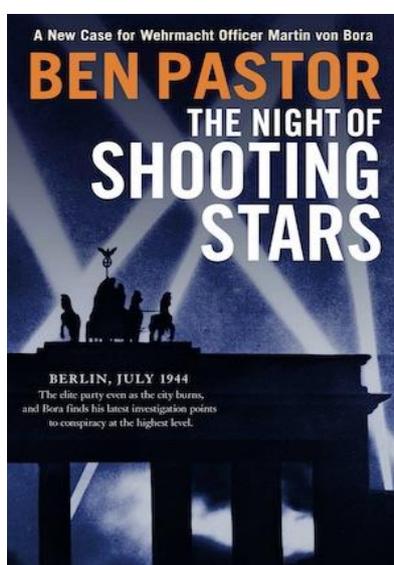


## CRIME FICTION LOVER

### THE NIGHT OF SHOOTING STARS

BY BEN PASTOR

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- Written by Vicki Weisfeld
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**Ben Pastor's political thrillers** take you inside the Third Reich with her protagonist, Wehrmacht colonel Baron Martin von Bora. Bora served in the Abwehr (German military intelligence) until that unit was disbanded in favour of the SS, Gestapo and other agencies.

The Abwehr connection taints Bora's service, because not only was the organisation notoriously and suspiciously inefficient but there were rumours that it was a haven for anti-Hitler plots. There was a large enough grain of truth to that, at least at the organisation's highest levels, to keep everyone looking over their shoulders.

It's 10 July 1944 when the story opens. Bora is leading troops in Italy, but he's traveled back to Berlin for the state funeral of his uncle, a renowned Leipzig physician. He's

barely arrived at the funeral before a former colleague of his uncle whispers to him that his uncle's suicide may not have been 'of his own free will.'

Bora lost his left hand in the Soviet campaign and, worse, his younger brother in an airplane crash. His wife Dikta has left him and arranged for their marriage to be annulled, after callously telling him she'd had three abortions during their marriage. These losses have filled Bora with profound regret, especially about Dikta, and she's never far from his mind.

After the funeral he runs into his old boss in the Abwehr, Benno von Salomon, in the street. He seems panicky and wants to share something, or confess, and insists on a private conference.

When Bora reaches the hotel where he's meeting his mother, she tells him he's been summoned to a meeting with Arthur Nebe, SS officer and chief of the criminal police (the Kripo). Bora maintains a composed demeanor, so as not to worry his mother, but there are many possible reasons this could be an ominous development. However, the meeting with Nebe is at least more concrete than his encounters with the distracted Salomon.

Nebe wants Bora to investigate the murder of a shady writer/seer/astrologer Walter Niemeyer, nicknamed the Weimar Prophet. He'll be assigned a police detective as driver and aide, and he has one week to solve the crime. Nebe gives him the paperwork that has been assembled, which includes information on four suspects, and will answer all question but one: Why choose Bora for this kind of routine criminal investigation? Nebe advises Bora to be discreet and report only to him.

The novel then plays out over the next days of Bora's painstaking investigation. All four suspects the police have already identified must be interviewed, their backgrounds checked, the neighbours questioned, in other words, the bread-and-butter activities of a police inquiry. They're all interesting and very distinct characters, and they each had a motive and means to murder Niemeyer. In the course of these investigations, author

Pastor superbly evokes wartime Berlin and the pall of anxiety that darkens every interaction among its citizens.

As to timing, this is Nazi Germany in the days before Claus von Stauffenberg's attempt to assassinate Hitler. Tensions, rumours and rumours of rumours run high. Bora wonders what it is that he's actually supposed to discover. And with whom should he share it, if he does? Von Salomon is on the run and a very loose cannon who might reveal anything under pressure. The detective assigned to him is prickly and not much help. Author Pastor keeps you very close to Bora's thoughts during the investigation, though you don't foresee the conclusions he's coming to.

Nebe, the former head of the Abwehr Canaris, the Leipzig mayor Goerdeler, and, of course, von Stauffenberg, among others, are all real characters who died in reprisals after the failed assassination of Hitler. This adds a hefty dose of realism to the story and Bora's dilemmas.

Bora recognises – as does the reader – that he is operating on the razor's edge and every step must be carefully calculated. All in all, this seventh of Pastor's award-winning Bora novels a tension-filled read, with not only history, strong sense of place, and compelling characters, but ethical dilemmas too. You might be reminded of the Philip Kerr novels featuring detective Bernie Gunter, but Bora's feelings about the Nazis are much more between the lines than Gunter's overt cynicism.

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**CFL Rating: 5 Stars**