



Review | *The Horseman's Song*, Ben Pastor | Book of the Week

The Horseman's Song is the sixth in the Martin Bora series and follows on from the success of *Road to Ithaca*, *Tin Sky*, *A Dark Song of Blood*, *Lumen* and *Liar Moon*, also published by Bitter Lemon Press.

“Bora felt kinship for the dead. The ancient and the new, the long buried and the exposed, those over whom people wept, and the dead whose name or gravesite no one knew. All of them claimed brotherhood with him tonight. It might be the balmy scent of the evergreens brushing against his boots, or the day closing like an eye, or knowing that Lorca was dead, as was Colonel Serrano's son. The man from Mockau,

too, was as dead “as all the dead of the earth”, in Lorca’s own words. It might be any of those things, but his narrow escape only made him kin to the bones of Spain.”

A whole generation was passionately entangled in the Spanish Civil War – politically, militarily and ideologically – preceding World War Two. Foreign volunteers actively participated, siding with different factions. Several countries defied the Non-Intervention Agreement, and also took sides, contributing arms, funds or fighters. Picasso’s *Guernica* is the most famous image of the 1936-1939 clash of bourgeois democracy vs. Fascist aggression; Ernest Hemingway’s novel about the conflict, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, was published in 1940; and George Orwell’s political memoir, *Homage to Catalonia*, came out in 1938.



The shooting of the poet and playwright Federico García by unidentified Fascists at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War remains, to this day, one of the highest profile mysteries of the period. The location of his gravesite remains unknown despite officially-sanctioned investigations carried out between 2008-16.

The Death of a Poet

“Like mashed lilies, *Bora thought, an unfamiliar image to him.* This dead man has the crushed pallor of white flowers that have been torn up and stepped on. *Never in*

the past weeks of war had he looked at the dead, those of the Reds or of his companions, without pity of flesh for flesh, blood for blood. Yet he could kill without forsaking this pity. He handled the body with slow care, and when his fingers became smeared with blood, he wiped them on his own clothes.”

Set in July 1937, in the villages and “dry land, the dizzying reaches of the sierra, Aragon and Spain around it,” *The Horseman’s Song* is an extremely well-written and evocative fictional investigation into the shooting of Federico García Lorca. An unusual and riveting read, it is a cut above the usual thriller fare.

Martin Bora, a young German officer and detective, assigned to the Spanish Foreign Legion, is among Franco’s troops. His counterpart, the New Englander, Major Philip Walton, who is fighting with the International Brigades, had seen action in World War One, and is a friend of the poet. The two foreigners join forces to track down Lorca’s suspected killer.

“Lorca’s death. You know nothing about him, Walton wanted to protest, but didn’t. You never even spoke to him. You have no idea of what his friendship meant to me, what his writings did for me when no one else cared to feed Philip Walton’s soul, whatever his soul is, whatever the word soul means to one born and raised in Eden, Vermont, and who like Adam was chased from it to earn his bread.”

Ravines near the villages of the sierra are littered with the skeletons of horses and mules. Lorca’s shoes were stolen, and partially erased music sheets are found by the side of the brook near the arid mule track where his body was dumped. Allegedly shot twice at point-blank range in a car, the second one was the killing shot, heard by a *mulero*.

Stephen Spender: “Poetry which is not written in order to advance any particular set of political opinions may yet be profoundly political.”

The tragic sense of life and the struggle with death is a classic Spanish preoccupation. Lorca's greatest poem, *Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter*, was inspired by the goring and death of an Andalusian bullfighter who had been his friend.

Lorca insisted he was apolitical, though his brother-in-law was the Socialist mayor of Granada and he had links to Leftist intellectuals. A vibrant mosaic of different political and social groups, alliances and personalities is pieced together as Bora and Walton set out to uncover the truth by analysing evidence, talking to militiamen, Lorca's cousin and other members of the local community. Individuals are taken away at night, or ambushed. The fear, treachery, economic distress and profound uncertainty of the times feels very real.

Sex and love and gunfire



The emotional forces that underpin Lorca's writing fuelled the revolutionary movement. Although he lived a privileged life and was part of the progressive intelligentsia, his work was a banner for the Spanish masses and his ballads were sung by illiterate militia men, becoming war songs. The famous slogan "*They shall not pass*" – *No pasarán* – was used in meetings and in the press.

"Lorca's words spoke of flesh and young death as if flesh longed for death and were in sad love with it. Bora sensed the hidden truth: the seductive dread, the danger of closing his eyes and saying "yes" to it."

His work shines a light on the stifling prejudice, bigotry, malice and soullessness of bourgeois Catholic society of the time. “*When we met in Valdecebros last week he said someone had been following him, and he’d barely managed to give him the slip.*” It is known today that Lorca was gay: a total taboo in 1930s Spain. Were there rumours about him? Was his sexuality a factor in his murder?

His plays, *Blood Wedding* and *The House of Bernarda Alba*, show up repressed sexuality and sexual urges. Women were encased in rigid moral laws. Catholic codes vs. pagan eroticism. The virgin vs. the whore. “*She was what he’d always thought beautiful, and her fairness in a land of dark women, her whiteness attracted him, created an intimate kinship of colour and race.*” Of Walton’s two women, it is Remedios with whom he is obsessed. But she is not his alone.

An elegy to a great and iconic poet, *The Horseman’s Song* is also a moving and convincing portrait of how ordinary people faced the almost unimaginable nightmare that is civil war. Ben Pastor’s muscular, poetic prose packs a punch as she provides a new perspective on a painfully knotty subject. Reading novels such as this helps to understand things, learn things about people, about experience, and to get to the heart of the matter.