

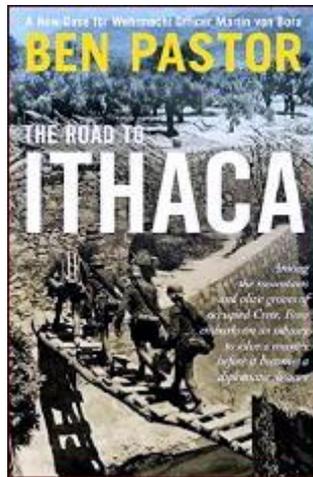
MYSTERY FILE

BEN PASTOR – THE ROAD TO ITHACA

Martin Bora #5.

Bitter Lemon Press; trade paperback, March 2017.

REVIEWED BY DAVID VINEYARD



It is May 1941 as Wehrmacht Captain Martin Bora, age twenty-seven, of the Abwehr, German military intelligence, is sent to Crete to solve a murder that could embarrass the Reich and lead to a major diplomatic disaster. A representative of the Red Cross close to SS chief Heinrich Himmler has been killed during an inspection, and Bora is under intense pressure to solve the crime quickly, and to provide a scapegoat, a politically satisfactory one.

That is only the surface though. Far more dangerous undercurrents wait for him at every turn.

This is the fifth novel in the series by Ben Pastor, a woman incidentally, who immigrated from Italy and who became an American when she moved to Texas. She

was a professor in Illinois, Ohio, and Vermont, and now spends half her time in her native Italy according to her bio.

The Bora novels are intensely researched and carefully plotted mysteries with a hero who carries a forbidden copy of James Joyce Ulysses in his pocket, and frequently is at odds with the wishes and orders of his superiors and his own prickly conscience.

In *The Road to Ithaca* he is sent to the mountains of Crete, where at first it looks as if the crime was friendly fire from a unit of trigger happy German paratroopers accused of a war crime, but as Bora looks deeper he is drawn into increasingly dangerous territory among local bandits and resistance fighters and his own morality in a world of double crosses, multiple identities, revenge, and double agents.

Pastor brings in big issues such as where does a man's duty to his country and to himself take him, and how much moral ambiguity can a man allow before he himself is tainted? She writes vividly, mastering suspense while asking deeper questions, her characters drawn in subtle shades of gray for the most part, but with a pervasive sense of the evil at the core of the Nazi power structure, and how it corrupted even the best of men.

There are also well-drawn characters from history such as Himmler, and in this work Erskine Caldwell and his wife Margaret Bourke-White, correspondents in Moscow where Bora is with the German Embassy as the novel opens.

Like the private eye of mystery fiction Bora often finds himself a lone wary knight alone in a quest for relative truth, a Philip Marlowe with echoes of Maigret trying to maintain sanity in a world gone mad.

Here he is facing death in a Cretan brothel:

Dark, dark, smell, sounds. Suspended, instantaneous loneliness. The trappings and locus of his death manifested themselves to Bora, who'd imagined them very

differently when he was talking to Kostaridis (the local Police chief), though he had said it didn't matter where he'd die. This was where it would happen.

That's just a small sample of how well written this book is. Pastor does indulge in a bit of foreshadowing, letting us know a tragic event looms in Bora's future, that I could personally have done without, but it is a small caveat and not overdone or overly detrimental.

I'll certainly be looking for the first four books in the series from an author who echoes writers like Graham Greene, Eric Ambler, Alan Furst, Hans Helmut Kirst, and Philip Kerr's Bernie Gunther novels while creating a milieu and a hero both original and classic.