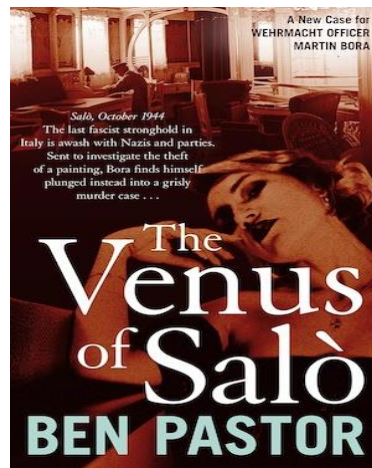


# Crime Fiction Lover

## The Venus of Salò by Ben Pastor

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**It's October 1944** and all is far from well in the Republic of Salò. As the last bastion of Fascism in Italy, the tranquil setting on the shore of Lake Garda belies the turmoil currently engulfing the seat of the German-backed puppet government. As the Italian authorities struggle to cling to power, Partisans fight to unseat them and the German occupiers increasingly view both sides with suspicion. The likelihood of death, doom and destruction has never been higher.

It's little wonder that Colonel Martin-Heinz von Bora is decidedly displeased to be separated from his regiment and redeployed to Salò, especially when the process begins with him being unceremoniously dragged from his bed by the Gestapo. He has been suspected of anti-Nazi thoughts for some time and the whole thing reeks of a set-up. Still, he has little choice but to accept being conveyed to Lake Garda with as much silence and menace as possible.

To his further discomfort, Bora learns that his arrival in Salò was immediately preceded by an art theft. A grenade was thrown into the garden of the villa owned by Cavalier Pozzi and currently occupied by Lieutenant General Sohl. During the resultant confusion, a large artwork purported to be a Titian – the titular Venus of Salò – was stolen. All very

embarrassing for the Nazis. Thus, while Bora is notionally there to serve as a liaison officer, his first task is actually to track down the thief and recover the painting.

Despite being a career army officer, Bora has become adept at playing detective and his natural curiosity soon sees him balancing his investigation into the painting with questioning an apparent suicide by hanging that occurred on the same night as the theft. As Bora comes to suspect that the suicide might actually have been a murder – and, in fact, that there might be a serial killer operating in Salò – he becomes embroiled in a far-reaching conspiracy and must defend himself from the suggestion of his own involvement in the deaths.

The Venus of Salò is equal parts crime fiction and historical fiction. Set towards the end of World War II, the story has a disquieting atmosphere of finality hanging over it. There is a sense throughout that things are coming to an end, both for Germany and for Martin Bora, and that the resolution of matters will be a torrid one. Of course, the forthcoming downfall of the Nazis is no surprise, but the eventual fate of Bora remains a mystery, although he fully expects to follow his friends to the gallows on the orders of the Gestapo.

Ben Pastor masterfully integrates her fictional detective – seemingly based on Claus von Stauffenberg, one of the Operation Valkyrie plotters – into real-world events and locations around Lake Garda. The story is incredibly rich in historical detail, with the descriptions and particularly the dialogue really ringing true and rendering the plot truly immersive. As The Venus of Salò is the eighth book to feature his deductive exploits, Bora also has vivid backstory, which means there are plenty of hints as to previous events and important characters, although the book can be read as a standalone story.

While the extent to which a Wehrmacht officer can really be considered a hero is always going to be questionable, Martin Bora is a sufficiently complex character that he cannot be dismissed as a mere Nazi. He's fiercely loyal to his country and to the army, but he certainly doesn't hold the Nazi regime in such high esteem. For unspecified reasons, which are likely made clear in preceding books, he has come to the attention of the Gestapo, who seem intent on doing all they can to make his life and career as uncomfortable as possible.

In addition to the psychological discomfort of constantly being on tenterhooks that he will be dragged back to Germany and summarily executed for some infraction or other, Bora also faces the moral disquiet triggered by the conflict between his Catholic religion and philosophical education and the current situation he finds himself in regarding the War. What's more, having recently lost his hand in a grenade attack, he is constantly accompanied by the literal pain of combat. And all that's without considering his romantic entanglements.

Notwithstanding these numerous complications, however, Bora really is an exceptional detective, which might be how he has just managed to stay in the good graces of the army hierarchy. The theft of the Titian from a building housing senior Nazis is an audacious heist, one that seems far beyond the common crook, suggesting the involvement of someone as notorious as Partisan leader Cristomorto. But are things ever that simple? Bora certainly has a lot to unravel to get to the bottom of things.

The Venus of Salò is a complex and controversial story featuring a morally ambiguous main character. Ben Pastor has crafted a mystery for Bora to solve that is just as difficult as the larger situation he finds himself in. Given its setting and subject matter, the story is often dark and disturbing, and it's both interesting and unsettling to follow the pursuit of a killer when practically everyone involved has killed for one reason or another.

**CFL Rating: 5 Stars**