

THE JEWISH CHRONICLE

Life & Culture

THE VENUS OF SALO REVIEW: A THRILLER WITH AN UNLIKELY HERO FROM
A DARK PERIOD IN ITALIAN HISTORY

*The Nazi protagonist has been assigned to figure out who could have stolen a
priceless Titian portrait*

BY [Amanda Hopkinson](#)

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Author Ben Pastor

The Venus of Salo by Ben Pastor

Lemon Press, £9.99

Reviewed by Amanda Hopkinson

This is a thriller riddled with riddles from the get-go. The author writes under the pen name Ben Pastor (translating as “sheepdog” from the original Catalan) but who – like fellow historical crime writer Donna Leon – is actually an Italo-American woman called Maria Volpi Verbena. And its protagonist, Lieut-Colonel Martin Bora, is both military commander and criminal investigator for the Wehrmacht, a Nazi anti-hero possessed of a surprisingly humane (if frequently agonised) conscience.

The book's action takes place in what seems to have become a place and time of topical literary interest, for this is the third novel set in the German puppet state of Saló in northern Italy that I've been requested to review this year. Perhaps its moral conflicts resonate with our times, for the concept of a "good Fascist" makes for an unlikely hero. Or perhaps the point is just that: our common humanity is fundamental, transcending politics, even in a time of war.

Martin Bora is assigned to figure out who could have stolen a priceless Titian portrait of The Venus of Salo at the point when, in October 1944, the German army had rescued Mussolini from prison and instated him as ruler of the "Italian Social Republic" in a clear instance of Nazi (National Socialist) emulation. Of the nearly 9000 Italian Jews known to have been deported to extermination camps in Poland and Germany, only 980 are known to have returned after the War.

It is against this bigger picture that Bora's own involvement with the Titian portrait of a seductive woman reclining in a red negligee is played out. Tasked to discover how thieves could have entered a private residence and removed it without causing suspicion, Bora finds himself repeatedly distracted. Discomforting connections emerge between the original artwork and its copy, the sitter the sensually seductive Annie with whom Bora becomes too intimately acquainted. As corpses begin to pile up, including the mysterious "woman upstairs" who apparently hanged herself, Bora turns to local Wehrmacht Chief of Staff, Lipsky, for counsel. After all, it was Lipsky who first mentioned Titian's "spectacular Venus reclining on a couch, discovered by Conforti the Jew", leading Bora to the portrait studio named "Antiquities and Photographic Studio, Moses Conforti".

From here on in the pace picks up, rushing ahead to its dramatic climax and Bora's bid to solve the case and escape the firing squad. Pastor is at the top of his/her form in bringing together her in-depth knowledge of one of the darkest periods in Italian history and the dramatic actions of a most unlikely hero.