

**BUZZ** The Arts Ariel Swartley on Books

# The Stranger's Dilemma

In the new thriller by David Francis, freedom comes in an unlikely place

**Darcy Bright** has just penetrated the Iron Curtain when we meet him at the beginning of *Stray Dog Winter* (MacAdam/Cage, 338 pages, \$24), David Francis's haunting thriller. The year is 1984, and Darcy, a promising young painter, has been hurtled from his native Australia. Now his train is inching toward Moscow through a landscape straight out of Turgenev. A horse-drawn cart waits at a crossing; a pair of silver foxes caper in the snow. His Fodor's guide has warned against photographing anything strategic, but a fellow traveler's feet, layers of socks beneath his sandals, seem safe enough. Darcy snaps away. With his delicate, child-perfect features, he's almost as innocent as he looks.

Francis, who grew up on a farm in Australia and has been a lawyer in Los Angeles since the mid-1980s, uses the stranger's dilemma—the need to distinguish weird but locally normal behavior from acts that are pointedly hostile—to great foreboding effect. Despite unsettling Cold War reminders like the train guard who retains his passport or the Soviet border agents who seize his Turgenev, Darcy clings to his holiday mood. His trip, after all, is a windfall. His friend Fin has been in the USSR for months with a commission to paint industrial landscapes—a little surprising to Darcy since she's more of an installation artist. Just weeks ago she called Melbourne to propose that Darcy defer his entrance to graduate school and join her. She needs him, she says; they'll have fun, she promises. The prepaid ticket that arrives in a money belt is a compelling argument. Darcy, an egg seller's son, has never



been far from home, never lived where the ground freezes. He's also easily compelled.

In brief flashbacks that intercut the train's arrival like passing station platforms, Francis lets us know that Fin is not just Darcy's friend. The daughter of his mother's sister and Darcy's father, she's both a cousin and a sibling. Dropped, literally, on the Brights' doorstep by her mother, who speeds away in a taxi for a flight back to California, the 11-year-old Fin becomes another burden on a long-crumbling marriage. Yet to Darcy, who's a year younger, she's a godsend. Too pretty for a boy, he's al-

ready a freak in his rural suburb. Fin, defiant where he is timid, seems like his better half. They even look like fraternal twins. She's a stranger, too, but a glamorous one, whose nifty independence and autocratic manner bring a whiff of cooler, freer California air. No wonder he hero-worships her. Still, when he says of the ticket to Moscow that he "knew he would go as much as he knew he shouldn't," he's talking about more than Fin's not always benign influence on him. Already he's disregarded her advice and accepted a soldier's wordless invitation to a tryst in a Prague

men's room. Succumbing followed by regretting is the rhythm of Darcy's life.

*Stray Dog Winter* contains the ingredients of a classic thriller: an innocent abroad, his ambiguous friend, an octopus-like secret service, and a war between democratic and totalitarian values. But Francis invests these elements, well-worn in the decades since Eric Ambler and Graham Greene, with a resonance that ranges beyond social commentary and genre play. Arriving shortly before the death of General Secretary Yuri Andropov, Darcy finds Moscow more than usually tense. Snow blankets the city while its undersurface seethes with a struggle between glasnost reformers and determined hard-liners.

One reason Fin needs Darcy becomes clear: She has painted nothing for the exhibition whose opening is imminent. Inspired by his new surroundings, he relishes the opportunity to take over her assignment. Then, too, artists appear to be allowed more freedoms than other citizens. The handsome ex-dancer he meets at the Bolshoi has the keys to half the city. But no one in this alien landscape is quite what they seem. Fin's fluent enough in Russian to question the ex-dancer, but her answers to Darcy are evasive. Her apartment is watched. Although the money belt looks ordinary, she immediately spirits it away. Darcy's suspicions that he's been used as a courier only deepen when he realizes that Fin's manipulative old boyfriend, a suspected radical, is in Moscow, too. Assuming that Fin is in danger, though, is easier for Darcy than thinking that he might be.

