club books (trivial literature) as well as more serious literature in order to supply a wide range of readers. The profile of this publishing house is therefore indicated "in the structure of the catalogs advertising literary texts collected under different headings" (Barsch 1996: 693).

Most publishers send representatives to visit booksellers and other prospective customers such as lecturers, prescribing committees and librarians, or make use of special catalogues. Such methods are effective because they target the intended reading public.

Some publishers employ additional techniques to advertise their wares, for example book exhibitions. Other marketing techniques include the reading *indaba* held in Bloemfontein annually as part of the *Volksblad* Arts Festival; book launches which are a common marketing strategy and serve a wide public; new books that publishers send to reviewers for publicity and to academics as an inducement for them to prescribe the books; Exclusive Books arranges "literary breakfasts" and the Boekehuis in Johannesburg holds regular book readings ("Saturday Voices") by authors.

Other elements of marketing by publishers include the physical appearance of the book, its title, distribution and bestseller lists.

The physical appearance of the book is the first visible marketing strategy employed by the publisher. A book which will be marketed as a popular novel should "be recognisable by its cover and point of sale, as a novel without literary pretence" (Malan 1983). Even critics should be kept in mind when considering the physical appearance of the book, since "the critical coverage of paperbacks is very spotty and ... To the critics publishing in paperback first is like slumming" (Weatherby cited in Hall 1979: 116).

The title is initially the most important element and should be striking, to induce the prospective buyer to take the book off the shelf and look at it. The dust cover and the text (blurb) on the inside flaps are crucial co-determinants of the book's initial reception (Street 1990: 137).

South African publishers distribute and market their own books to booksellers. The gatekeeping function of booksellers is determined largely by the booksellers' choice of books, as prospective customers can choose only from among the items on offer in the bookshop.

American publishers regard bestseller lists so highly that they even have "escalator clauses built into contracts with additional payment for every week a novel features in the *New York Times* or other lists" (Sutherland 1981: 14). The lists are regarded as simultaneous sources of marketing and research, and contribute considerably toward increased book sales (Verdaasdonk 2003: 364).

The booksellers in South Africa use such lists mainly as records of best sales, although at some bookshops, such as Exclusive Books, the lists are sometimes placed on the bookshop counter for customers to read (Smit, telephone interview, 2003).

The *Mail & Guardian* newspaper regularly publishes a bestseller list based on sales at certain Exclusive Books branches. The consolidated list (based on sales) for all Exclusive Books branches is sent to the *Sunday Times* (Greenberg, personal e-mail correspondence, 2004) where Michelle Magwood compiles and publishes a final list in the *Lifestyle* supplement of the *Sunday Times*, based on sales at Exclusive Books, Wordsworth and Adams stores countrywide (Greenberg, personal e-mail correspondence, 2004; Magwood 2004: 13).

3.2 Book clubs

The passivity of book club members strengthens the gatekeeping function of book clubs and is illustrated by the "package book clubs", such as Lademan in Sweden, which sends members a package of three books "from which the members are not allowed, and obviously have no wish, to make a choice" (Gedin 1977: 191). Hall points out that the gatekeeping function of book clubs extends beyond members to authors, "who are presumably encouraged to write in a style that gains 'book-of-the-month status'" (1979: 116; Ekelund 1997: 2).

Leserskring, a South African book club, and its English equivalent, Leisure Books, also manipulate their members through selective advertising and the catalogues they compile. They also market the books they have ordered in larger quantities more aggressively than the other books in their catalogues.

3.4 Reading circles

Reading circles consist of groups of people, mainly women, who meet to listen to an expert talk

about a book they have all read. These groups have a limited gatekeeping function, as their influence is restricted to their own members who decide jointly which books to read. Such groups do influence book sales in South Africa, as many of the respondents in this survey indicated that they had bought Dalene Matthee's first two forest novels after *Kringe in 'n bos* was discussed at their book clubs.

