



## Trial Run

*Dick Francis*

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## **Trial Run** Dick Francis

Veteran horseman Randall Drew travels to Moscow to help the Russian royal family--but ends up caught in a world of jealousy, sabotage, and murder.

## **Trial Run Details**

Date : Published September 7th 2004 by G.P. Putnam's Sons (first published 1978)

ISBN : 9780425199831

Author : Dick Francis

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# From Reader Review Trial Run for online ebook

## Gerald Sinstadt says

Has to be read these days as a period piece, set as it is in Russia before the break-up of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, anyone who visited Moscow at that time will recognise the authenticity of the portrait.

The background is equine - but eventing, not racing - and will appeal to those who like a good espionage yarn. Dick Francis enthusiasts will find the author's ability to keep the pages turning is well up to standard.

In common with several other authors recently encountered, Francis sadly fails to understand the meaning of the word Crescendo. It is not a climax, and it is simply wrong to suggest as much. It makes themany references here to Ravel's Bolero uncomfortably jarring.

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## Wsm says

Horse racing takes a back seat in this Dick Francis thriller. Most of the action takes place in Moscow during the days of the Soviet Union, just before the Olympic games of 1980. The familiar Francis ingredients of blackmail and violence are present. But for me, the most interesting part of the book was the authentic description of life behind the iron curtain. The city of Moscow is beautifully described, I could almost feel the chill of the Russian winter.

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## Robert Beveridge says

I'm not sure I believe it, but there it is: amazon has Trial Run listed as out of print. Amazing.

By now I should be inured to the pace of a Dick Francis novel, which is roughly equivalent to that of a marathon turf stakes at Ascot: in order to conserve energy, the horses start off slow, knowing they have a couple of thousand meters ahead of them; the pace picks up after you get round to the backstretch the first time, and the finish is furious. Francis spent too much time on the backs of nags at Royal Ascot to forget that, I guess. And thus you know that the first three or four chapters of a Francis mystery are likely to bog down. Stick with it; it's almost always worth the trip.

Randall Drew has been forced into retirement (like many of Francis' jockeys). In this case, it's because the jockey club has seen fit to outlaw riding with glasses, and contacts and Drew don't mix well. Drew, friend and lover to English royalty, is tabbed by the Prince to investigate shadowy claims of threats to a Royal who wants to ride in the 1980 Moscow olympics, threats that are backed up by the death of a German olympic rider, supposedly of a heart attack-- but foul play is suspected. Drew heads off to Moscow, and the fun begins.

If you know Francis, you already know whether you're going to buy this or not, I suspect. Francis mysteries are basically formulaic. Ex-jockey becomes amateur detective, ex-jockey discovers something nasty is happening at a track somewhere, ex-jockey investigates, ex-jockey gets into scrapes, ex-jockey gets out of scrapes, ex-jockey solves crime. It's good clean mindless fun, and this one has nothing about it that stands

out from the others, save its rather odd location (which seems quaint given the collapse of the cold war nowadays). Good if you like Francis, bad if you don't, and not a book I'd suggest as a jumping-off point if you don't know his work (try Odds Against or Enquiry instead, where Francis is on his home turf).

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### **David says**

A convoluted plotline and not up to the usual Dick Francis standard.

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### **Sue says**

Randall Drew was approached by the Prince to travel to Russia to inquire about Alyosha. The Prince's brother-in-law wanted very much to be part of the Equestrian team at the Olympics but it seemed that if he went, Alyosha would be waiting to cause trouble. Would Randall please go and interview this individual and get a sense of how things lay. Well, Randall went and found that others had already been asking questions. Can he find answers where others have failed?

Typical Dick Francis in terms of main character fighting to stay alive / ahead in order to figure out what's going on and provide the answers to those who sent him. The paperback copy I read was published in 1978 and it was the 1980 Olympics which were in Moscow. Was Francis trying to stir the pot a bit ahead of the Games? Don't know, but fun to consider.

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### **Shorty says**

An old school Cold War/KGB plot, set in 1978. Loved it, and finished it in two days. Must recommend.

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### **James Thane says**

This has to be, to my mind at least, the weakest of the novels written by Dick Francis. And, at least in the editions I own, it also has to win the prize for weirdest cover art.

The story opens when an amateur jockey and horse trainer named Randall Drew is approached by a member of the royal family with a special assignment. The prince's brother-in-law, a jockey named Johnny Farrington, would like to ride in the upcoming Olympic Games which are to be held in Moscow. But rumors are circulating that if Farrington should go to Russia, he might be entrapped in a scandal involving someone named Alyosha. The prince wants Drew to go to Moscow and nose around to see what the scandal might involve and determine whether Farrington or the royal family might be potentially embarrassed.