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**Stranded** passportless in Fin's apartment soon after his arrival, he goes out anyway. He's Australian, he tells himself, innocuous, immune. In a wintry park he notices a man watching: "Darcy wondered if this could be his shadow, but he led a narrow dog in a quilted tartan blanket, a whippet or miniature greyhound, the type Darcy imagined being walked by a gay man in New York, not a KGB agent.... Darcy heard Fin's words: *Be careful, the places you go.* He heard his own promise but the intrigue already flitted around his consciousness, luring him, a finger seeking its hook inside his mouth and he'd barely stepped out the door."

Part of the lure of Fin's ticket for Darcy was the chance to escape to a place "without the new gay cancer." But there are other risks to cruising in the Soviet Union, including imprisonment and torture. Darcy, we learn, is not wholly unaware of the penalties for homosexuality in Russia. Still, the sense of immunity is hard to shake. Darcy's holiday on ice provides enough cryptic glances, bullet-ridden warnings, and



cliff-hanging escapes to fill two page-turners. The suspense, however, comes from his growing awareness of his own motives. The most dangerous secret service, Francis suggests, is the one the heart enlists against itself.

*Stray Dog Winter* is Francis's second novel. His first, *The Great Inland Sea*, published in the United States in 2005, follows a young equestrian from the Australian outback to Southern California by way of Maryland and Mexico (Francis, too, used a talent for show jumping to see the world). The hero, like Darcy, is a loner from a broken home, and the girl he's drawn

to is another dangerously unpredictable daredevil. In one of their early encounters she gets him to jump his horse over a car while she and a colleague rake in the bets. Childhood pain, both novels remind us, is often a component of adolescent charisma. Francis details the shifting power dynamics of attraction, the fuzzy line between the kind of fragility that irresistibly invites protection and the kind that compels it out of fear.

Australia, dominating and contradictory, looms in both novels as another member of the heroes' troubled families. Instead of free-

dom, they've found imprisoning isolation. In this country brutality is a matter-of-fact as the heat. "They passed Foxes Hangout," Darcy remembers, "the dead foxes on the tree." Francis's prose has the sparse elegance of a Xeriscape. Every detail holds water.

Darcy, he writes, "reached down and pulled out a capeweed. The soil smelled stale and sweet from the compost and chicken manure his father brought home. He knew in spring the capeweed would have a bright yellow flower like a daisy. He wondered who decided which were the flowers and which were the weeds, who decided whether his father would come home." Australia's own outsider status—a continent on the periphery of larger, self-important ones—offers Darcy a perspective. He may be odd, but then things aren't always as fixed as people presume. Christmas falls in the summer, too.

As *Stray Dog Winter* barrels toward its conclusion, there are fewer flashbacks to Darcy's homeland, more slippery twists and turns.

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This isn't to say the Russian scenery isn't vividly evoked but that the settings demanded by the increasingly violent plot—interrogation chambers, cars, and woods at night—are meant to seem as if they could be anywhere and therefore everywhere. That's how intimidation operates. But if Darcy's unawareness has landed him in danger—both as a suspected spy and a known homosexual—his remi-

niscences have jogged his memory. Key names are recalled, though almost too late. More important, having come to terms with his past, Darcy is finally free to act.

If his triumph over well-armed opponents is hard to believe, it doesn't detract from the book's impact. The mystery of how easily the flame of desire turns to arid compulsion remains long after Francis ties up the loose ends. The gray zone between persecution and delusion is the thriller's home ground, but Francis's probing of the connection turns *Stray Dog Winter* into a moving meditation on gay rights and responsibilities in the wake of AIDS. That makes Darcy's improbability as an action hero easier to overlook. As a foreigner, he holds one advantage over his pursuers: He hasn't lived long enough around repression and betrayal to accept them as inevitable. Even in the midst of pain and fear, he can't bring himself to believe that there isn't any hope. ■



**FICTION** David Francis' second novel is a disquietingly well-crafted thriller, writes  
**BIOGRAPHY** Alan Saffron gives a fairly sordid account of a colourful man and his

# An innocent pawn abroad

## Stray Dog Winter

By David Francis  
 Allen & Unwin, \$32.95.