3.5 Public libraries

During the 1970s the book selectors at South African provincial libraries attempted to cater for all tastes, trying to supply books for the mainly undeveloped reading taste of the Afrikaans public and for a relatively small group of readers of serious novels (Die openbare biblioteek en die Afrikaanse boek 1979: 101). In some instances, librarians asked members to help them select books, thus partially ceding the library's gatekeeping function to these library members.

Today librarians in municipal libraries select books from displays which the official book buyers of municipal libraries organise. This indicates that these book buyers share the gatekeeping function of the librarians who make choices based on the broad selection the book buyers offer. In the city branches there has recently been a major shift to education and literacy texts, and also to fiction for pleasure, though libraries in the rural areas tend to select books which will promote literacy among all age groups.

Muir and Fishwick (2000) and Edelman and Holley (2002) emphasise that book reviews strongly influence librarians' selection of books.

3.6 Reviewers and censors

It is widely believed that readers are not influenced by critics' reviews. Research in South Africa (Smuts 1989) has shown, however, that readers are influenced by reviews, for example the erstwhile Directorate of Publications did not declare undesirable the Afrikaans novel, *'n Pot vol winter*, a relatively sexually explicit work for teenagers written by a clergyman's wife, Maretha Maartens, because the Directorate had gained a strong impression that many of the complainants had based their complaints solely on reviews of the book, without having read the book themselves.

3.7 Book awards

Book awards have long been a feature of the book industry worldwide. Todd (1996) recognises the need for "some fuller understanding of the culture that has spawned the growth of those [literary] prizes, enhanced their power, and - enriched our literature".

The Afrikaanse Taal- en Kultuurvereniging (ATKV), an Afrikaans language and culture association in South Africa, established its prose award in 1984. The award is given annually to the best Afrikaans work published during the previous calendar year; preferably fiction, but non-fiction with a literary background may also be considered.

The M-Net Book Prize was launched in December 1989 as an award for the best popular English and Afrikaans novels of the year. John Badenhorst, at that time the public relations manager at M-Net, defined a popular novel as one which "presupposes a strong narrative content" (1989).

3.8 Television, radio, stage and film

Audrey Bignault, a writer herself, has read excerpts since 1986 from more than forty novels, including the forest triad, for broadcast on the former Afrikaans radio service. Serious as well

as popular books were selected to satisfy a diverse listenership.

When adapting novels for stage performance to attract the public, the former provincial performing arts councils often involved the authors of the works in the adaptations which were intended mainly for performance in schools. Such adaptations were often performed in theatres too, so reaching a wider public and in turn increasing the sales of these novels.

3.9 Education institutions

The education departments in South Africa tended to prescribe only serious novels in schools until the 1980s. Then the situation changed markedly, especially after the publication of *Kringe in 'n bos* in 1984. The questionnaires completed by respondents in the education departments, tertiary education colleges and universities show that after the publication of this Afrikaans book, there was a strong tendency to prescribe the works of a few authors repeatedly. *Kringe in 'n bos* (1984), *Fiela se kind* (1985) and *Moerbeibos* (1987) were the most frequently prescribed novels for schools from 1984 to 1990 (thirteen times in all). A similar trend was identified in tertiary education institutions where, until 1985, only the works of more scholarly authors, such as Etienne Leroux and André P. Brink, had been prescribed.

Kringe in 'n bos and *Fiela se kind* are currently prescribed for secondary schools in South Africa.

4. Research strategy

The initial choice of the forest triad for my research seemed appropriate since these three books, especially *Kringe in 'n bos*, had received greater acclaim from reviewers than any Afrikaans novels previously published in South Africa. The excellent sales of *Fiela se kind* and *Moerbeibos* were apparently due partly to the unique publicity campaign set in motion several months before the publication of *Kringe in 'n bos*. The latest publication, *Toorbos* (2003), was selected too, as it is also a novel set in the Knysna forest, although it was published sixteen years after *Moerbeibos*.

