

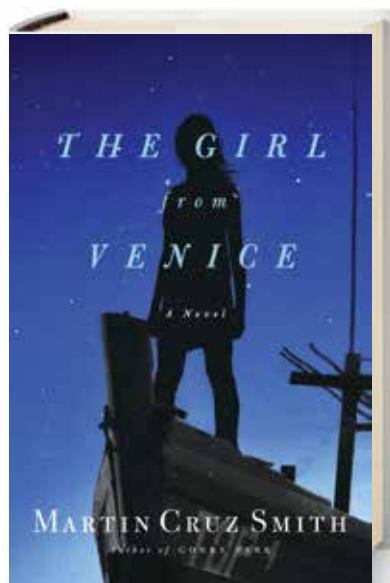
Eerie Canals

In author Martin Cruz Smith's latest thriller, World War II Venice is a living, breathing backdrop for a dark tale

by DAVID MASELLO

MOST VISITORS TO Venice are curious about where to buy birdseed for the pigeons in St. Mark's Square or which *vaporetto* goes to the Murano glass factory. On his recent visits to the city, novelist **Martin Cruz Smith** wanted to get lost in the marshes, find out whether a person could swim across the lagoon and learn the best locales to catch crabs. And rather than sit back and be serenaded by a gondolier, Smith asked to take the oars to propel himself and his wife along the scenic canals. "What I will say about that experience is that we did not exactly go into the water," he remarks.

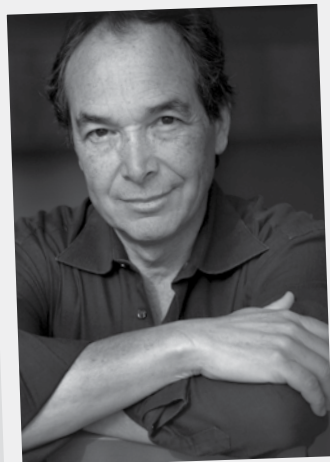
Smith, the blockbuster novelist who has written iconic international thrillers includ-



ing *Gorky Park* (made into a 1983 movie starring **William Hurt** and **Lee Marvin**), *Polar Star* and *Stalin's Ghost*, set out to make the city a character in itself in his newest book, *The Girl From Venice*. "Venice is very much the protagonist," says Smith, who took five two-week trips to the city from his home in San Rafael, Calif., while researching the book. "What people know about Venice is the Lido and St. Mark's, but they don't know about the lagoon or that its average depth is only 2 feet or that fishermen still live in villages on the narrow islet of Pellestrina."

In the novel, Smith imagines the occupied city at the end of World War II. The Third Reich is collapsing, Mussolini has embarked on a campaign to steal his nation's gold and the last of Italy's remaining Jewish population has either been rounded up or is on the run. When a fisherman discovers a young woman swimming the lagoon at night—later revealed to be a Jew trying to outrun her Nazi captors—the familiar Venice of romantic canals and Renaissance palazzi suddenly becomes something far darker.

Writing the book took Smith three years, with a daily routine that included distractions of watching an old movie (he admits to repeated viewings of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*), and playing Ping-Pong with his wife. "She says I cheat because I like to put a spin on the ball," he says with a laugh. As for his masterful spin on plots, his fans have no complaints. ■



SMITH: DOUG MENEZ; BOOK: MALERAPASO/GETTY IMAGES.