**I**N THE MOSCOW WINTER OF 1984, Russian Premier Yuri Andropov died. A year or so earlier, the Turkish Consul-General was murdered in Melbourne.

The connections between events so disparate are vital for the plot of David Francis' second novel, *Stray Dog Winter*.

In turn they are shadowed by cataclysms of long ago that abide in vengeful memory, such as the killing of a million Armenians by the Turks, and by the terrible institutions of the Soviet state that have sustained its power: the KGB, the Lubyanka prison, the gulags. To the latter are dispatched newly identified enemies of order — homosexuals, or "blues". In another of Francis' historical markers, AIDS has just commenced its slaughter in the West.

Adventures often happen to those who least want them, such as Francis' Darcy Bright, a young Melbourne artist and homosexual who has agreed to the request of his half-sister Fin to meet him in Moscow — carrying for her a money bag that he is not to open. The device is so familiar that Francis' initial use of it is as daring as the destructive revelations that eventually it yields.

Francis understands how conventions can be both the bedrock of crime fiction and frameworks within which subversion and invention can thrive. Darcy's journey is bound to be ruinous for some, but with Fin "he shared a love and hate of dangerous people". An innocent abroad, he is inveigled into a scheme of which he has neither knowledge nor responsibility. As a consequence, his are the familiar

punishments of the man on the run: pursued, beaten, imprisoned, powerless, in fearful flight.

We encounter him first on a train travelling from Prague to Moscow. Without knowing it, he is under surveillance. Any sense of freedom is already illusory. From the window of his compartment he is afforded glimpses of the lives of strangers.

Here, portrayed with Francis' characteristic asperity, are "A figure trudging alone in a snow-beaded field with a scythe. An unscarved woman behind a wooden fence shaded her face as if there was sunlight." Unconsciously, he has conjured images of death and darkness.

Soon his companions and tormentors, usually fulfilling both roles, will include not only his sister and her lover Jobik, but General Sarfin, who in interrogating Darcy "towered over (him) like a fuming building" and his son Aurelio, formerly of the Cuban Ballet and now reluctantly about his father's business.

The cold, dark world, menacing and ambiguous, through which Darcy is impelled flickers with images for his painter's and photographer's eyes. But to understand what they impend, who might be trusted, is beyond him. Instead he plunges on, wearing Aurelio's borrowed coat, which "felt heavy, like a shawl of dread".

There are two parallel actions in which he is enmeshed. One involves the succession to Soviet leadership of the brutal, cloddish Chernenko, and a sting operation against his son-in-law, mounted perhaps by "Gorbachev's people" who would, indeed, soon instal a new regime in the Kremlin. The other concerns those — operating within Russia — whom the Turkish authorities wish to exterminate as Armenian terrorists.

Darcy is haplessly put to use in furthering each of these intrigues



and in observing their outcomes. Nowhere is Francis' touch surer than in handling the grand-scale events that swallow up plotters and the innocent alike.

However, he also plays strict attention to the cadences of his prose, as illustrated by sustained alliterative play with key words. For Fin, Darcy is both "her pigeon and her painter". His fate is persecution. His role in politics is to pimp for sinister blackmailers.

*Stray Dog Winter* is such a disquietingly well-crafted thriller that its domestic dimension might be overshadowed. Yet the portrait, in jagged flashbacks, of the collapsing fabric of the marriage of Darcy's parents, in what resemble a succession of scenes from a silent movie, is indicative of the author's range and authority.

Francis, lawyer and former Olympic equestrian, now based in Los Angeles, offers the demanding gift of his fiction to his own country, and beyond.

David Francis is a guest at the Melbourne Writers Festival, which is sponsored by *The Age*. [www.mwf.com.au](http://www.mwf.com.au)  
 Peter Pierce is chairman of the fiction judges for the Prime Minister's literary prizes, the winners of which will be announced on September 12.

