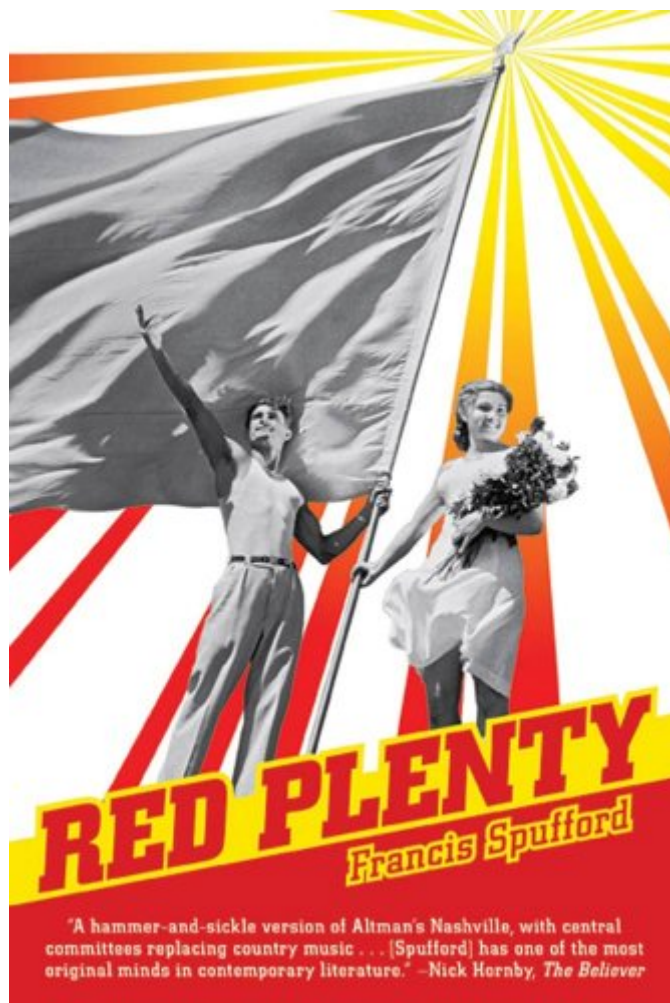


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Red Plenty



Synopsis

"Spufford cunningly maps out a literary genre of his own . . . Freewheeling and fabulous."

—The Times (London) Strange as it may seem, the gray, oppressive USSR was founded on a fairy tale. It was built on the twentieth-century magic called "the planned economy," which was going to gush forth an abundance of good things that the lands of capitalism could never match. And just for a little while, in the heady years of the late 1950s, the magic seemed to be working. *Red Plenty* is about that moment in history, and how it came, and how it went away; about the brief era when, under the rash leadership of Khrushchev, the Soviet Union looked forward to a future of rich communists and envious capitalists, when Moscow would out-glitter Manhattan and every Lada would be better engineered than a Porsche. It's about the scientists who did their genuinely brilliant best to make the dream come true, to give the tyranny its happy ending. *Red Plenty* is history, it's fiction, it's as ambitious as Sputnik, as uncompromising as an Aeroflot flight attendant, and as different from what you were expecting as a glass of Soviet champagne.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I liked it. It's not a historical novel in the normal sense. There are far better reviews than mine here. But it has a neat mechanism. It's not quite a historical novel and it's not quite an exposition. It's sort of both. It's almost like going on a time travel coach tour. The coach driver provides a background and narrative and then you get to step into a point in time and see what was happening. In that alone Spufford excelled. I am disappointed in that for some reason the author or the publisher will not allow loaning of the Kindle version that I thought I bought. Apparently I only own the right to read it and central control is not up to the purchaser. I hoped to loan it to a friend but that is not permitted for this book. How ironic.

This is a hard book to classify but I found it absorbing and very well-written. Historical novel comes closest, I suppose. It moves seamlessly between fact and fiction. It is an absorbing account of a fraught period in Russian history and how the lives of some very interesting and largely sympathetic people intersected during the Soviet period. I can't vouch for its accuracy--it includes copious notes, for those who care. The portrayal of the thoughts of Khrushchev was convincing to me; whether these were in fact his thoughts seems not a very interesting question in the context of a work of art as opposed to a history. Tolstoy, after all, did the same thing with Napoleon and Kutuzov.

This is a remarkable book. It reads like a detective novel; but it's subject is actually economics - specifically, how the Soviet Union's centralized economy was designed and why it failed. Each chapter could stand on its own as a terrific short story with great characters and lots of local color. But, as the stories progress, you discover that you're following and understanding a larger, more complicated story. Remember when Khrushchev and Nixon had the famous "kitchen debate" at the Moscow American technology exhibit in 1959 and Khrushchev boasted "In 7 years we will reach the level of America. When we catch up and pass you by, we'll wave to you."? You learn from Spufford that one reason Khrushchev felt confident enough to make the boast is that the Soviet Union had, at just that time, made a huge investment in an entire city devoted to science and mathematics. It was called Akademgorodok (academy town) and was, at its peak, staffed with 65,000 scientists and mathematicians. One of the goals of this establishment was to develop both the mathematics and the computer systems necessary to make the Marxist economic vision a reality. Of course, we know the outcome. That was settled when the Soviet Union collapsed. But, the important thing the book offers for any American who lived through the cold war is not the outcome. It's what we didn't know at the time - the part of history that was happening behind the iron curtain. And once you read it, you'll understand more clearly why China decided to move to a market-based economy. We

assume they learned from us. I now think it's likely they learned more from the USSR's failure. There is another lesson I took from this book. The Soviet leaders refused to learn from experience because they couldn't shake loose from the grip of Marxist ideology. Their best scientists and mathematicians were telling them that the only way to avoid economic failure was to allow supply and demand to establish prices. But that was a heresy that couldn't be tolerated. It was too much like capitalism. I look at our politics today and wonder if some of the most vocal advocates of capitalism are now making a similar mistake by refusing to consider ideas that seem too much like socialism.

It is a novel-like book with Russian fairy tales, skazki, interwoven. The characters are both real and imagined. We want the workers to succeed, the horrible plans to be abandoned. Alas, it is not to be. For someone who has visited the Soviet Union late in her history, 1974, it was enthralling. It helped me better understand what I had experienced as a child. The grim apartments still endured, shared kitchens and baths. An accepted spying everywhere, an inherent mistrust of the west especially the US. I recommend this book for anyone who has an interest in the USSR.

A novelized account of the early, halcyon days of the Soviet Union -- when overtaking the West seemed not just possible, but probable. It uses fictionalized versions of major historical figures (Kantorovich, the discoverer of linear programming, among them) and little-known (in the West) events that illustrate and drove the development and downfall of the USSR. The book also gives a good overview of life in academia and in the Party as they try to run an economy along political, rather than economic, principles. An excellent, readable overview of life in the USSR and why it failed. As the author says in a note, "This whole book is, in fact, a prehistory of perestroika". Finally, the Kindle version of this has a MAJOR problem -- the notes. As is common in fiction, these are done by page, rather than using a series of notes, and they are NOT linked to the text in the Kindle version. Which means that if you, like me, don't check them out at the start of the novel, you may not know they're there until you've missed quite a bit.

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