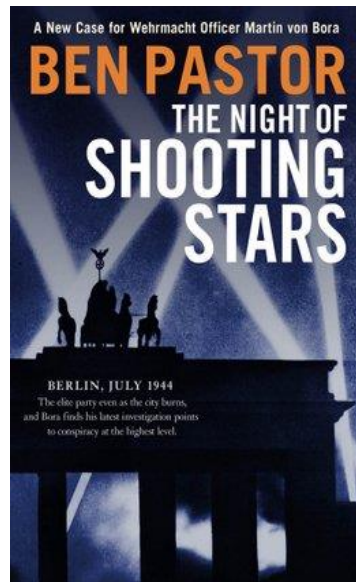




Mike Ripley's
GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER
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BOOKS OF THE MONTH

Still smarting from the enforced cancellation of a Spring Break in Bologna, it was ironic that three of my favourite reads this month have come from Italian authors and I strongly recommend all of them.



Ben Pastor's series hero, Martin von Bora, and the late Philip Kerr's Bernie Gunther are invariably linked, both being German protagonists operating in the Nazi era. But where Gunther is a left-leaning professional detective and occasional, reluctant, soldier, von Bora is an aristocrat and dedicated front-line soldier, an often reluctant detective and even more reluctant dispenser of justice.

The fictional von Bora is often compared to the real Claus von Stauffenberg, an aristocrat and Catholic mutilated in the war, and also a senior Wehrmacht officer. But there are important differences and nowhere better illustrated than in *The Night of the Shooting Stars* [Bitter Lemon Press] which is set in Berlin in the dozen or so frantic days before the 20th July 1944 and the 'Stauffenberg bomb plot' against Hitler. [Spoiler alert: it failed.]. There is even a crucial, and very dramatic scene *between* von Bora and von Stauffenberg where von Bora makes it clear he has no time

for political coups (at that stage of the war) and simply wants to return to lead his troops on the Italian front. The fact that he is in Berlin at all is down to his reputation as an investigator, for while attending the funeral of his uncle (whose death may have been an officially sanctioned suicide) he is ordered to investigate the murder of an eccentric clairvoyant and stage magician from Weimar days.

It is not, as one might expect, a straightforward case, though if any reader remembers the original English title of *Die rote Kimono*, they should keep it to themselves, and once again Ben Pastor shows the depth of her research, from brands of cigarettes and army-issue condoms to ballistics and firearms – she is particularly good on small arms.

This is the seventh Martin von Bora novel to be published in the UK, though in fact it is actually the thirteenth on the series. Ben (Verbena) Pastor writes in English but her books are published first in Italy and, having bought *La note delle stelle cadenti* in Milan last year, I can say with confidence that she is brilliantly translated into Italian by Luigi Sanvito.



Ripster with his translator and Ben Pastor with hers

Ben Pastor's Martin Bora books, which she has been writing since 2000, are a remarkable achievement. Not only is the background research which goes into them – involving settings from the Spanish Civil War, wartime Italy, France and Crete, to campaigns in the Ukraine and Russia – absolutely stunning, but so too is her grasp of the mentality of the professional soldier following his own code of honour whilst doing his best to be a decent human being. For all his personal faults and weak spots (women in particular), and the fact that he is fighting for the most odious of regimes, Martin von Bora is a hero you want to cheer for.

This is superior, very intelligent, historical thriller fiction at its best.