

TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

Martin Bora, a Wehrmacht Major, and Sandro Guidi, a local police inspector, make an original duo in this dark story set near Verona in German-occupied northern Italy during late 1943. Ben Pastor, an Italian who was a professor for many years in the United States, uses to good effect a background of Fascist collaborators and Communist partisans for her second crime novel featuring Bora as her detective.

The point about the cultivated, aristocratic Bora is that he is an intellectual, haunted by his own demons. “I am a soldier”, he says, “and don’t dabble in politics.” He frets about his childless wife at home and thinks there is a distinction between killing the enemy and murdering Jewish children, as he has witnessed in Russia. Bora is scathing about Italians who “confuse firmness with cruelty”, and bears with absurd stoicism the pain from his recent war wounds, including the loss of his left hand in a skirmish with partisans. Bora and Guidi are brought together to investigate the murder of Lisi, a rich Fascist supporter. The soft-hearted bachelor Guidi cannot understand either Bora’s attitudes or his courage. He follows his senses, especially where Clara, Lisi’s attractive young wife is concerned.

Pastor handles her themes with considerable skill. Personal and public quarrels are played out with the Americans at Salerno and confused civilians fleeing to their shelters during air raids. Rich men seduce young girls; women die of botched abortions—and who is to know whether a witness slips and falls beneath a tram or is pushed? Especially nasty is the top Italian Fascist, juggling money, power and mistresses. When he gives Bora “a hateful look”, Pastor’s use of the word “hateful” seems just right. She makes her reader understand Bora, the obedient but troubled German officer, and the differing attitude of Italians towards their German allies. In addition, she gives a memorable comic portrait of Guidi’s doting mother. Banished to the kitchen while her son talks with the Major, she shells peas “with the offended dignity of the excluded.”

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