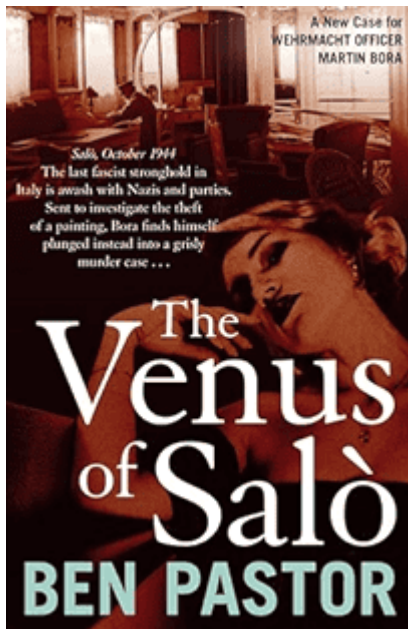


## The Venus of Salò

[Written by Ben Pastor](#)

[Review written by Mike Ripley](#)

Mike Ripley retired from regularly reviewing new crime fiction after more than 32 years (and almost 3,000 reviews) at the critical coal-face. He now restricts himself to the worthy or unusual titles which tempt him out of retirement.



Bitter Lemon Press  
RRP: £9.99  
Released: May 23, 2024  
Pbk

*Ben (Verbena) Pastor is known in Italy as ‘the queen of the historical thriller’ and though she has written excellent mysteries set Ancient Rome – she has a background in archaeology – she is best known for her long-running series featuring the melancholic but noble Wehrmacht officer Martin von Bora, a character clearly inspired by Count Claus von Stauffenberg. Bora has often been compared to Philip Kerr’s Bernie Gunther, but where Gunther is a police detective turned reluctant soldier, Bora is a dedicated professional soldier reluctantly forced by circumstances into being a detective or a spy.*

Pastor's Bora series began in Italy in 1999 and appeared in English in 2011 from Bitter Lemon, who have since published seven more titles, including the latest, *The Venus of Salò*. There are, I think, at least another four novels and a collection of short stories which have only been published in Italian, the irony of that being that Ben Pastor (who has dual Italian and American citizenship) writes in English. The sporadic publication of the English editions make it difficult to follow Martin Bora's career chronologically which covers the period from the Spanish Civil War through the entirety of WWII, with Bora serving in Poland, France, Greece and Italy.

*The Venus of Salò*, which was originally published in 2006, is set in late 1944 in northern Italy around Mussolini's last stronghold of Salò on Lake Garda. Bora, severely wounded in action against Italian partisans, is reluctantly posted away from his unit to find himself investigating the theft of a valuable painting, plus murder and corruption in the chaos of a crumbling fascist regime, whilst dealing with increasingly bold partisan activity.

The Bora books all stand by themselves and one of their most important, and poignant, themes is the inevitable destruction of von Bora's marriage and the often brittle relationships within his aristocratic family, as the patriotic (though certainly not Nazi) soldier struggles with his Catholic faith amidst the horrors of war. *Venus* should probably be read immediately after *A Dark Song of Blood* [Bitter Lemon, 2014], which is set in Rome in May 1944, although *The Night of Shooting Stars* [Bitter Lemon, 2020], set in Berlin in July 1944, explains why Bora is suspected of complicity in the 20th July bomb plot against Hitler, and why the SS is hot on his tail.

Ben Pastor never apologises for her admiration for the professional soldier doing his patriotic duty, however unpleasant and however horrific the political system dictating that duty. She is also brilliant at showing the tragic personal cost that comes with. These are finely crafted, historically accurate novels which deal with crimes, often small, venal and very human, against the backdrop of the Second World War, the biggest crime scene of the twentieth century.