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The Horseman's Song is an accomplished historical thriller set in Spain in 1937. This novel is confidently plotted and the tempo is judged to perfection, so the storytelling has a balanced feel to it. The intriguing premise of the novel centres around the disappearance of one of Spain's greatest poets, Federico García Lorca, believed to have been executed by Franco's supporters in Granada in 1936. Pastor builds her story on the fact that his body has never been found; perhaps his arrest in Grenada was not the occasion of his death, what if he was killed later? Elsewhere? Equally fascinating as exploiting this gap in historical knowledge is the investigation that Pastor gives us. In her fiction, two men, on either sides of the battle lines, are compelled for differing reasons to investigate the death of the poet. Despite the political gulf between the men, they initially circle each other, they are drawn towards cooperating in order to solve a heinous crime. As a leftist and an important playwright/poet García Lorca is an enemy of Franco's nationalists, the obvious suspects are therefore the fascists. However, García Lorca was a homosexual, despised by many because of it, the motive could be much more personal.

Martin Bora is a German officer fighting for Franco's Nationalists in Spain, although he reports to his Abwehr superior too. The lieutenant is part of the Nationalists Foreign Legion based in northern Spain. One side of El Bauarte are the nationalists, the other, the republicans (the loyalist forces). Bora discovers a body on an old goat path, the man has been shot in the nape of the neck, execution style, he is not wearing a uniform, there is no identification, just one photograph. There are a number of odd things that stand out for Bora, he reports the body to Colonel Serrano on his return to camp. The Colonel is ambivalent about the death until he identifies the victim from Bora's

description. He won't say who the man is but he instructs Bora to retrieve the body immediately.

American volunteer republican soldier Major Philip Walton was expecting his friend García Lorca last night, but he didn't show up. Walton organises a search only to find the poet's body, which they take for burial. Colonel Serrano think the republicans killed García Lorca to make them look bad, Walton assumes the nationalists did it. Serrano orders Bora to retrieve the body from the republicans (it has propaganda value for them). Bora is still unaware of the identity of the dead man until he meets with his Abwehr contact, Herr Cziffra, who explains who the man was. What starts out as an investigation to catch a killer becomes more personal for Bora as he becomes more familiar with the man's work. Of course, it is very personal for Walton too. Both men are aware of each other, they reluctantly accept they must work together...

Historical crime fiction set during the years of the Third Reich has become a populous and exciting sub-genre; Philip Kerr, Luke McCallin, Boris Pasternak and Rebecca Cantrell, for example. Ben Pastor got in early and her work still stands out for its originality. *The Horseman's Song* has a several features that make it a superior read. The historical setting is beautifully realised. The civil war, with all the peculiarities that entails; opposing soldiers visiting the same town and brothel but also the pain and sorrow of families torn apart by conflict. The complexities of factional divisions within the republican ranks and the interference by Russia and Germany. Bora is stationed at a remote of military outpost away from the main conflict, he comes as an invader, but gradually investigating the murder means that he comes to respect the cultural life of Spain and the poetry of García Lorca.

Bora and Walton can never have a meeting of minds on ideology which sets up an interesting dynamic, when they are forced to cooperate. They have to investigate in different ways initially, avoid each other, talk to different witnesses, or even the same witnesses but under different circumstances, they have different approaches and motives. They hate each other but grudgingly come to understand each other better, this relationship is fascinating.

The characters are rounded, Bora is unapologetic, a realist, he is young, susceptible to love and his love of the poet's work helps to make García Lorca a presence that overhangs the novel. He gradually comes to realise that there is personal danger here too, he is on a long list of possible suspects of the crime, but he is also on knife edge demonstrating sympathy for a degenerate leftist:

“There are lots of queers in Spain. It's typical of intellectuals everywhere to be sexual deviants. Lorca was a self-indulgent pervert.” [Herr Cziffra]

The Horseman's Song is a thoughtful thriller that plays with an historical mystery in a manner respectful of the known facts. Documents released in 2015 appear to verify the claim that the Grenada fascists killed García Lorca in 1936, but his body has never been found.

This is the sixth published novel in the Martin Bora series, it is set prior to the others. Pastor writes intelligent thrillers that help us to understand the past a bit better, which is quite an achievement.

Paul Burke 5/4

The Horseman's Song by Ben Pastor

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