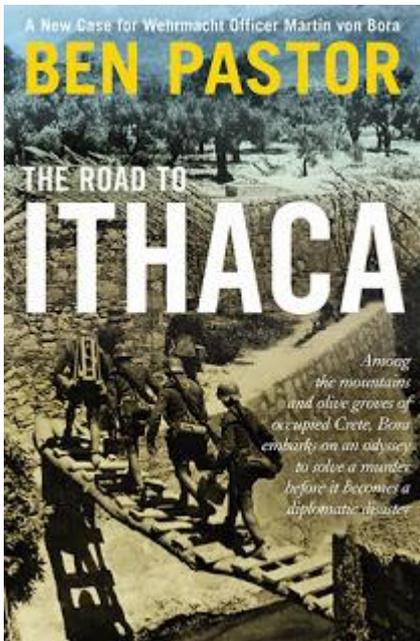


Review of The Road to Ithaca by Ben Pastor

(Bitter Lemon Press, 2017)



May 1941. Bora is part of the German embassy staff in Moscow, but is sent to Crete to secure sixty crates of Cretan wine for Beria. The island has only just been seized by German paratroopers and is still in post-invasion turmoil. Upon arriving he is assigned the task of investigating an accusation by a British officer of the cold-blooded murder of a German archaeologist connected to Himmler and his household by the paratroopers. Neither the soldiers or the locals are inclined to aid his investigation, but Bora is a persistent detective prepared to antagonise his own side to discover the truth. The English soldier who witnessed the atrocity and took photographs has fled captivity to the Cretan highlands, so Bora treks into enemy territory guided by a reluctant American woman to try and gather eye-witness testimony.

The Road to Ithaca is the fifth of the Martin Bora series to be translated into English (and tenth in full series published in Italian). The five are all set during World War Two, but are not told sequentially. In this outing, it is May 1941 and Bora is asked to examine a possible war crime in Crete just after its invasion. He has some knowledge of the island, having vacationed there as a child, and is familiar with Greek mythology and stories, such as Ulysses. Indeed, Ulysses permeates the book in two sense: first, he is carrying a copy of the book by James Joyce; second, he keeps recalling bits of the ancient tale as he wanders on his quest and braves various challenges. My sense was that my enjoyment of the tale would have been heightened if I'd been familiar with both stories. As it was, the story has much to like, including the stoic anti-Nazi, but by-the-book military man, Martin Bora, the detailed and somewhat convoluted plot, and the historical and geographical contextualisation with respect to Crete post-invasion, its longer history and archaeology, and its mythology. In the background are themes of class, politics, history and culture. The narrative is rather dense, with lots of detail, and is partially told through Bora's diary entries. The result is a clever, multi-layered story that is as much an in-depth study of Bora as it is about solving a mass murder and wider geopolitical events.

Rob Kitchin