Sure touch:

DAVID FRANCIS  
*Stray Dog Winter*



Quiet Storm  
 by Alan Saffron



MELBOURNE WRITERS FESTIVAL  
 August 22 to August 31, 2008

**PROFILE** His brush with totalitarianism proved a potent memory for David Francis when he came to tackle *Stray Dog Winter*, writes **Fiona Gruber**.

# The horse and his boy

**I**N 1984, DAVID FRANCIS went to Moscow to stay with his former Monash University friend, the actor Jane Turner, and her husband John Denton, who was then cultural attaché to the Australian Embassy.

The Cold War was nearly over, Gorbachev was round the corner, but as Francis stepped off the train at Belorussky Station, a thaw seemed inconceivable. Immediately surrounded by men in uniform, he was escorted to an office, his camera was taken from him, and the film removed.

"I thought at first that Jane and John had organised an armed escort

for me," Francis jokes, but his brush with totalitarianism proved a potent memory when he came to write his second novel, *Stray Dog Winter*.

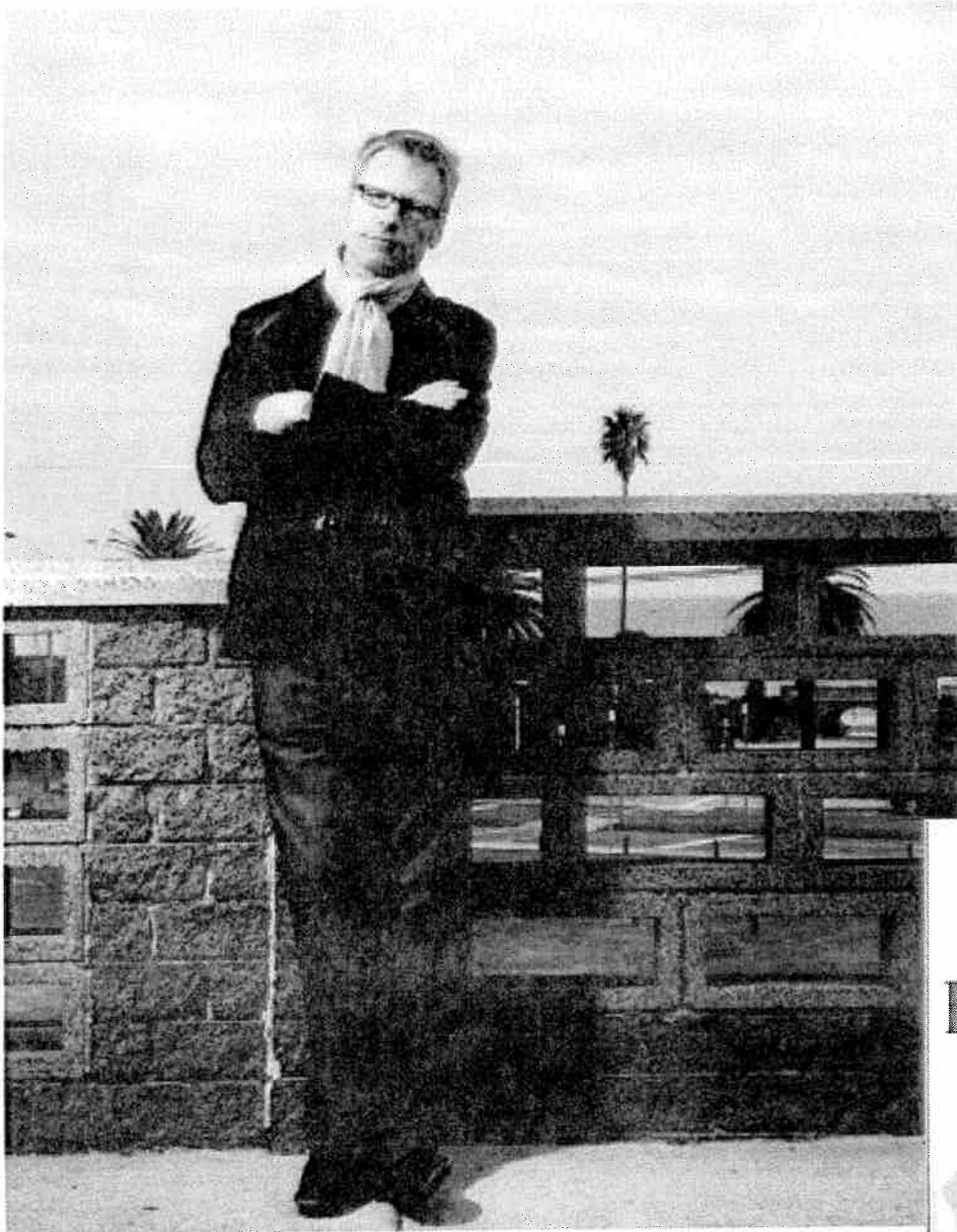
The scene comes early in the narrative, as Darcy Bright, a gay and rather fey young Australian on his first trip to the Soviet Union, manages to expose himself to danger before even reaching his destination. Hustled off the train, his photographs of snow scenes and peasants, innocently snapped from the window of the sleeper, are deemed a security risk.

