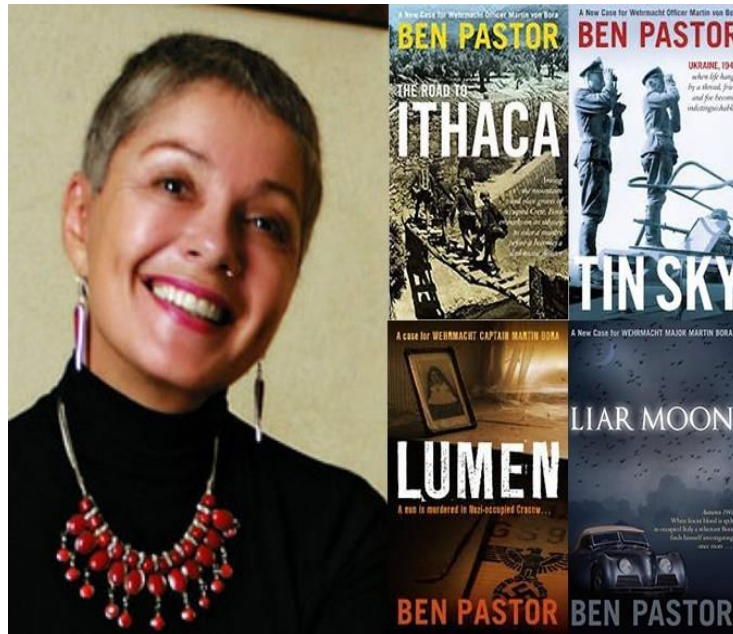


BookBlast® Diary



Interview | Ben Pastor, novelist | Author of the Week

Author, BEN PASTOR, lived for thirty years in the United States, working as a university professor, before returning to Italy to write historical thrillers. Bitter Lemon Press have published six of her novels to date.

Where were you born, and where did you grow up?

I was born in Rome, and grew up in the hill country southeast of the city. Ten elements typified our small town: Roman ruins; rainy springs; olive groves; sparkling red wine; farm women dressing in beautiful traditional garb on holidays; the Thursday fair; more steps than streets (a problem and a good exercise for my family doctor father); a tall church steeple from where you could glimpse the sea in the far distance; cats, dogs, and farm animals of all kinds; the feeling that the world was orderly, cyclical, and safe.

What sorts of books were in your family home?

All sorts (except pornography) and too many to count. As children, my sister Simona and I used to read avidly, and then have a picnic on top of the tall bookshelves of the family library. Years later, we found mummified little pieces of sandwiches behind the furniture when we moved out. Mother had a passion for nineteenth-and-twentieth-century literature: the great French, English, Spanish, Russian, Italian, American authors . . . Father loved geography, history and mysteries; all of us had

a fondness for poetry and art. From *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to *Nicholas Nickleby*, from *Blood and Sand* to *Dead Souls*, the steps to culture and to our picnic place were all there!

Who were early formative influences as a writer?

Surely a good question. My mother was writer, and she had her favorites. Eventually I developed my own list of preferences, mostly based on the writer's style and ability to create a world. It is a crowded room, so I will only point out those whom I hold as examples even today: Hermann Melville, Toni Morrison, Georges Simenon, Federico Garcia Lorca, Ernst Wiechert, Graham Greene, and Marguerite Yourcenar.

As an author, what are you most proud (or embarrassed) of writing?

Personally, I think that pride and embarrassment should stay out of one's work. In a practical sense, after more than twenty novels I came to a place of comfort with most passages and subjects.

Writing of soldiers, combat scenes and a certain amount of violence are inevitable; the same can be said for sex scenes. I'd say that I am fond of dialogues, and occasionally satisfied with the results. The dialectical tension between characters intrigues me, especially when tempers flare and need to be kept under control. I admit I have an enormous difficulty treating scenes of violence against animals, and will go a long way to avoid them.

Your top tips to share with aspiring writers?

I like this question. I run creative writing classes, so we often discuss tips and tricks. I would list five small suggestions:\

- Go from "Write what you know" to "I don't know, but I can find out";
- Write a single page where the protagonist perceives the world with the five senses, then a single page where only one of the senses is privileged;
- write a complete little story in no more than 100 words;
- read the great authors (there's a reason why Homer is still read 3500 years later), and learn from them;
- do not let literary fashions and fads distract you; find your own way, and follow it.

Books that changed your life?

Cranes's *The Red Badge of Courage*, Wiechert's *Die Majorin*, Garcia Lorca's literary essays (especially his *Theory and Play of Duende*); Dickens' *Bleak House*; Buzzati's *Il deserto dei tartari*; Meyerink's *The Golem*; J. Roth's *Radetzky March*; all of Hrabal's novels.

Your views on book publishing?