The sociological nature of the study required suitable methods of data collection and analysis. The information gleaned from structured, oral interviews conducted with publishers and from the questionnaires completed by representatives of reading circles yielded suitable data.

Several institutions, among others, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), publishers such as Tafelberg and Lapa, the Nasionale Afrikaanse Letterkundige Museum (NALN, translation: National Afrikaans Literary Museum) and many individuals supplied useful documentation and other information.

The information obtained from interviews, questionnaires, literary institutions and from a review of the appropriate literature was synthesised to form a backdrop for the description, in terms of the institutional approach, of the "essentially corporate machinery" that helped to popularise Matthee's forest novels (Sutherland 1981; Kraaykamp & Dijkstra 1999).

5. Main findings

The main findings of the research into the popularisation of Dalene Matthee's *Kringe in 'n bos* (1984), *Fiela se kind* (1985), *Moerbeibos* (1987) and *Toorbos* (2003) are discussed in terms of

marketing; set-works, reading circles and bestseller lists; libraries; awards; stage and film productions; and reviewers.

5.1 Marketing

The elements of marketing discussed below are the translation and promotion of the forest triad; then details are given of their physical appearance including the blurb on the inside cover flaps.

Before it became an Afrikaans bestseller, *Kringe in 'n bos* was translated into eight languages, including Swedish and Hebrew. Three English versions were published in Britain, America and Israel. It was also serialised in the South African women's magazine *Fair Lady* (1984), auctioned at the Frankfurt Book Exchange and sold in Britain for a five-figure sum – a "pre-publication bestseller" (De Jager 1991). Maximum use was made of magazine and newspaper advertisements in the marketing drive for *Kringe in 'n bos*, for example a full-page advertisement in the Afrikaans women's magazine *Sarie Marais* included a summary, a copy of the dust cover and a sketch of the Knysna forest (Muller 1984).

In radio and television programmes, the author Dalene Matthee described her experiences while researching the novel in the Knysna forest (Harding 1984). Radio and television interviews introduced the author and her work to a wide audience of listeners and viewers, who might otherwise not have known about the book.

Newspapers played an important role, especially the announcements that the book had been translated into so many languages a full five months before the original Afrikaans version was published (Van Coller 1985: 92). An early review mentioned that the author had not yet chosen a title for the novel – a further enticement to potential readers.

The subsequent novels, *Fiela se kind* (1985) and *Moerbeibos* (1987), were translated into five and three languages respectively and marketed in a similar fashion. No other Afrikaans novel had ever before been marketed quite so aggressively. One article offered snippets from the latest, as yet unpublished, novel to whet the reader's appetite. The publisher's gatekeeping role was clearly evident when he said he believed the second novel to be "stronger and better" than the first.

The phenomenal sales of *Moerbeibos* have been attributed to the aggressive marketing drive before and after its publication. The novel was shown to millions of viewers during television advertisements and posters were issued to booksellers for display purposes. In South Africa a book is classified as a bestseller if 10 000 copies are sold within a year: the first run of 60 500 was sold in three months and the second, of 20 000, was ordered a week after the first. These sales figures were not unnaturally inflated, as the book had not yet been prescribed for schools.

The excellent early sales of *Kringe in 'n bos* were partly due to the fairly stable economy at that time. After 1984 many booksellers, for example Ad Donker, closed down. In view of the substantially weakened economy when *Fiela se kind* and *Moerbeibos* were published, the high sales figures for both are all the more remarkable, making *Moerbeibos* comparable to international bestsellers. So far the four Afrikaans editions of *Kringe in 'n bos* and *Fiela se kind* have sold 308 091 copies and 251 434 copies respectively; and the three Afrikaans editions of *Moerbeibos* have sold 83 860 copies. *Toorbos* was released in July 2003 and the two Afrikaans editions have already sold 34 660 copies, an exceptional achievement as this book has not yet been prescribed as a set-work (e-mail correspondence, 2004).

