

Action, Intrigue, Historical Accuracy – Aelius Back With a Vengeance!

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By

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Ben Pastor sets new standards of excellence for historical-mystery writing with “The Fire Waker”, featuring the exploits of Roman army officer/historian/sleuth Aelius Spartianus.

This is the second Spartianus murder mystery and every bit as good as the first. Last time, in “The Water Thief”, Spartianus searched for the Lost Tomb of Antinous while at the same time stumbling onto a dire plot that threatened to topple the empire at the turn of the 4th Century AD. This time, Spartianus is on the trail of a provincial brick mason who was miraculously raised from the dead by a Christian mystic, only to die a second time under suspicious circumstances. Spartianus's hunt for the murderer leads him into a vipers nest of religious fanatics and political intrigue between rivals vying to become emperor.

Pastor is well known for her Martin Bora novels set in Nazi-occupied Europe, and with her Spartianus books Pastor shows she is just as much at home with the Legions in Ancient Rome. She is indeed a master at the craft of writing a mystery that is more than a mystery and a historical novel that is more than a historical novel. In fact, her books defy easy categories. The murder mystery plot, while riveting, is only part of the fun of reading this book. She has an incredible eye for detail and for precise time and place. Each event corresponds to a calendar date. Each setting is an authentic place. When Pastor describes a rain cloud on the horizon, you half-suspect she consulted an ancient almanac to verify the weather on that day in the year 304 in the vicinity of ancient Mediolanum (Milan).

Above all, her characters are vividly drawn and fully complex human beings. Her dialogue is superb. As in her Bora novels, the characters in the Spartianus books are never one-dimensional, never all-good or all evil, never entirely what they appear to be on the surface -- just like all of us. Spartianus is a tolerably decent and honorable man who finds himself in perfectly intolerable situations. And as in all her novels, even the minor characters are fleshed out. There are always a couple of intriguing eccentrics. In “The Water Thief” there was the outrageous tranny whore Cleopatra Junior. And in “The Fire Waker”, we have the nymphomaniac Helena who uses the wiles of her body in a bid to bring her son Constantine to the throne. The reader knows, of course, that the man-hungry, sluttish Helena will one day be honored as a Christian saint.

Such tongue-in-cheek irony is a staple of Pastor's fiction. Saints and demons often occupy the same

ambiguous flesh in her novels. And speaking of ambiguous hero/villains, it is good to see wisecracking Baruch ben Matthias back again as the itinerant Jewish merchant/brigand who is variously Spartianus's best ally or worst foe -- with Spartianus never quite knowing which at any given moment. We also meet Spartianus' family and get to know his cold-hearted father, his perfectly dreadful in-laws and his long-suffering mother, who finally has an opportunity to speak for herself once her domineering husband dies.

Lots of action. Lots of intrigue. A good mystery. Historical accuracy. Powerful human emotions. Above all, gifted prose that moves the plot right along. "The Fire Waker" has it all.