

## Thinking about books

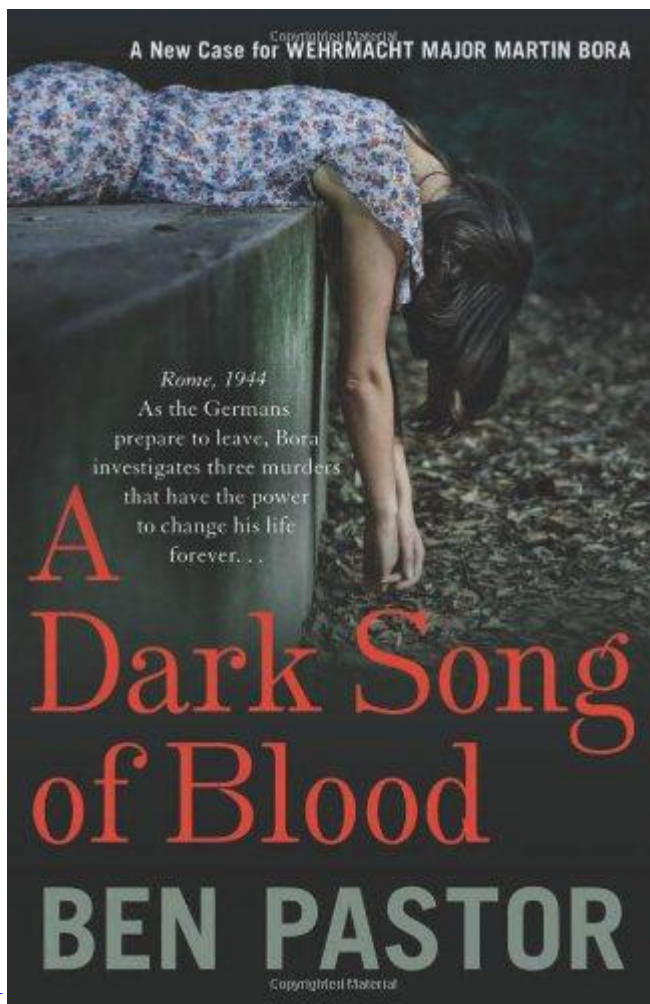
An editor and writer thinks about recent books, films and television shows — particularly in the science fiction, fantasy, horror and mystery genres

### A DARK SONG OF BLOOD

by Ben Pastor

*April 25, 2014*

*David Marshall*



[book](#)

Here we find ourselves pitched into an increasingly confident area of historical mystery. The conventional mystery or thriller writer picks a time of relative calm as the setting. This leaves the history as contextual background information, with the foreground free for the hero to investigate the wrongdoing. But some authors prefer times of great conflict as the setting, and the period just before, during, and after World War II is proving a fruitful area for authors to explore. J. Robert Janes has a long-running series set in Occupied France featuring Hermann Kohler of the Gestapo and Jean-Louis St-Cyr of the French *Sûreté*. The interest, of course, lies in the question of whether St-Cyr is a collaborator and therefore worthy of contempt, or does he earn some latitude because he pursues wrongdoers regardless of nationality or status? Philip Kerr also has a long-running series featuring Bernie Gunther, a homicide detective. The first book starts in 1936 at the time of the Olympics, then moves forward to 1938 with him given the temporary rank of *Kriminalkommissar* in Heydrich's state Security Service, and later moves into the war years and the period immediate afterwards. Luke McCallin has his second book featuring Captain Gregor Reinhardt coming out later this year and J Sydney Bounds has one book set in post-war Nuremberg, see *Ruin Value*.

*A Dark Song of Blood* by Ben Pastor (Bitter Lemon Press, 2014) is the third book in the series featuring Martin von Bora, an officer in the *Wehrmacht* who continues to work with Italian police inspector Sandro Guildi (in the first book, Bora is teamed with Father John Malecki, a Polish-American priest working directly for the Vatican). The consistent themes through the three books are dark and complex. First in Poland and then the two remaining books in Italy, we're required to think about how different groups form and maintain alliances. Standing slightly outside the more conventional political power structure, there's the overarching relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Third Reich. As part of the plan to deChristianise Germany, catholics had been specifically targeted which led to the increasing marginalisation of catholics during the 1930s. However, the relationship with the Papal See was complicated when Italy formally joined the Axis. As Germany began

its expansion across national borders, it immediately found itself having to hold areas still deeply religious. As if invasion was not hard enough for the occupied people to stomach, it would further antagonise locals if priests were arrested and the people were prevented from worship.



*Ben Pastor*

Much of this book is taken up with Germany's difficulty in reconciling its presence in Italy with the entrenched power of the Pope and his cardinals. Bora is a useful honest broker because he's a trusted catholic whose university study was guided by a man now serving as a cardinal. This book is set in 1944 as the Allies are pressing their advance through Italy towards Rome. So the alliance with the Italian Fascists is failing as patriotic fervour dims in line with military failures. The relationship between the *Wehrmacht* and the SS is also strained as the practice of retaliating for German deaths by executing multiples of local citizens is encouraging the emergence of increasingly confident resistance fighters. Final efforts to deport Jews and others deemed socially undesirable are also producing real political disagreements between the different groups. It would be a serious understatement to call this a time of danger and uncertainty. And Ben Pastor does not make the mistake of leaving these events in the background. In many senses, this is a work of military fiction or a political thriller

which just happens to feature an army officer who gets sucked into investigating politically sensitive deaths.

The initial hook for the investigators is the death of Magda Reiner who worked in the German Embassy as a secretary. She was found dead on the pavement outside her apartment block. It could have been suicide, but the Roman Chief of Police prefers that a political opponent be guilty of her murder. Much later there's what may be a murder-suicide with a society lady well-known for her charitable works found dead in bed with an elderly cardinal. Obviously all three deaths are sensitive albeit for different reasons. As a serving officer, Bora is already deeply committed to defending what Germany holds in Italy. The investigations must therefore be fitted around his military duties. He's also conscious of the fact that Germany will lose this fight and be forced out of Rome. If Guildi is positively involved in this investigation, he may be damned when the Allies take over and the locals can take their revenge against known collaborators. Independently, Guildi finds himself walking a narrow line through the infighting between the Italian factions as the Communists begin to take a more active role. In the end he will be faced with the difficult decision of whether to risk staying in Rome as the Allies arrive, or going north with the partisans.

*A Dark Song of Blood* is a powerful novel about lives under pressure. With every individual wondering whether he or she will be able to survive, it falls to the few with a conscience and a sense of honour to defy the prevailing power structures and do what they believe to be right. Bora has been emotionally scared and physically damaged. He's no longer fit for active duty on the front line and so finds himself fighting a different type of war both with himself and many of those around him. As the novel progresses, he proves to be a proactive survivor, i.e. once he realises he's falling into the pit, he decides to fall with as much force as possible and hope to produce at least one small change for the better before he dies. The outcome for Rome as a city is a matter for history. The different outcomes for Bora and Guildi are completely fascinating, making this a genuinely impressive novel.