Having escaped this ordeal, Darcy's education in the Soviet system begins in earnest. As the tale unfolds, he finds himself in a sinister underworld

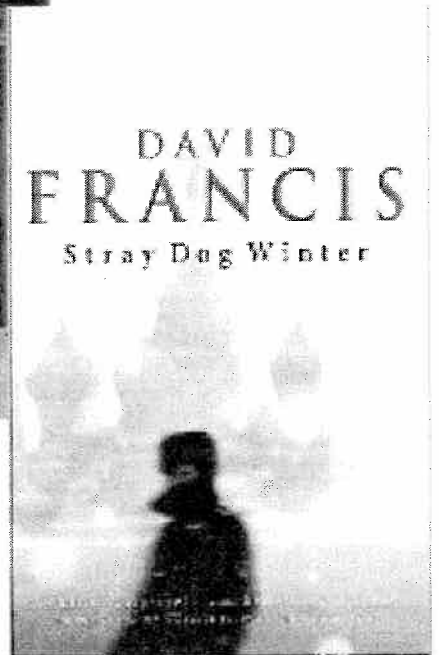
of surveillance and entrapment, where even his half-sister Fin, already ensconced in the city, is not all she seems.

Ostensibly on an art scholarship to paint the industrial landscapes of Moscow, she keeps disappearing from the flat, and Darcy's adventurous encounters with men turn out to be less coincidental and far more dangerous than at first appears. The androgynous pair, hip and cool in a Western context, are no match for the forces at work around them.

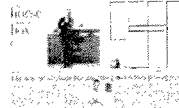
The fragility of the individual, his self-delusion and loss of innocence, are themes that preoccupy Francis. In the case of his fellow nationals, he



The fragility of the individual preoccupies David Francis.  
PICTURE: EDDIE JRM



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argues, there is a trustfulness and optimism that is especially vulnerable.

"There is a particularly Australian naive entitlement that comes with travelling," says Francis, "a sense that 'the rules don't really apply to me, and I'll be fine and be able to charm my way out of things.'" He admits to having put quite a lot of himself in both siblings, but says he has more in common with the confident tough sister than her vulnerable and naive brother.

The Soviet narrative is only one strand of the novel. There is a strong Australian context as the story jumps between Moscow in the '80s and Mount Eliza and Melbourne in the '60s and '70s.

It is through these flashbacks that we come to understand the profoundly dysfunctional world in which the siblings grew up, the "why-done-it" exegesis to complement the "who-done-it" adventure. Francis plays with a locale rooted in family history (he grew up on the Mornington Peninsula), introducing troubling and bizarre elements, including a strange dream about a very racy aunt (more of her later).

Despite 20 years living in Los Angeles and a soft accent that is more West Coast than Westernport Bay, Francis' charmingly self-deprecating manner and absurdist humour is very Australian. He's athletic and quite boyish, looks younger than his 49 years, and his teetotal lifestyle with lots of yoga and a disciplined writing routine sounds very Californian.

