

# Victoria Weisfeld

Stories about the perils of life and the mysteries of travel

## \*\*\*\*THE HORSEMAN'S SONG

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By Ben Pastor – This book is one of Ben Pastor's six detective novels featuring German intelligence officer Martin Bora and a prequel to novels covering Bora's activities during the Second World War.

As the book opens, it's summer 1937, in the midst of the Spanish Civil War. Two tiny encampments located high in the rocky sierras of Aragon overlook a valley, a cane-lined brook, and the small town of Teruel. Bora heads one of these camps, comprising about seven Nationalists; the other, near enough for occasional sniper-fire, is similarly sized and led by American volunteer Philip Walton. Walton is a World War I veteran, a couple of decades older than Bora, and has joined the Republican side less because of conviction and more because he can't think of anything better to do.

The men in both camps are a ragtag bunch and more prone to follow their own inclinations than any official orders. Neither unit is interested in attacking the other, preferring to save their energies for a big battle rumored to be coming soon. The proximity of these two encampments is illustrated by the fact that both Bora and Walton both visit the same prostitute high on the mountaintop. For Bora, the encounters with this young woman are life-changing; for Walton, they're a painful reminder he's aging. Yet they inspire destructive sexual jealousy.

Bora finds the body of a stranger shot in the head on the road below his encampment and wonders how this stranger ended up there. Walton also knows about the corpse, plus he knows who the man is: his friend Federico García Lorca (pictured), the revered poet and playwright, homosexual, and staunch Republican. Walton and his men bury García Lorca's partway up the mountain; Bora's scouts find the grave, remove the body, and bury it elsewhere. The official story—in the novel as well as in real life—is that García Lorca was murdered in 1936 outside Granada. The authorities on both sides would prefer that Bora and Walton let the official story stand unquestioned.

Separately, they conduct a somewhat clandestine investigation of the events of the fatal night and the motives of various people who might have been involved. It's slow going, because Walton and Bora are mostly otherwise engaged. The times themselves dampen progress further. If Bora wants to send a message to Teruel, someone has to get on a donkey and take it. A response won't arrive for hours. If Walton wants to investigate an event in the village of Castellar, he must climb the mountain to do so. The overall impression is of a hostile environment that's dusty and hot, hot, hot. Author Pastor does an admirable job evoking the landscape, the conditions, and the way things got done (or not) eight decades ago.

With their murder investigations limping along, there is ample opportunity for exploring the characters of both Walton and Bora, as well as several of their underlings. Pastor's writing style is dense and full of psychological insight. Her short scenes feel

almost like an hour-by-hour bulletin on camp activities. And, of course, writing about García Lorca gives the opportunity for pithy epigrams from his wonderful poems.

Ben Pastor is the pseudonym for Maria Verbena Volpi. Born in Rome, she holds dual citizenship in Italy and the United States. Though Martin Bora is fictional, he was inspired by Claus von Stauffenberg, best known for his leading role in the July 1944 attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler.