

Blood and sand

THRILLERS: ROBERT WINDER

BALLAD OF DOGS' BEACH by Jose Gardosa Pires (Dent, £4.50). It would be easy to call this celebrated murder story a cross between Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Agatha Christie. That might be a convenient way of suggesting the unusual mixture of straightforward suspense and scholarly, elliptical prose in this book, but the truth is, it's highly original and needs no invented forebears.

Sold as the "dossier of a murder," it's the story of the investigation which followed the discovery of a mutilated corpse in the sand dunes. Pires clings to a precise, factual tone, without ever being merely spare.

THE KREMLIN KISS by Brian Freemantle (Century, £9.95). There's only one way a hero with a name like Brinkman can behave, and that makes most of this East-West spy story quite predictable. Brinkman is pushing on two fronts: he wants the Soviet defector to come to him, rather than the Americans; and he wants the wife of his American equivalent to defect in his favour as well.

Plenty can go wrong with these plans, and plenty does. Freemantle sets it all up neatly and some of the passages in which Brinkman is within an ace of winning all the tricks are tense and clever.

HER MAJESTY'S HIT MAN by Allan Prior (Grafton, £9.95). Jay, the assassin-hero of this book, doesn't want to know who he's being sent to kill, or why, or what the risks are. He just wants money and the sense of pride that comes from believing that it's better, on balance, to murder one of theirs than it is to lose one of your own.

It's not the first time that a professional killer has been the hero of a thriller, but it's hard to remember one so slavish and compromised as this. What rescues him, in the sympathy

of the reader, is his desire to stop.

The inspiration for all this derives, apparently, from the real-life revelations of a British Intelligence contract killer; and while the treatment of such a



PRIOR: direct hit

subject in such a sensational form of fiction tends to make it less than credible. Prior succeeds in embedding a tense drama in an atmosphere of appropriate and crushing cynicism.

THE SISTERS by Robert Littell (Cape, £9.50). Frances and Carroll are old-style CIA agents, the Hinge and Brackett of international espionage, an office joke, amiable and eccentric plotters whose camp banter belies their very masculine ruthlessness.

The sisters, as Carroll and Francis are known in the Company, hatch an extremely elaborate scheme to snare a Soviet sleeper; but all they succeed in arousing are their own deepening nightmares.

Littell is as well versed in the cerebral, pretentious folklore of the CIA as anyone, so the complexity of the stratagems he discovers amongst the world's secret communities is often surprising and sometimes breathtaking.