It also sounds glamorous, involving extended writing stints in Paris and a background as an international equestrian. The latter is a legacy of his horsey family, which included his mother Judith Francis, a competitive rider and founder of the Victorian Pony Club. His parents ran the Tooradin Estate, an equestrian centre on the peninsula, and his sister Sally teaches riding for the disabled.

Until the publication of his first novel, *Agapanthus Tango*, in 2001, when he decided to simplify things, he says he led a crazily high-paced life. "I was sponsored until eight or nine years ago, and rode a string of jumping horses. It was fashionable, as an Australian, to have me in Buenos Aires, or Rio or Mexico."

One senses that Francis' charm and disarming manner have come in handy in carving out a life that allows him creative space. He'd like to be a fulltime writer but can't see a way of existing on the money. "Although it's not kosher to admit to having another source of income, at the moment I do and it gives me the luxury to afford to write what I want and not feel compelled to write for an audience. But maybe I'm too self-involved."

His house in downtown LA was built by Paramount Studios in the 1920s to house screenwriters, and he spends all his spare time scribbling longhand in its attic. He writes at lunchtime too, somewhat bizarrely finding inspiration and quiet in the Hollywood Memorial Cemetery.

Visitors often assume he's a mourner, perhaps engaged in a long missive to a dearly departed relative.

Despite a steely sense of focus on his writing schedule, his writing process is looser and more haphazard. "I write in a very organic, sentence-by-sentence, chapter-to-chapter way, which is a crazy way to write a mystery," he admits. His agent is keen for him to pursue this new direction, but he feels that the blurring of genres might not be good for his identity as an author, or his emotional engagement with writing.

"If I wanted to orchestrate my career I probably should sit down and write another thriller, but that is so contrary to my instinctive writing style, it would feel disingenuous."

Every fortnight he meets with a small group of local writers, to read though each other's work. They include Janet Fitch, the author of *White Oleander*. Other LA friends include the author and blogger Mark Sarvas and the novelist and essayist Jane Smiley, with whom he rides. Many of his friends are screenwriters. His first novel has been optioned by a French production company, and he will be writing the screenplay.

But back to that disturbing dream. *Stray Dog Winter* was started in Paris, where he spent six months in 2002 on a writing fellowship from the Australia Council Literature Fund. The Australian part of the plot came to him while he slept, and featured the aforementioned racy relative.

"I had a wild aunt who slept with lots of American soldiers under the hedge at Mount Eliza.

In the dream his father had an affair with glamorous aunt Ruth, and they had a daughter. In the novel's first flashback, young Darcy Bright is surprised by the arrival of his aunt from America. She dumps a small girl on the Mount Eliza driveway, and immediately leaves without talking to her sister, or her brother-in-law, the child's father. The two children become comrades, united by mistrust for their fickle, adulterous parents. The appearance of a secret, forbidden "other" appealed to Francis.

"I was interested in having a strange mirroring of Darcy and Fin, she being the more female version of him, and yet in some ways a more boyish version," he confesses.

His unconscious informs his plots, and the adventures of Darcy in Moscow were not written from an Olympian height. "I wasn't that far ahead of Darcy. I was at the same level of experience and knowledge when I went to the Soviet Union." It added to the "wonder and the danger and excitement of writing a suspense novel".

In keeping with his "organic" style, when he started writing he had no idea that his characters would travel to Moscow. When he found them heading east, he toyed with the idea of a fact-finding trip but decided against it.

"I was tempted to go back and visit but I think I work better from snapshots and little memories, little details. As a writer these remembered resonant details are the most powerful. I know writers who have gone back to visit a place and it has screwed their vision."

He is not a Russophile, he insists, though he is well-versed in Russian fiction and poetry, and thoroughly researched the period in which the novel is set. For a time he didn't know if the two parts of the novel belonged together, even though they informed and coloured each other.

A trip back to Australia and time spent at the family property at Tooradin helped mesh the two, but, he says, the sense of not knowing what comes next is quite common among writers. "E. L. Doctorow said writing was like driving at night; you can see as far as the headlights and no further, and you have to accept that."