The marketing campaign for *Toorbos* differed considerably from the campaigns for the forest triad. The author appeared on *Pasella*, an Afrikaans magazine programme on SABC 2, and several newspaper and magazine reviewers interviewed her, although she had indicated that she did not want a large publicity campaign. The publisher expressed pleasure at the excellent sales despite the relatively low-key publicity for an author of Matthee's stature (Boshoff, e-mail correspondence, 2003).

The covers of the forest triad feature bright colours and realistic images, which Helmut Starcke designed after reading the novels. These colours and images are regarded as signs of "accessibility" (Street 1990: 137) and may indicate that the general public, rather than a select group of readers, is the target audience.

The blurb usually found on the inside flap of the cover also influences the reader's initial reception of a novel. The inside cover for *Kringe in 'n bos* has a brief summary of the story, emphasising Saul's inner struggle and his relationship with Oupoot the elephant, as well as adventure and love; these elements speak to a wide readership.

Interesting information is offered about the author, namely that she is a descendant of Sir Walter Scott, who wrote seventy novels and was also known for visiting the places about which he wrote. The allusion to Matthee's quest for the "truth" about the forest increases the interest value.

The blurb on *Fiela se kind* highlights the secrecy and tension in the story and also emphasises the international bestseller status of *Kringe in 'n bos* with laudatory quotations from Afrikaans, Dutch and American critics.

The blurb for *Moerbeibos* accentuates the prominence that the novel gives to truth and offers something for everyone, from humour to tragedy. Reference is made to Matthee's previous forest novels in an attempt to induce the prospective reader to purchase all three. The photographs of the author on the covers of *Kringe in 'n bos* and *Moerbeibos* create a personal effect by bringing the author closer to the reader.

The *Toorbos* cover was designed by Laura Olivier, who attempted to recreate the hidden area where the ghost orchids grow. The shiny star-like shapes on the cover enhance the fairytale atmosphere; and the chameleon on the back cover was photographed by the fiancé of one of the author's daughters (Olivier 2004). The cover illustration and the title are closely linked, since "toorbos" can be freely translated as "magic forest". This can also be regarded as a sign of the novel's accessibility to prospective buyers.

The blurb consists of a brief summary of the life of Karolina, the main protagonist, and ends with a reference to her journey back into the forest, thus piquing the prospective reader's curiosity. The author's photograph on the back inside flap also brings the author closer to the reader, similarly to those on the covers of *Kringe in 'n bos* and *Moerbeibos*.

5.2 Set-works, reading circles and bestseller lists

The former provincial education departments, colleges of education and universities prescribed the forest triad as set-works. This step inflated the sales figures, especially those of *Kringe in 'n bos* and *Fiela se kind*, which are currently still prescribed (Riekert, 2003), and to a lesser extent those of *Moerbeibos*, which has been less frequently prescribed.

The role that the former provincial education departments played as gatekeepers is demonstrated by their request for a special school edition of *Fiela se kind*. The novel had to be purged of certain unacceptable words, for example "Here" (Lord or God) was changed to "Jinne" (in English "gee" – as in "gee whiz"). The publishers were compelled to mark the adapted text as a "school edition".

Few changes were made to the paperback school edition of *Kringe in 'n bos* and it was sold with the same cover illustration as the original hardcover to encourage the general public to buy it.

Bestseller lists at the time of publication reflect the popularity of the novels. Van Schaik listed *Kringe in 'n bos* as the top seller from April 1984 to April 1985. *Fiela se kind* never reached top position although *Moerbeibos* was top of the list for two months.

Data obtained from the questionnaires completed by reading circles show that *Kringe in 'n bos* was selected for discussion between 1984 and 1990 by forty-one of the sixty-eight responding circles, whereas *Fiela se kind* and *Moerbeibos* were selected by twenty-five. So far twenty-five reading circles have selected *Toorbos* (2003) for discussion during 2004 (Lategan, personal interview, 2004).

