

CrimeChronicles

BEN PASTOR: A DARK SONG OF BLOOD.

Bitter Lemon Press £8.99.

'You did none of those things for me. They were expedient.'

'Right now everything is.'

No prizes for guessing that we might be listening to two people caught in a war. The place to be is somewhere else. Martin Bora is the German officer investigating the murder of a woman in Rome at the end of the Second World War. For those who are curious as to how decent Germans endured Nazism, the book is perfect. Major Bora is neither a hero nor a villain. He is a soldier who lost a hand and he is physically and mentally scarred. But, though tainted and haunted, he is not guilt wrecked. He is not the friendly, familiar appeaser we see in war movies. Nor is Bora complicit in evil. His Italian co-investigator, Guidi, has similar merit. The two men are superior to the self-serving around them because they, at least, think about the consequences of what they have to do.

Both men want to see out their lives without committing personal atrocities but even this modest ambition will make them feel alone.

As in the great British movie, *The Third Man*, war and honour demands allegiances but, because none of the allegiances are honourable, survival requires alliances – sexual, political and occupational. *A Dark Song Of Blood* evokes the complicated morality of Graham Green continually. As in *The Third Man*, our main interest is not the puzzle. This is a story of people barely holding themselves together. There is, though, a surprise that is especially satisfying because it makes obvious sense when it happens. Following the weary investigators through their obstacle-laden search is enjoyable but how the characters will survive and discovering who will prevail is what makes the book such a satisfying read. We are back in sorely missed *Greenland*, which is why the story inevitably includes Vatican officials, whose morality and spirituality has long been lost to bureaucracy.

Normal does exist during a war but in only the memory. This sense that something better can actually exist as a dark shadow is caught well in the scenes between Bora and the wife who has decided to abandon him. It mirrors the distant combat that Bora believes might help him recapture worthwhile purpose. Indeed, Bora reveals himself as a German equivalent of Christopher Tietjens. Ford Madox Ford would have approved of *A Dark Song Of Blood*. As Madox Ford understood, war gives opportunism a bad name. And you should also be wary of aspiration.

Ben Pastor writes well. She is able to write about combat and avoid the clichés. Daily work, survival, grind, war and religion are mixed effectively. Once nothing is certain everything is a mystery, and, again like *The Third Man*, the characters are unknown to each other and even themselves. The distribution of power changes constantly, and, in a world where no one can be trusted, everyone appears to be an imposter. Alliances are formed but none offer comfort and this is affirmed by the complex conclusion.

Howard Jackson