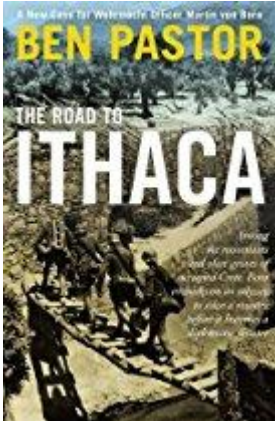


The Road to Ithaca

Written by Ben Pastor

Review written by Mike Ripley

As ‘The Ripster’, Mike Ripley writes the gossip column Getting Away With Murder for Shots. Mr. Campion’s Fox, now out from Severn House, is his twenty-first book.



Bitter Lemon Press

RRP: £8.99

Released: March 16 2017

PBK

There will come a day when the British reader will be able to follow the career of Ben Pastor’s complex and compelling hero Martin Bora from the Spanish Civil War to the end of World War II in chronological order, which is my way of complaining that at least six of the novels in the ‘Bora Cycle’ are as yet unpublished in the UK. But then I really don’t want that to happen as it might mean the end of the series.

However, we should be grateful to Bitter Lemon Press for championing five Bora novels in this country, the latest being *The Road to Ithaca*, a long, complex and cleverly imagined story set in Crete immediately after the German invasion in 1941 which shows Ben (Verbena) Pastor totally in command of her exhaustive research and writing at the peak of her powers.

Martin Bora – or Martin-Heinz Douglas *Freiherr (Baron)* von Bora to give him his full moniker – is a German aristocrat, a Catholic and an officer in the Wehrmacht, a classic example of the good, honourable soldier having to fight for a bad, dishonourable cause. *The Road to Ithaca* begins with Bora serving in the German diplomatic mission in Moscow less than a month before the Nazi invasion code-named Barbarossa, which Bora knows is coming. Hitler’s armies have, meanwhile, invaded Greece and Crete and this sets up an unlikely and unwanted

mission for Bora. Lavrenti Beria, the head of Stalin's feared secret police, has a yearning for a particularly rare Cretan wine and to keep him happy (if only for a few more weeks); Bora is dispatched to Crete to obtain supplies.

Once on the newly-conquered island, Bora finds he has a new, equally unwelcome, mission. A prominent Swiss scholar (and advisor to Himmler) has been found dead in a massacre of unarmed civilians. The prime suspects are a squad of German paratroopers seen in the area and supposedly witnessed by English soldiers who are now prisoners-of-war. Bora's unenviable task is to investigate the massacre as a war crime and absolve the paratroopers, but if they didn't do it, who did? The German army is uncooperative and the paratroopers are determined to protect their own, especially as one of their officers, a devoted National Socialist, holds a boyhood grudge against the aristocratic Bora family.

With the help of a reluctant local police inspector and a very reluctant female American archaeologist, Bora has to trek into the Cretan hills on an odyssey to find the truth. Analogies with Odysseus' long and dangerous journey home to his wife after the Trojan War are plentiful and quite deliberate (the clue is in the title, plus Bora even carries a battered copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in his knapsack) and not just because the scenery and archaeological remains – Crete is described as 'a pitiless time machine' – beautifully conjure the world of the Homeric myths.

One would expect the archaeological background to be accurate – there is even an honorary mention of the legendary British archaeologist John Pendlebury, of Pembroke College Cambridge (warning: there's a clue there), who worked for British Intelligence and who died in the early stages of the battle for Crete. Ben Pastor is herself an archaeologist, but she also writes supremely well about serving soldiers and how they react to moral and political threats as well as enemy action.

The plot expands way beyond Bora's investigation of a war crime and although he makes it back to the temporary safety of the German embassy in Moscow, he is still, like Odysseus, a long way from home.