Apparently, there are no British agents already in the Soviet Union that might check out these rumors and so Drew reluctantly agrees to go. He gets to Moscow, meets some people, asks some questions, and gets beaten up a lot. The plot is preposterous and much more resembles a spy novel than a typical Dick Francis thriller. It strongly suggests that Francis wanted to take a trip to Moscow and write it off as a business expense, and thus attempted to get a book out of his vacation.

I had a great deal of difficulty following the plot and sorting out the characters after I was about a third of the way into the book, although this may well be because by then I had simply stopped caring about any of it and finished it only out of a sense of duty. A generous 2.5 stars, rounded up to three because I can't bring myself to give Dick Francis 2.5.

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## **E.P. says**

Although Dick Francis's novels all followed more or less the same basic formula, he also played with various subgenres, including the racing thriller (of course), the survival thriller ("Longshot"), the financial thriller ("Banker"), the travel thriller ("Smokescreen" and many others), the closed-train mystery ("One the Edge") and so on. "Trial Run" was his experimentation with the Cold War thriller.

Unsurprisingly, he does it well. There's a suitably horsey plot--a scandal surrounding a contender for the British team for the 1980 Olympics in Moscow--and plenty of thoroughly-researched action in late 1970s Moscow. Naturally, the book takes place during the winter, when Moscow is grim and gray. Funny how these things never take place during Russia's long sunny summer days, isn't it? Anyway, the tension builds nicely and lovers of classic Cold War spy thrillers will find plenty to enjoy. From my point of view there were a few questionable moments, such as the easy ability of the hero's student interpreter to give complex instructions involving verbs of motion (my intermediate Russian class laughed hollowly when I told them about him saying things like "Drive the car around the block and pick us up behind the hotel") combined with the fact that it takes everyone the longest time to figure out the true gender of the extremely common name Alyosha, but those are minor quibbles that one can expect to find in practically any book dealing with the former USSR (do I even need to mention the "Red Square" confusion in the book "Red Square"? In which the Malevich painting and the location are confused, even though they are COMPLETELY different words in Russian. Doesn't anyone check this stuff? But I digress, and in order to play the kind of "gotcha" that does no one any good). In short, another highly competent thriller from the master of competent thrillers, with a shiver-inducing Cold War setting.

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## **Contrarius says**

This book in the Francis series steepes itself in the atmosphere of Cold War Russia, with some interesting observations on how institutionalized fear can warp the character of a people. Unfortunately, the narrator for the audio version of this volume (Tony Britton) had no idea of how to do a Russian accent, so most of the characters ended up sounding more German or Scandinavian than Russian. This one was fun overall, with twists and turns to match the spy caper tone of the book and multiple references to other spy stories of the time. It is also relevant for today's readers, however, since the central mystery involves terrorism at a public event.

If anyone is wondering -- the drugs referenced in this book are real drugs, and they would have more-or-less the effects claimed in the book. However, no pathologist would confuse the true cause of death with heart attack these days.

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## **Harry says**

What is there to say about Dick Francis? As I think about all of his books (yes, this review covers all of his books, and yes I've read them all) I think about a moral ethical hero, steeped in intelligence and goodness embroiled in evil machinations within British horse racing society - either directly or indirectly. The heroes aren't always horse jockies, they can be film producers, or involve heroes engaged in peripheral professions that somehow always touch the horse racing world.

But more than that, Francis's heroes are rational human beings. The choices made are rational choices directed by a firm objective philosophy that belies all of Francis's novels. The dialogue is clear and touched with humor no matter the intensity of evil that the hero faces. The hero's thoughts reveal a vulnerability that is touching, while his actions are always based on doing the right thing to achieve justice.

Causing the reader to deeply care about the characters in a novel is a difficult thing to do. No such worries in a Francis novel. The point of view is first person, you are the main character as you read the story (usually the character of Mr. Douglas). The hero is personable, like able, non-violent but delivering swift justice with his mind rather than through physical means. This is not to say that violence is a stranger to our hero. Some of it staggering and often delivered by what we would think of normal persons living in British society.

You will come to love the world of Steeple Chase racing, you will grow a fondness for horses, stables, trainers and the people who live in that world. You will read the books, devouring one after the other and trust me Dick Francis has a lot of novels (over 40 by my last count).

There are several series woven into the fabric of Francis's work: notably the Sid Halley and Kit Fielding series.

Assessment: Dick Francis is one of my favorite writers. I read his books with a fierce hunger that remains insatiable and I mourn his death.

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## **Kathryn McCary says**

Francis's mystery novels always involved more than their racing background and the plot-vehicle mystery. This one is a little more intensely about something else than most.

