

## A Dark Song of Blood!

Written by Steve Donoghue on April 21, 2014

Our book today is Ben Pastor's *A Dark Song of Blood*, her third murder mystery starring Nazi Wehrmacht officer Martin Bora (the first two were *Lumen* and *Liar Moon*). The book is out now in a very sturdy paperback from Bitter Lemon Press, and it makes for a very absorbing – although very dark – reading experience.

It's a tour through Dante's Hell, only with no Virgil as a guide and every anguished soul a suspect



in the death of every other anguished soul. The setting is Rome in the early months of 1944, with Nazi control over the city slipping a bit more every day, with Italian partisan attacks growing in scope and effectiveness, and it's into this tense and attenuated atmosphere that we follow our hero, the aristocratic Bora, wounded and doubting everything, as he begins to investigate the death of German Embassy Secretary Magda Reiner. The case brings the grim and taciturn Martin Bora into an uneasy alliance with Italian police inspector Sandro Guildi, and as suspicions start to swirl around Fascist official Ras Merlo, both men are dragged into a case that's being watched with deeply conflicted interest by all the powers in the city, most certainly including the Church, which has always had a problematic relationship with their Fascist overlords. A conversation Bora has with crusty old Cardinal Borromeo shows Pastor's extremely honed ability to let spikey tensions ripple underneath the surface:

"I believe I'm telling the cardinal nothing new [Bora says] if I assure him that the German Army is not pleased with any interim government."

“You’d rather have the city to yourselves?”

“We’d rather have no interference from PAI and what else remains of Fascist police units.”

“That’s neither here nor there. We expect you to curb the zeal of the Blackshirts left in town – even though I’m a Fascist of sorts myself. The Church was Fascist long before *Il Duce* planned his ‘March on Rome’. We marched on it in AD 64 with Peter and Paul at the lead.” Borromeo rang a bell on his desk. At the timid appearance of a cleric on the threshold, he merely gestured. Shortly thereafter, a tray with a coffee urn and cups was brought in. “I don’t trust people who don’t like espresso.” He ensured that Bora should accept the drink. “Your ambassador gets along with us – why shouldn’t the army?”

“The army is not involved in politics, Cardinal.”

“But the SS is. The Gestapo is. What you’re telling me is that you Germans will not curb any excesses by our police forces, or yours.”

One of the pleasures of mystery fiction is the interplay of investigation and authority (indeed, an old friend of mine, a dedicated mystery reader, often used to say the most interesting part of any murder investigation was “the fellow who can call it off”), and that pleasure is at its strongest in these Martin Bora mysteries, since the authority backing him is not only corrupt itself but hated by him – and in this latest volume, even that dark authority is frittering away. Bora and Guidi must doggedly pursue their complicating murder investigation against the indifference of all parties involved – after all, how important could a single murder be when weighed against whole societies trembling on the brink of destruction? It serves to bring the whole question of sleuthing into almost bitter relief.

Pastor’s novels are all so leanly intelligent that they’re a joy to re-read (she knows exactly how to temper the bleak drive of her narratives with quieter moments; “By the cessation of quick clouds in front of Bora’s face, he might be holding his breath,” she tells us at one point, “In fact, he said nothing whatever. Guidi looked down the dark, wide emptiness of the street. He smelled the night air, bitter and already green”), and a good deal of that joy in this case comes from the fact that our hero is much more alone than he himself would like to be. The implied comforts of the police procedural are absent from these books – the institutional powers are too worried about their own tomorrow to care very much about any single murder victim’s yesterday, which sharpens all the

more our appreciation of the man who does worry. I don't know much about Bitter Lemon Press, but I can't recommend these books strongly enough.