As *Toorbos* is a relatively new publication, it has not yet been submitted to the education departments for consideration as a set-work. The publisher plans to do so in 2004. *Toorbos* featured prominently on the Exclusive Books bestseller lists from July to October 2003 and Louis Greenberg describes it as "a great performer" (2004).

5.3 Libraries

Librarians found it impossible to determine the number of times the novels had been issued during 1993, as most copies were consistently out on loan to readers and the date sheets could not be scrutinised. Several copies of each novel had been written off as they had become dilapidated by being continuously issued to library members.

The lending figures of the Tshwane municipal community libraries have recently been computerised and the figures for thirty-nine libraries for 2003 are as follows: 200 copies of *Kringe in 'n bos* were issued 1 187 times, 193 copies of *Fiela se kind* were issued 620 times, 159 copies of **Moerbeibos** were issued 869 times and *Toorbos* of which there are currently twenty-eight copies, was issued 103 times (Swart, telephone interview, 2004). In contrast, the lending figures for two serious literary works for the same period are: twenty-one copies of *Onse Hymie* (1982) by Etienne Leroux were issued forty-one times; of the sixty-five copies of *Toorberg* (1986) by Etienne van Heerden only forty-five were issued once each (McDonald 2004).

5.4 Awards

Renewed public attention was drawn to *Kringe in 'n bos* when Dalene Matthee received the ATKV award for "good" popular prose (Malan 1983). During his address at the award ceremony, H.P. van Coller praised the skilful pre-publication marketing drive, stating that the novel's success could not be ascribed solely to the publicity campaign: "... it is an original story told in a gripping and readable style, representing a convincing world in which fact and fiction are interspersed ... that is what good popular prose is about" (Prosaprys 1985: 6). Matthee again received the ATKV award for *Fiela se kind* in 1985 and for *Moerbeibos* in 1988. In 1986 she received the South African Institute of Forestry prize for alerting the general public to the plight of the Knysna forest workers' community and drawing attention to conservation issues in the forest.

The awards did not in themselves lead directly to increased sales but the publicity they generated did contribute to consistent sales.

5.5 Stage and film productions

The stage adaptation of *Kringe in 'n bos* by Peet van Rensburg renewed interest in the novel as the production was seen in Cape Town after its run in the former Orange Free State. Ticket sales for the stage version of *Fiela se kind* have been compared to the sales of rugby match tickets at Newlands: 4 400 tickets for the production were sold in six hours. The production, with Shaleen Surtie-Richards (who played the lead in the film), attracted a total audience of 34 000 people. *Fiela se kind* was even set to music and a CD was produced (*SA Rock Digest*, 2003).

Circles in a forest, the English film version of *Kringe in 'n bos*, was criticised because the story had been adapted to suit an international audience. It was described as "... an empty parody of a classic story – but the broad film audience will never suspect that this is the case" (Schoombie 1989: 2).

The film script for *Fiela se kind* was written by Chris Barnard, the husband of the producer, Katinka Heyns. The author, Dalene Matthee, played a minor role in the film and acted as production adviser.

By March 1988 the film had earned more than R2 million: "... the success of *Fiela se kind* was surpassed only by that of *Dirty Dancing* which featured Patrick Swayze in the lead role ... it was at that stage the most successful film ever released in South Africa – and *Fiela se kind* was second" (Rabie 1988: 20). Heyns attributed the success of the film which more than 500 000 people had seen, to the earlier success of the book. The fact that the film had not been censored at all also contributed to its success.

The release of the film caused such a surge in demand for the book that the publishers launched a paperback version of the film – a text identical to the book, with a different cover from the original edition. Almost 25 000 copies of this "mass" paperback were sold.

Fiela se kind was nominated for ten AA Life Vita awards and was awarded eight. In 1989 Heyns received an honorary award from the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns (the South African academy for arts and science) for *Fiela se kind*.

5.6 Reviewers

Newspaper and magazine reviewers played a major role in popularising *Kringe in 'n bos*. Many of the (pre-publication) reviews were merely book announcements, as reviewers had not yet read the book (Breytenbach 1983).

