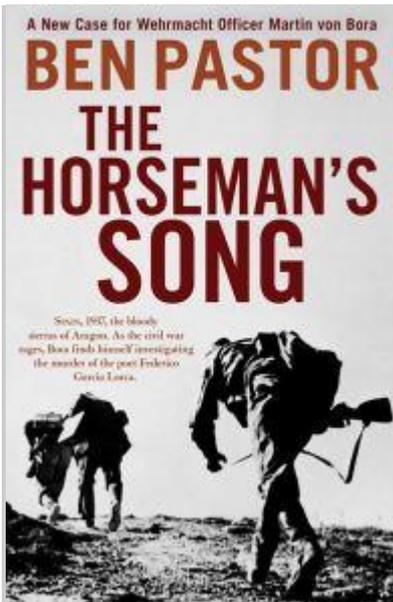


EMMA'S BOOK BLOG

FOR THE LOVE OF BOOKS, AND ALL THINGS BOOKISH

THE HORSEMAN'S SONG BY BEN PASTOR



Publisher : Bitter Lemon Press

Published : 14th February 2019

Synopsis:

Spain, summer 1937. The civil war between Spanish nationalists and republicans rages. On the bloody sierras of Aragon, among Generalissimo Franco's volunteers is Martin Bora, the twenty-something German officer and detective whose future adventures will be told in *Lumen*, *Liar Moon*, *The Road to Ithaca* and others in the Bora series. Presently a lieutenant in the Spanish Foreign Legion, Bora lives the tragedy around him as an intoxicating epic, between idealism and youthful recklessness. The first doubts, however, rise in Bora's mind when he happens on the body of Federico Garcia Lorca, a brilliant poet, progressive and homosexual. Who murdered him? Why? The

official version does not convince Bora, who begins a perilous investigation. His inquiry paradoxically proceeds alongside that which is being carried out by an “enemy”: Philip Walton, an American member of the International Brigades. Soon enough the German and the New Englander will join forces, and their cooperation will not only culminate in a thrilling chase after a murderer, but also in a very human, existential face-to-face between two adversaries forever changed by their crime-solving encounter...

My thoughts:

The Horseman's Song is the 6th book in a series of mystery novels featuring investigator Martin Bora. This novel, however, is set prior to the others so it works perfectly as a stand alone, or as an introduction to the series.

The novel opens in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War. In case you're not familiar with the setting, it was a war fought between the Francisco Franco's fascists (Nationalists) and the supporters of the Republic (the Internationalists, republicans and communists.) Like all civil wars, this was a brutal and cruel time. One of the great supporters of the left was poet, play-write and homosexual, Federico Garcia Lorca. It is widely accepted that he was captured in 1936 and executed by the fascists in southern Spain. His grave has never been found and the circumstances of his death are often speculated over, but still unknown. This uncertainty has allowed Ben Pastor some poetic licence, from which she has created this novel; Pastor's premise is that perhaps he was not executed in Granada in '36; perhaps he was captured and somehow ended up in Aragon in 1937.

As the synopsis states, Bora, who was fighting for the fascists, happened upon the dead body of a man (who he later discovered to be Lorca) on the dusty roads. Around the same time, the republican fighters began to suspect that Lorca's body had been discovered near their camp and set about finding him.

The first narrative in the novel is Bora's, a young and idealistic German soldier whose motives for being in Spain can be discovered in this excerpt:

Ahead of him, the mirror was bolted to the wall. Spidery stains dulled it at the corners, and on the right side two hand-tinted postcards sat between the wall and the mirror's frameless edge. On one of them Bora recognized the square minaret of the great mosque in Marrakesh, limned against an improbable alizarin sky. The other was a blue-grey aerial view of St Peter's Square. The sight of the Roman cathedral unexpectedly moved him. As I wrote in my diary he thought, this is the reason I'm here. All ideologies aside, this is what Spain is – intramurum Christianitatis, a bulwark of Christendom for so many: the anti-Bolsheviks and the monarchists, the Italians spoiling for a fight over Libya, and us, young Germans carrying the shame of a lost war we too no part in. I still find it hard to comprehend how neatly this civil war serves my desires to redeem Germany, serve my country and allow me to break some rules.

Running parallel to this, is the narrative of Philip 'Felipe' Walton, an American who has traveled to Spain to fight for against the fascists. He has a personal link to Lorca, whom he met with when Lorca visited the USA some years previously. His narrative allows us to understand the patchwork make-up of the opposition fighters – a side made up of communists, liberals and republicans.

Because Lorca was a progressive and an out-spoken socialist, it seems that his killing could logically be blamed on the fascists. However, he was also a homosexual, which people of both sides objected to...so the case of 'Who killed Lorca?' is not straight forward!

Bora and Walton separately seek to discover who killed him. They become aware of each other, yet remain ideologically opposed and on different sides of the war. Ultimately, they end up having to join forces to solve this mystery.

The Horseman's Song is richly descriptive with language which evokes the stultifying heat of the sierras at this time. It's populated by a host of characters, and thankfully has a character list at the front to refer to. (I would have loved a map at the front too – I love a map in a book!)

As you spend time with the characters, you will learn about the uncomfortable and unhygienic living conditions of both camps of combatants, along with the frustrations, suspicions and duplicitous nature of fellow fighters. This is a detailed and well-researched novel, sure to delight fans of the Bora series, those with an interest in Spanish history and fans of historical mysteries.