



**Ben Pastor/THE VENUS OF SALÒ (Bitter Lemon Press)**

Pastor's Martin Bora series now reaches its eighth instalment in English although further titles remain untranslated from the original Italian. The criminally neglected American-Italian author, who translates her own books, is without a doubt a leading star of historical crime fiction and her striking novels featuring Bora, a dogged Wehrmacht officer struggling for a sense of balance during the dark years of WW2 form a fascinating landscape equal in its sense of bleakness and despair at the folly of men to Philip Kerr's Bernie Gunther books. It's October 1944 and Mussolini has established the Republic of Salò off the shores of Lake Garda, a German puppet territory in the North of Italy and the final fascist stronghold against the invading Western forces. Exhausted by months on the front line fighting a losing battle, Martin Bora is called in to investigate the theft of an invaluable Titian painting, soon complicated by the unwelcome appearance of three dead bodies. Bora's task is not made any easier by the presence and undue pressure of the Gestapo and has to tread a thin line between uncovering the truth and not putting himself in further danger and ending up facing a firing squad. Pastor balances the struggles of the individual, the art of sleuthing and the overall picture of savagery and despair of a country in ruins. Pastor, who is also an accomplished writer of historical fiction, summons the past with forensic exactitude but also a sense of quiet despair at the follies of human nature while never neglecting the minutiae of Bora's investigation. A series you should investigate soonest had you been unaware of it.