

Book Review: Deeper into Bora's war: 'Liar Moon' by Ben Pastor

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In "Lumen," her first mystery novel, Norwich University professor of graduate studies Ben Pastor introduced us to Martin Bora, a young idealistic captain in Hitler's army stationed in Prague in 1939. In Pastor's new novel, "Liar Moon," we meet Bora again over three years later. He is now a major, and much more of a realist. He no longer believes, for instance, that it will do any good to report military human rights abuses as he did in Pastor's earlier book.

In September 1943 the war drags on. Bora, for reasons we suspect have to do with not being enthusiastic enough about Hitler's ideas, and his habit of sidestepping orders to murder innocent civilians, has been posted to the relative backwater of Lago, Italy. Lago is a small town, as Pastor describes it, "lost in the fields of the Veneto region."

Heading into the bleak Italian winter, Bora is recovering from the loss of his left hand and a knee full of shrapnel from an ambush on his car by Italian partisans. His younger brother, a pilot, has also died in the war. The author, by describing Bora's staunch, excessive refusal to give voice to the unbearable pain of doctors exploring his wounds at the very beginning of "Liar Moon," establishes just how much Bora has changed in three years.

He is both more weary and more rigid, his strong will perhaps one of the only internal resources he has left. Benedikta, his perfectly blond, Aryan, and extremely selfish wife, is still more interested in her horses than in her husband. She has not written to Martin since his injury.

Because a prominent citizen in nearby Verona has been murdered, Major Bora is forced into contact with the local police. Police Inspector Sandro Guidi, a lanky, sandy-haired Italian who still lives with the mother who knitted the long scarf he wraps around his neck against the cold, is in some ways a foil to Bora.

While Bora seems to be completely stoic and unsympathetic to those involved in the local drama, Guidi wears his feelings clearly on his face. He, like Bora, seems to fall in love with the wrong woman. In Guidi's case it is a beautiful grieving widow who also happens to be a murder suspect.

But Guidi is no buffoon with his mouth hanging open. In spite of the comic quality of his relationship with his overbearing mother whom I somehow came to picture eternally gesturing with a soup ladle, there is something sad and deeply lonely about Guidi. And he still keeps his eyes open in spite of his emotions and desires. At least he doesn't try to fool himself, like Bora seems to, by thinking that his intellect is completely in control.

As in "Lumen," Pastor's first Martin Bora novel, it is the relationship between Bora and his locally assigned working partner in solving the murder that generates most of the heat in the novel. Bora's purposefully unreadable countenance and his constant bragging about the hardships he endured in Russia make him insufferable, both to us and to Guidi.

But though both Bora and Guidi each are encapsulated in their own private emotions, they have much in common. Bora's stone face covers a multitude of grief and loneliness as well. As he leaves the house of a midwife after interrogating her regarding an abortion related to the murdered man: "He wanted to think, 'I'm a childless man, what's any of this to me?' But talk of abortion and death by abortion unnerved the soldier in him, because of the fragility of a soldier's life. ... Bora sighed, feeling lonely. He was a soldier, and a childless man."

Similarly, when Guidi finds a mysterious man shot to death with a moldy, much-nibbled piece of bread in his pocket: “These were the times when he grew tired of his sad profession, and became unwilling to talk. Behind him the sun had nearly completed its low arc, and had escaped a long bank of clouds enough to draw enormously long shadows under everything that stood.” These long shadows of premonition and grief are much in evidence in Pastor’s latest story.

For, though her human characters are etched realistically and painfully, war is the main character here. It magnifies and confuses everything. All gaps widen: between rich and poor, husband and wife, civilian and soldier, government and governed. In the end, it could be said that the murder ostensibly wanting solution is a rather insignificant and meaningless one, paling next to the many other war deaths that occur during the story.

But that is exactly Pastor’s point, and why, I suspect, she tells her stories in the first place. By setting her murder mysteries in the middle of the larger murder called war, she reminds us of several cruel ironies. One, that in the middle of wholesale slaughter, the death of an immoral, self-indulgent civilian is chosen for investigation and solution. And another, that Major Bora, a decent human being who happened to be born in Germany at a certain time, must scheme to save Jewish lives, and hide this very decency behind a cold uncaring mask.

Like a master painter, Pastor uses the landscape to reflect the inner state of her characters. Bora, still trying to get used to the loss of his left hand, drives through the countryside: “At the edge of the fields, much-pruned trees stood guard like wounded bodies, ready to bud again in the spring from their mutilated branches.” And the consequences of their solution of the murder arc over both Guidi and Bora as they head into the investigation’s final phase: “... the countryside appeared sunken in blue dimness. An early, waxing moon had risen ahead of them like a scythe about to reap stars in the circle of its wide halo.”

Pastor has given us another deeply moral tale, beautifully told.

“Liar Moon,” by Ben Pastor (Van Neste Books, 207 pp. Paper, \$18).