

Spies stuck out in the cold

A familiar formula, in even more familiar territory, is given an original, erotic edge.

THRILLER

Stray Dog Winter

By David Francis

Allen & Unwin, 299pp, \$32.95

Reviewed by Caroline Baum

A SOVIET defector once told me that one way you could tell a homosexual was by his shoes: only gay men wore slip-ons, as opposed to lace-ups.

Under communism, homosexuality was a crime punishable by banishment to a gulag, so it was worth making sure one's taste in footwear did not attract the wrong kind of attention. David Francis does not mention this in his excellent thriller but he still manages to convey the paranoid malaise of surreptitious encounters between men during the Soviet era with authoritative and convincing detail.

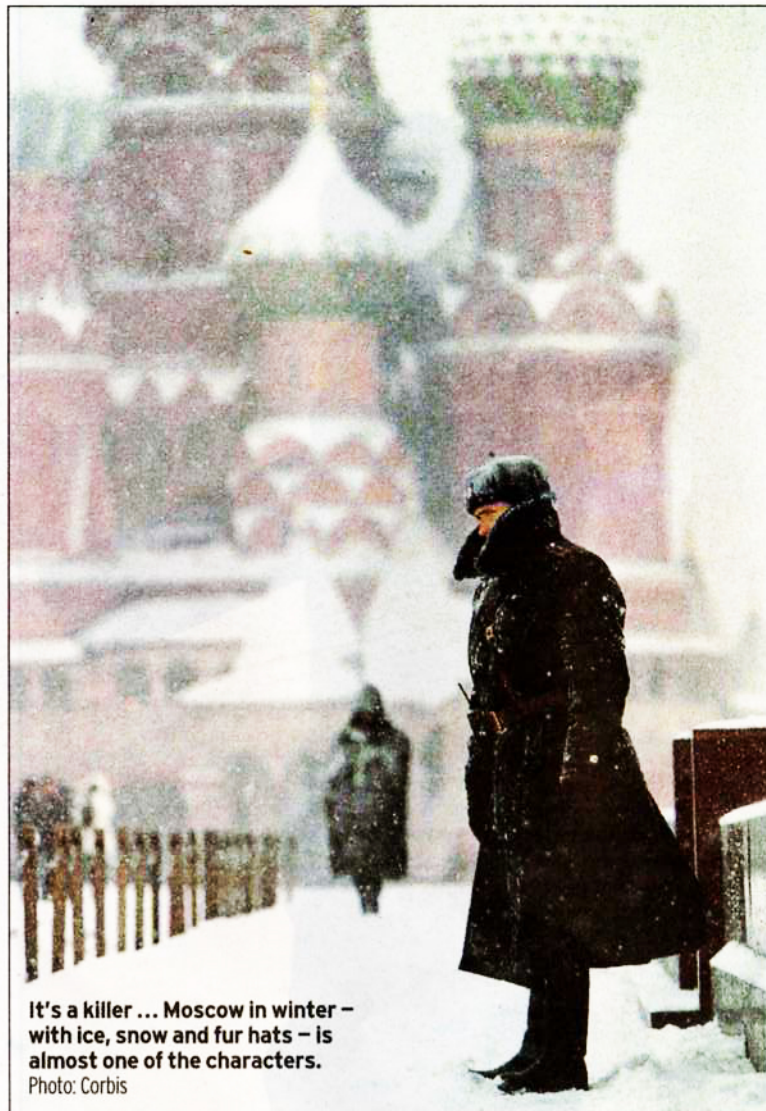
His central character, Darcy Bright, might have been wiser not to wear an attention-attracting Kenzo fake-fur coat. (Fortunately, Francis soon abandons an early preoccupation with luxury brand names for more telling observations.) Bright has other problems, though, such as

an appetite for anonymous sex in public places, from trains to parks, that dates back to an episode in his Australian rural adolescence involving a Mormon missionary.

He is also burdened with an unhealthy and conflicting erotic attraction for his half-sister, Fin, who has lured him to Moscow and asked him to help her with an artistic commission. When he gets there she is evasive, preoccupied, unforthcoming and clearly distracted by something riskier than painting. (The fact that she never leaves him a key, a note or anything for breakfast makes her particularly irritating.) So Bright goes for a walk. With just a few steps across the dirty snow, his fate is sealed.

As any right-thinking thriller writer would, Francis deploys the winter weather almost as a character in his novel. Who would think of Moscow as a backdrop without ice, fog, fur hats and heavy coats as atmospheric props? It is a world already familiar to readers of decades of Cold War thrillers but one can't help wondering whether the city would lose some of its mystique if it wasn't shrouded in seasonal effects. When will a thriller writer be brave enough to give us Moscow in summer?

According to recent remarks by



It's a killer ... Moscow in winter - with ice, snow and fur hats - is almost one of the characters.

Photo: Corbis

John le Carre, the enduring market for the genre reflects an ongoing nostalgia for the certainties about who the enemy was and what the rules of the game were between rival spy agencies. Francis, a US-based Australian who visited Moscow in 1984, sets his novel

during an interesting phase of transition, with the old guard withering, Gorbachev in the wings but the KGB still flexing its muscles. Visitors are aware that conversations are probably bugged, though they're not always right about where the listening devices are concealed.

Francis contrasts the frozen city and its frosty inhabitants with the rural heat of Bright's childhood, when he wandered about naked, avoiding his American mother's alcoholic barbs while his father travelled the countryside selling eggs. Such flashbacks always carry risks - they can interrupt the narrative flow instead of heightening the tension or illuminating the characters - but Francis places them deftly, with just the right pacing, and they allow him to demonstrate his ability to write a more lyrical, less hard-edged prose than in the Moscow scenes. They also flesh out the unresolved relationship between Bright and Fin.

Although this is his first attempt at the thriller genre, Francis is masterly at building up suspense and an almost palpable sense of intrigue, menace and ultimately real danger, as Bright is punished for his naivety and foolish impulses, finding himself compromised, blackmailed, his loyalties torn and his life in peril. Not that this is entirely undeserved. Like Fin, who is embroiled in an equally, if not more dangerous game of her own, Bright (his name sometimes seems like an ironic misnomer) seems hell-bent on risk-taking behaviour, no matter how much he is warned against it. This can prove a little exasperating, making it hard to sympathise with Bright when he is cornered.

It is harder still to believe in Fin's motives, based on her flimsy and slightly unconvincing relationship with a shadowy figure from her sunnier Australian past.

Francis is at his best evoking the twilight zone of ambiguities in the conversations Bright has with his Russian minder, Aurelio, creating tension from the erotic charge of Bright's desire. It's an original and unconventional angle that brings new vitality to a familiar formula.