

CrimeChronicles

Ben Pastor

THE ROAD TO ITHACA.

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Bitter Lemon Press

The Road To Ithaca is the fifth novel by Ben Pastor to be published by Bitter Lemon Press. Wehrmacht officer, Martin Bora, is back, and fans of the man will relish this addition to the series. Bora weaves his way through conflict, ideologues and careerists to not only solve the mystery but also somehow keep his integrity intact. Bora is a fine hero and a man that we can trust. This time around he has the love of a good woman. Although obliged to live elsewhere she has had a settling effect on Bora. His personal drama does not dominate the story to the extent it has in previous novels. Instead, interest is maintained because the reader has a good mystery to ponder and a satisfying resolution.

Bora wanders through Crete and meets various foes. Journeys are interesting because of what we see but also because they help us to discover something about ourselves. Bora has the curiosity and complexity to be an interesting traveller. *The Road To Ithaca* is a good title, and its significance is explained in the novel. Bora solves the crime and, because of his journey, he remembers what caused a childhood fight between him and a fellow German officer. The rediscovered memory provides an important revelation about the character of Bora, how he operates and survives. The importance of masks for travellers is also emphasised, and we appreciate how combat exaggerates what they achieve.

The references to the *Odyssey* of Hercules will appeal to some and deter others. Pastor does not wear her intelligence lightly but it is a characteristic she shares with all thriller writers who have ambition, those who desire to write something other than a history of a crime and its detection. This trait even applies to hardboiled masters like Chandler and Hammett. Ben Pastor is not a minimalist. She makes sure we understand the history, when Bora meets the Catalonian anarchists we are given basic information about the Spanish Civil War. The references to *Ulysses* exist as signposts to what Pastor thinks the reader needs to understand. Although some of the legends also exist in German folklore Bora is not tempted to mention Wagner. Heidegger, though, is quoted, and his wise words will have a good therapeutic effect on readers. The American writer Erskine Caldwell and his wife Margaret Bourke White are not given the same respect but they are an interesting detail. Not only me will be curious to know how Bora would have reacted to *Kentucky Flood*, the famous photograph by Bourke White.

Pastor is at her most impressive when evoking the past through small detail. We experience the daily life and respond to the routine and decisions of a German officer. Pastor understands that the past is a world best defined by distant relics and sensations. In this remote world routine objects, because they no longer exist, are as inspirational as icons. To sustain this attention and examination of another age whilst revealing a complex and inspirational character means that the five Bora novels qualify as an epic work of historical fiction. They are essential reading not just for crime fans but the curious.

By Howard Jackson.