Of the forty reviews examined for this study thirty-nine were favourable. André P. Brink wrote: "With *Kringe* Matthee proved beyond all doubt, the feasibility of combining literature with the tension and appeal of popular writing" (1987: 25). Smuts (1984) described it as "undoubtedly one of the most readable and enjoyable novels ever to be published in Afrikaans".

Fiela se kind was described in similarly glowing terms and the adroit use of the Afrikaans language was commended as "a resounding interplay of narrative and language" (Jooste 1985).

Moerbeibos elicited mixed reviews and Dorothea van Zyl (1989) accused both the favourable and unfavourable critics of distorting the true picture through subjective and extremist reviews.

Toorbos, like *Moerbeibos*, has elicited mixed reviews: " [it is] filled with wisdom, warmth and live characters and affirms Dalene Matthee's stature as top narrator" (Human 2003) and " ... the magic layer which is unconvincing within the given sociological framework makes this a weak reflection of her earlier forest novels" (Van Biljon 2003). Of the seven reviews available, only two are wholly positive; the others mention few positive and many negative aspects. One of the major concerns of a number of reviewers (e.g. Cilliers 2003 and Olivier 2003) is the fact that the historical material was not effectively synthesised.

The inclusion of information on the original forest triad in J.C. Kannemeyer's (1988) history of Afrikaans literature proves that the novels have valid literary characteristics and are therefore classified as "good" popular prose (Odendaal 1988; Bosman 1992).

6. Conclusion

The institutional approach provides a useful set of tools for understanding how literature becomes popular, indicating that definitions based on intrinsic characteristics are elitist and may even be meaningless.

The narrative of the forest novels illustrates the gatekeeping function and power of the institutions discussed and highlights the importance of public opinion in the popularisation processes of novels generally.

Each preceding novel was used to promote the as yet unpublished "sequel" and the role of the pre-publication announcements of translated versions should not be underestimated. Though the pre- and post-publication drive surrounding *Kringe in 'n bos* had been unprecedented, and that of *Fiela se kind* largely similar, *Moerbeibos* was marketed even more aggressively. The excellent sales of *Toorbos* despite the relatively small amount of publicity, probably reflects to some extent the power of public opinion (Hall 1979; Todd 1996) as the readers (buyers) were influenced by the author's reputation and their reading of the earlier forest novels. The pre- and post-publication marketing drives of this triad undoubtedly contributed significantly to the popularisation of the novels and although the sales figures were (and even still are) greatly influenced by their being prescribed as set-works, they remain phenomenal bestsellers. *Toorbos*, which has not yet been prescribed, is selling so well that the publisher has not yet consented to a radio reading as it might cause a decrease in sales (Hugo, radio-interview, 2004). This actually has the opposite effect, as the radio readings usually tend to stimulate sales.

The fact that the novels are prescribed at schools, universities and colleges is an indication of their eminent suitability for teaching purposes and shows that academics and teachers have accepted them as functional, significant works of literature (Barsch 1996). *Kringe in 'n bos* and *Fiela se kind*, which are currently still prescribed, appear to be popular among teachers, some of whom serve on book-prescribing committees which decide on the novels to be prescribed in schools.

Finally, the "canonisation" of the triad by its inclusion in Kannemeyer's (1988) literary history which spans the period 1652 -1987 indicates that the triad can be read as "good" popular prose and as serious literature (Odendaal 1988; Bosman 1992).

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Doctor Carol van der Westhuizen is a senior lecturer in the Department of Arts, Languages and Human Movement Studies Education at the University of Pretoria. She teaches English and is the Teaching Practice organiser of the School of Teacher Training. Her research interests include mergers, teaching practice-related issues and the teaching of literature.

Dr. Carol van der Westhuizen

School of Teacher Training
Groenkloof Campus
University of Pretoria
0002

Tel: 012 420 5567

012 346 3877

Fax: 012 420 5595

cn.vdwesthuizen@gk.up.ac.za