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Literary

Red Plenty
Francis Spufford
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Francis Spufford is a British writer with highly eccentric interests. In *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination*, he produced a cultural history of ice, Eskimos, and polar exploration. His previous book, *Backroom Boys: The Secret Return of the British Boffin*, revisited the post-World War II pipe-smoking heroes of British science and engineering. Now, as if daring readers to accompany him on yet another unexpected journey, Spufford offers *Red Plenty*, an unclassifiable book about the men and women behind the Soviet Union's planned economy in the 1950s and 1960s.

Populated by a rich bevy of characters, *Red Plenty* encompasses a fictional landscape from Leningrad to Sverdlovsk, an area as vast as the Soviet Union itself. In a series of loosely connected and cleverly rendered vignettes, we meet artists, scientists, economists, and laborers—some drawn from real life, others wholly fabricated—as they struggle to move their beleaguered country forward after the death of Stalin. It may not seem like the richest fodder for imaginative literature, but Spufford invests each episode with a sense of time and character that is truly remarkable, given that, by his own admission, his knowledge of Communist life during the so-called Thaw is limited at best.

Red Plenty is about "Russia, the dear dreadful enormous territory at the edge of Europe which is as large as all Europe put together. And also, it isn't. It is story Russia, not real Russia; a place never quite in perfect overlap with the daylight country of the same name. It is as near to it as a wish is to reality, and as far away too."

Spufford bolsters his fictional forays with an impressive amount of research, including more than fifty pages of detailed footnotes and a bibliography of astonishing depth and breadth. When a real-life character speaks up in one of these episodes, the author has the source material to back it up. This lends an uncanny authenticity to these interlocking stories, a true sense of what it must have been like at a time when young men and women tried to break through Soviet

orthodoxy to forge a new economic order—and a better quality of life—for citizens throughout the republic. As Galina, a student at Moscow State University, reflects, “She felt the way you do when you reach the bottom of a staircase one step before you’re expecting it, and jar your bones by trying to step into the solid floor with all the unbraked hurry of your descent. It seemed that life could be easier than she had imagined. But not, of course, for her.”

Spufford has once again confounded expectations, writing a book that blurs the line between history and fiction without apology or regret.

Lee Polevoi