

The Red Coffin

By Sam Eastland

Faber & Faber, 357 pages, \$24

The Red Coffin is the sequel to *The Eye of the Red Tsar*, and it's superb. If you missed the debut of Investigator Pekkala, once the Tsar's most trusted agent and then the special investigator for Josef Stalin, you'll want to run out and get the first book. That's not to say Eastland doesn't give enough back story to fill in the gaps. It's just that they're so tantalizing you'll want more – and Eastland gives us much, much more.

It's 1939, 10 years since the action in *Eye*, and Pekkala and his assistant Major Kirov, have been busy on the Comrade's business. Stalin's concerns here are the possibility of war and the development of a new weapon, the T-34 tank. German agents are at work attempting to get the plans for the tank, relying on a group of tsarist ex-soldiers known as the White Guild. It appears that the top-secret cadre working on the tank has been infiltrated. Stalin wants Kirov and Pekkala to uncover the traitor and reveal the secrets of the Guild. One twist is that the White Guild is Stalin's own little trap, created by him to ferret out anti-revolutionary forces.

What transpires as Pekkala goes about his master's business is a brilliantly conceived and perfectly executed mystery, with the requisite deaths, clues, investigation and resolution.

It all works so well because Eastland – the pseudonym, we are told, of "a British author who lives in the United States" – takes the time to build the characters, develop the plot and incorporate the action. Kirov, a bit lean in the earlier book, is wonderful here, elegantly dressed and a bit of a Soviet-style dandy to Pekkala's grungy Siberian survivor.

One can only hope that Eastland has more plans and plots for Inspector Pekkala. This is a series with plenty of promise.

The Water Rat of Wanchai

By Ian Hamilton

Anansi, 424 pages, \$19.95

The Water Rat of Wanchai is the first book in what Anansi intends as a new mystery imprint called Spiderline. If the other novels are half as good as this debut by Ian Hamilton, then readers are going to celebrate. Hamilton, a nationally known journalist and non-fiction author, has created a marvellous character in Ava Lee, a Toronto forensic accountant.

That's right, an accountant. Those who believe that CPA is



the acronym for beige and boring will be stunned as Lee engages in adventures (and sex) from Hometown to Hong Kong, Bangkok to Guyana. It seems Lee works for an "Uncle" who just may be part of the Chinese Mafia. Lee's job is to track down the money and those who have it. In this case, it's a nephew of a friend of "Uncle" who is owed \$5-million. What happens to the person who diverted the millions is not Ava's concern. Just find the cash and get it back to the nephew.

This is a terrific story that's certain to be on the Arthur Ellis Best First Novel list this year. Even better news is that the next three novels in the series are already written and ready to print. Ava Lee is going to be chasing the accounts for a long, long time.

First Frost

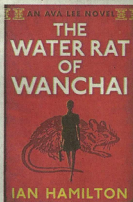
By James Henry

Bantam, 360 pages, \$34.95

I was never a fan of the late R.D. Wingfield's DCI Jack Frost novels, feeling that Frost was too much the crusty curmudgeon. So I wasn't expecting much when I found that Jack was returning, revived by "James Henry," the nom de plume for publisher James Garbutt and editor Henry Sutton. I was wrong. This new young Frost is as sharp and smart, but he's also more nuanced, and the signs of age are already there.

The action is set in 1981, when Britain is faced with economic depression, terrorism, and the dreadful Superintendent Stanley Mullett has arrived to restore order to Denton PD. Sergeant Jack Frost is faced with a crumbling marriage and a missing 12-year-old girl. It's his first really big case.

Fans will find that this young Frost resembles the Jack Frost in the television series. In fact, this prequel (with more to come, I hope) should make a great new series from the old one.



The Poison Tree

By Erin Kelly

Viking, 323 pages, \$33.50

This dazzling debut novel begins as Karen and her daughter Alice go to pick up Rex from prison. Rex has just served 10 years for murder. Who these people are and what happened to them is the spine of Kelly's excellent psychological thriller.

From the present, the story slips away to a golden time of youth and freedom in the London of the late 1990s. We know something dreadful is going to happen – after all, Rex was in prison – but what and when? Kelly spins the story and the suspense like a master. Fans of Barbara Vine may think this one is

INSIDE TODAY'S GLOBE

The man who made vaccines safe again

Parents everywhere feared that vaccinations might give their kids autism, until journalist Brian Deer proved that claim was false. Sarah Hampson asks him what drives his search for truth – and it may have to do with Brussels sprouts.

Globe Life

