

The Bookbag

LIAR MOON

Ben Pastor



Near Verona, northern Italy, autumn 1943: Captain Martin Bora is a German military policeman, known to have conducted previous murder investigations. He is asked to look into the death of one Vittorio Lisi, a prominent local fascist who was run over in his wheelchair on his own estate by a car. The number one suspect is his widow Claretta.

Liar Moon is the second book in this series, following on from Lumen which was set in Poland in 1939, but it is not essential to have read the first. There are references to his time in Poland and even to the case there, but there are no spoilers. Curiously, there are also references to his time in Spain and Russia, and I wondered if the author plans to set future Bora books there, probably going back in time a little.

Bitter Lemon Press specialises in publishing translated crime fiction from around Europe and beyond. However, Ben Pastor is an Italian woman who lived for over 30 years in the US and her novels are originally written in English. I enjoy crime fiction from other countries but I did like the fact that I could read about a different setting without having to wonder whether the translation fully reflected the original.

In Liar Moon, as in the predecessor, Pastor moves into telling her story without a lot of explanation of the historical background, which is quite complicated, and I felt a need to research online to properly understand the story and the setting (as I did with Lumen) – in 1943 a new Italian government deposed Mussolini and switched sides to join with the Allies instead of fighting with Germany. The Germans had responded by invading and taking control of northern Italy, and were keen to keep the trust of their Fascist supporters there, despite significant differences of policy and emphasis over issues such as the treatment of Jewish people in Italy.

The characters in this book are more interesting than the plot, especially Martin Bora himself. Pastor has created a hero who is a representative of an evil regime, yet he is in his way a human being, who has principles but must compromise them in his day to day work. This time Pastor has created a second central detective character, Sandro Guidi, and much of the story is told from his point of view, including his perceptions of Bora, a man he finds difficult to work out. In the context of the politics at this time in Italy's history, it is to be an uneasy working relationship.

Most of the story is taken up with a police procedural investigation, in which Bora and Guidi travel round interviewing a series of witnesses, although matters are complicated by the atmosphere of understandable suspicion in which they must work, as everyone's political loyalty is under scrutiny.

This is an intriguing, thought provoking mystery, with a little more effort needed to understand the setting and follow the story than in some crime fiction. The two Martin Bora novels are reprints of books published some years ago, but I understand that the author plans to write more books in the series, and I look forward to seeing where Bora ends up next.

Luci Davin