

AnnaBookBel

Although *The Venus of Salò* is the eighth book in Ben Pastor's Martin Bora series, due to the nature of Wehrmacht officer Colonel Martin von Bora being posted all around the Theatre of War in Italy, it's more episodic a series in nature than many, so I was happy to jump in to the latest addition.

It's set in 1944 in the Fascist Republic of Salò, where Mussolini had had his HQ, centred around Lake Garda, but is currently under German control, although Italian partisans are waging guerilla attacks, so it's not a stable situation at all. Bora is transferred to Salò from his regiment in Brescia where he is to be a liaison officer between the various parties. What he doesn't expect on his arrival, having been rudely pulled out of bed by the Gestapo, was to be assigned to a case of art theft. A priceless painting, 'The Venus of Salò', attributed to Titian was cut from its frame and spirited away, embarrassing the Italians for it was on loan to them. Signor Conforti must comfort himself with an inferior copy.

However, as he begins to investigate the art theft, Bora gets drawn in to a case the local police are investigating, an apparent suicide. However, as he gets to know the locals better, it would appear the suicide is anything but. However, soon more 'suicides' throw everything into chaos.

Added to this is all the internal politics in the German hierarchy, a Major Lipsky who apparently reports to Göring and is busy squirreling away antiquities to send back to the Reich. It's the Gestapo vs. the SS and Bora has long learned to be wary of the Gestapo. Throw in a beautiful Italian woman whom Bora can't help but be attracted to (as is his rival Lipsky) and we have an increasingly complex set-up. When the police inspector investigating the suicides is blown up in his car, Bora has to change his tack and go after the partisan leader who goes by the nickname Christomorto.

This is a very intense novel and not a fast read – there's a lot to absorb. It's clear that Pastor knows her history inside and out. The amount of detail in this novel, giving the historical context, is huge, but interspersed throughout as part of the narrative so it is never overwhelming. It both adds to the atmosphere of ever-present danger and slightly slows things down, although this is a thoughtful novel rather than out and out action and you need time to assimilate the detail.

This is leavened though by the character of Bora, a German officer with a conscience and a strong sense of social justice. He has so many sides to him, Catholic, aristocrat, a philosophy PhD, fluent in Italian, a piano player, and downright romantic. He is also having to get used to only having one hand, his left hand having been blown off by a grenade, presumably in the previous novel, he now wears a prosthesis. He is dogged in his investigations – and we hope he'll find the painting and solve the murders before the end of the novel...

I don't often read historical crime novels, and although I found the WWII detail tough going, I did enjoy the character of Martin Bora a lot, and would love to read some earlier volumes in the series before he got so world weary.