

CrimeChronicles

Ben Pastor: TIN SKY

Bitter Lemon Press, £ 8.99.

In 1949, Howard Hawks made the movie, *I Was A Male War Bride*. The Hollywood screwball comedy satirised the bureaucracy of the American Army. The right wing director was offended by the rigid paternalism of military expediency. Who knows what the movies of Hawks would have been like if he had been German. In the Second World War the Germans had an Army, an SS and a Gestapo, all determined to prevail and establish an alternative hierarchy. Even the solitary Major Martin Bora needs allies to survive and, just as important, discover the truth of what happens around him.

Bruised and haunted by Stalingrad, Bora is obliged to mix combat with detection when two Russian Generals, one captured and the other a defector, are discovered dead. Bora is nothing but dogged and by the end of the book he has not only identified the murderer but also resolved the mysterious events inside Krasny Yar forest, the crucible rather than the dovetail of the two complementary plots. The Second World War disconnects political objectives and military life. In this bizarre world, where reality has been suspended, the strange events in the forest provide odd disturbing but appropriate fairy tale echoes.

Major Bora is an ex-student of moral philosophy. He stands opposed to the bureaucracies that frustrate him. He is moral and needs to be judgemental rather than arbitrary. Bora may have modest appetites and singular strength but he is not perfect. Like superspy George Smiley, Bora is principled but also has the survival instincts of the politically acute. He is susceptible to flattery and his morality is

rooted in ego and a sense of having exceptional worth. So exceptional that he disappoints himself. But at one point he intervenes in procedure to ensure that 15 women are not executed. Readers will like Major Bora. He is a complicated hero and his character should appeal to fans of John Le Carre and PD James. The war weary cynicism of *Tin Sky* also evokes the great novels of Eric Ambler.

He, though, wrote about the world he knew. *Tin Sky* is ambitious historical fiction rooted in the research we expect from an academic historian. The grasp of historical detail of both German and Russian history is impressive. The reader experiences life as it must have been in the German Army on the Ukraine border in the Second World War and how military technology and Army routine define daily life and identity. Nobody carries a mere rifle in *Tin Sky*, weapons and equipment are always identified.

Apart from the detail the novel has thematic weight. Ben Pastor challenges the notion that war offers heroes integrity not available in the shabby compromise of peacetime. The women in the novel are important but they exist outside Army life, are reminders of the separate confused world that led to the military fuss. Without them Bora would fail in his quest for truth and independence. This is why we root for our vain hero in his quest to relate a hidden past to an incomprehensible present.

By Howard Jackson.