

ForeWord Reviews

THRILLER

A Dark Song of Blood

Ben Pastor

Bitter Lemon Press

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Pastor's portrait of Nazi-occupied Rome is nuanced and is colored with unique characters and their fascinating circumstances.

In the third book of the Martin Bora series, Ben Pastor's *A Dark Song of Blood* follows Wehrmacht Captain Martin Bora to a city caught in a complicated web of power and threatened by upheaval. The investigation unfolds in an atmosphere where allies have revealed themselves as enemies, civilians are targets, and everybody must take sides. Pastor's historically competent novel takes readers into the world where an ancient city meets modern warfare and most people are just trying to survive.

The year is 1944; the city, Rome. German military command has taken over the best hotels and streets, subjugated municipal institutions, and imposed withering martial law on citizens. Now it's maneuvering to squash a strengthening local resistance movement, even as it hunkers down against the approaching Allied forces. Can the Italian civil investigator and the German aide to a Nazi general assigned to investigate a woman's murder find a killer in such a place? Can they be friends?

Pastor's expertise is clearly in describing the politics, intrigue, and daily complications for anyone, winners or losers, participating in a foreign occupation during wartime. The lengthy cast of characters—including two rival cardinals, various SS officers and their aides, prostitutes, and Latin students—is burdensome, since this novel, while being most effectively historical fiction, is built around a mystery to be solved and each new name must be considered. The early chapters get bogged down in introductions and potential motivations, but the variety of characters and their adorning details serve to build an engaging context. The novel illuminates what a pair of silk stockings means to a young Italian girl, what sandbags mean to a general traveling by car outside city limits, and what unopened suitcases mean to the owners of a boardinghouse.

Despite the novel's generous attention to people and place, Major Bora is unquestionably

the star of this novel, and his role as noble servant to a threatened and oppressive regime puts him in constant danger. Above all, this novel is an adventure with a hero. *A Dark Song of Blood* will appeal to fans of wartime sagas, cross-genre adventures, and Old World settings.

Jennifer Williams