

Tin Sky

Written by Ben Pastor

Review written by Mike Ripley

As 'The Ripster', Mike Ripley writes the gossip column Getting Away With Murder for Shots. Mr. Campion's Fox, now out from Severn House, is his twenty-first book.



Bitter Lemon Press

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It is May 1943 and having survived the horrors of Stalingrad, Major Martin von Bora is stationed in Merefa, a suburb of Kharkov in German-occupied Ukraine where he is attempting to raise a cavalry regiment to harass the advancing Russians. In the nearby woods of *Krasny Yar*, bodies are being unearthed from previous massacres. Are they German, Ukrainian or 'missing' Jews? The local villagers and their priest are convinced something unholy has happened there and that the place is cursed but for Martin von Bora: *there was no more a devil in the woods than there was real hope of winning this war, even though as a Catholic and a German officer Bora believed both in the devil and in the final victory.*

Before he can seriously investigate what actually went on in *Krasny Yar*, Bora has to devote himself to Intelligence matters, interrogating one captured Russian general and taking charge of a second, who has spectacularly defected to the Germans in a new model Soviet tank. The captured general dies suddenly of a suspected heart attack and the defecting general – a tactical genius nicknamed ‘Khan’ – is abducted from Bora’s care by the SS and Gestapo and in short order he is reported poisoned and dead, his body missing.

It would be tempting to say that Martin Bora’s life was about to become complicated, but then it already was. Bora is an aristocrat with a privileged upbringing, a soldier of the old school and a Catholic devoted to a beautiful wife he is drifting apart from, though he may not yet fully recognise this. In a world where the inmates really have taken over the asylum – and laid it waste – Bora is a noble, yet vulnerable warrior beset on all sides by ignoble enemies, many of them wearing the same uniform. As one embittered and jealous army doctor rants at him: “You are used to people dotting on you, I can tell. Your looks; your smile. It annoys me that you count on it”.

How Bora survives the pressures of fighting a war his conscience objects to in support of a regime which destroys and denigrates everything he was brought up to believe in, is at the heart of this superb series which (when they are all finally published in the UK) will chart Bora’s career from the Spanish Civil War through the invasion of Poland, the Russian campaign and then to Italy as the war grinds to its inevitable end.

Ben (Verbena) Pastor has created a character that it is possible to cheer for (as when, in *Tin Sky*, he instinctively helps Russian women escape an SS round-up), weep for and fear for, as this is a man too often too brave for his own good. The background historical detail of army life, organization and infighting, is incredibly impressive and superbly woven into the story, but Pastor’s novels are far more than military memoirs. As well as being superb, pacy thrillers they are novels of heart and soul, with a hero who refuses to believe life is cheap despite the awful evidence all around him.