An upper-class English rider (with myopia and asthma) is dragooned by minor nobility into going to Moscow, in advance of the 1980 Olympic Games, to investigate a rumor that one of the possible riders for the British horse team will encounter the mysterious Alyosha, to his cost, should he attend the Games. More than a decade before the fall of the Wall, with Glasnost and Perestroika still unimaginable, but with the memory of the Munich Olympics very much alive, and terrorism beginning to stretch its muscles as the replacement for the "red under the bed," Francis's thoughts about terrorism were in many ways prescient. Fascinating that, for this one book, his protagonist is of the upper classes, rather than the working class and upper-middle class. His observations about life under the Soviet regime one has to trust, as he was generally a careful observer and reporter; but not all of his conclusions about the ideology and the system ring entirely true. Still, they are very much of the period in which he wrote--and this is definitely an entertaining setting for them

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## Sarah says

I always think of Dick Francis novels as my palate cleansers, but that's not really fair to him. Sure, they're breezy, fun reads. They're also tightly plotted, and impeccably researched. His characters all have complex motivations and human flaws. Any writer could learn from him. This one wasn't my favorite: too much gay scare, women pretty much only present as dragon ladies or free-woman-of-the-seventies style lovers. Francis did a great job of getting me to envision a Moscow winter in the late 70s, though, and it was still a fun ride.

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## Algernon says

Dick Francis has been one of the most reliable writers of crime fiction for me, guaranteed to fill in a lazy Sunday afternoon with a pleasant and mildly thrilling mystery set around the horse racing world. I believe **Trial Run** is the first misfire in the 30+ novels of his I've read so far. I will try to keep my review short, as I really don't like to attack one of my favorite writers.

Trial Run is atypical for me in the Dick Francis catalogue for two reasons :

- his heroes are usually quiet types, with a pleasant, restrained demeanour, easy to like and in general favorable disposed towards the world and friendly with the people they meet. Randall Drew starts as the same type of protagonist, but once he sets foot on Russian soil, he turns into a hate machine for everything he sees around him - not a kind word to be said about Moscow, its people, its culture, its cuisine or its social life. Instead he goes on long and vituperative rants about how ugly and mean and oppressive life in the Soviet Union is - a specialist in only a couple of hours, criticizing the system and the people with acid abandon. Randall's anti-communist attacks colour every page of the novel, repeating and exaggerating all the usual claims that were the norm of the 1950's Western propaganda. None of the heroes I've met in previous Dick Francis books has been so politically involved and so vehement in passing judgement on a country and a culture he is visiting for the first time, not even the one in the book about South Africa, who didn't even touch on the subject of Apartheid. (there are a lot of Dick Francis books that are partly travelogues from around the world)

- the plot here is really forced, descending into some almost silly scenes, coincidences and revelations towards the end. The beginning is again rather standard: Randall Drew is a succesful jockey, forced off the track by the authorities because he wears glasses. He is gentry, has an interest in farming and he really, really likes the British Royal family. But from this premise we jump to him agreeing to go to Moscow as a private investigator to search for the mysterious Alyosha - a person who threatens the safety and the reputation of one royal connected member of the British horse rider delegation to Olympic Games. There's also the suspicious murder of a German rider at a trial event for qualifying at the said Olympic Games. Pretty soon, the plot takes a sharp turn from a murder mystery investigation and becomes a sort of Cold Era spy thriller, as Randall is followed everywhere by the KGB, his room is bugged, everybody is afraid to talk to him, and several attempts are made on his life. (view spoiler). There's also an almost total lack of horse riding time and horse related information, with the exception of a single ride for Randall and some suspect veterinary chemistry claims.

I was tempted to give up on the story more than once, but I really want to complete a read through of all Dick Francis novels in chronological order, so I'll try to jump into the next one soon, hoping for a return to form (he is usually one of the most predictable authors in terms of plot and character development).

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### **Marilyn says**

Dick Francis is always great for me...relaxing...interesting...love the British ways...mysterious...but not so much so that I can't put it down and go on to something else.

Randall Drew, a horseman who has recently been barred from racing because he wears glasses (of all things!), finds himself much needed by the prince to help resolve a confusion that has to do with the prince's brother-in-law, the Olympics, and the Russians. In Moscow, Randall sees the grimmer side of Russian life, while trying to save his own, and trying to find Alyosha...the apparent key to the confusion.

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### **Bekah (bmango) says**

So... the plot was good, and the writing was good, and it was a super quick read, but I just didn't care about the characters or what happened to them or how it was going to end... honestly really anything. Ah well, maybe it was the setting or the fact it was written 40 years ago. This book club should be interesting!

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