Much depends on the nation. In the US, there seems to be today a predilection for politically correct subjects that greatly influence what as a reader you'll find for sale and on library shelves. Great Britain and France still maintain an appreciable concern for style and *belles lettres*. Everywhere,

people read less than they used to, or do not read at all. Their span of attention appears to be affected by the velocity of electronic communication, and the many distractions of what for lack of better terms is called “modern life”. The most interesting works often come out of smaller and/or independent publishing houses, less tied to trends and to big-time marketing. Two dangerous sentences you’ll find in book ads (and should stay away from, as a writer and as a reader): “If you liked X, you will love Y,” or, “In the style of XY . . .”

How important were, and are, editors? Have you had much encouragement from your editor(s)?

I love editors. In my career, I have been fortunate in this regard. On both sides of the Big Pond, I met wonderfully accurate editors. In particular, I have a fantastic Italian editor, whose advice, great culture, wit and knowledge of the business are peerless. Naturally, literary agents are neck-and-neck with editors when it comes to their importance for new and established authors.

Which is more important, style or voice?

Both. Both need to be there. A voice without style may be recognizable, but is seldom memorable. Style without voice is forever at risk of academic emptiness. But there’s a third element to keep in mind. Federico Garcia Lorca said it all, when he related the advice of Manuel Torres, a great flamenco performer, to a neophyte: “You have a great voice; you have style: but you will go nowhere, because you do not have *duende!*” *Duende* burns “like ground glass in the blood,” and never shows up “unless there’s a possibility of death.” It is “. . . power, not action; struggle, not thought.” Unlike the Angel and the Muse, other heralds of inspiration in Lorca’s essay, *duende*, dark and disquieted, can make the difference between good work and a masterpiece.

Your views on the explosion of creative writing courses? How helpful are they?

How useful are gyms? It depends on the instructor/trainer, but also on the natural abilities of the trainee. Tricks can be taught; talent is another thing. I chose to attend an MFA in Creative Writing when I was already a published author, and found it very beneficial. Writers often need discipline, and a good writing course can make you rethink your approach to creativity.

What are your favorite literary journals?

The *TLS* above all.

How well are your books received abroad in translation?

I grew up speaking Italian, so at first some readers imagine I write in this language. In fact, I always wrote in English, and even in Italy I make use of a professional translator (writing and translating are two different jobs, requiring different gifts, competencies and abilities). I would say that, considering that my protagonists are army men in historical settings (Germany in WWII and the IV century CE), and although technically “mysteries” my novels do not hesitate to tackle controversial

issues (sexuality, politics, genocide), I am quite pleased with the performance of my books abroad. It tickles me to read Martin Bora, a German officer active in the resistance, speaking French, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, Greek . . . What makes me proud is the response of my readers around the world. Clearly, I also enormously appreciate the positive critical reviews.

Your views on how new technology has (or has not) changed your writing life? What about social media?

I live good part of the year in the vineyards of northern Italy, where mobile phones often have no line. A PC is a professional necessity, and having begun my writing career on Mother's Olivetti 42 typewriter, I cannot appreciate enough the comforts of electronic supports. However, of our two computers, the one I use to write my works is not online. I understand the importance of, but do not participate in the social media; I do not have a FB profile, and my American friends joke that they can only reach me by "regular" phone, e-mail, the postal service, or in person. Four ways of reaching any human being are enough. I'd welcome, of course, homing pigeons and hot-air balloons.

If you could go anywhere in time for one day, where would you go and why?

This is an old dream of mine. About a mile away from my childhood home, there was a place where a few shards indicated the presence of buried Roman walls. As a young adult studying archeology, I discovered it was the site of a great villa belonging to TI. CLAUDIUS LIVIANUS, praetorian prefect under Trajan during the Dacian wars. His handsome figure is portrayed behind the Emperor's on Trajan's Column in Rome. Many times, I drove by the vineyards covering the ruins and hoped I could magically see in a flash the mansion as it was, with its porticoes, ponds, mosaics and fine marbles – and of course with Livianus looking back from his property. The time would be circa 103 CE. Why do I wish for this sort of time travel? Because the Past is a distant land we should confidently visit and get to know.

Your favourite prose authors?

A wagonload. I'd like to include here some of those who, while writing exclusively or mostly non-fiction, touched me and had an influence on me: Edward Gibbon, Martin Heidegger, C.G. Jung, Gaston Bachelard, Vladimir Propp, James Hillman, P.P. Pasolini, Marie-Louise von Franz . . .

Your favourite noir series?

If we're speaking of novels, surely Chandler's Marlowe and Simenon's Maigret. As for TV series, I don't watch much TV, but loved Bruno Cremer's rendition of the Maigret cycle.

Favourite feature films?

To mention only a few: *The Night of the Generals*; *Russian Ark*; the Sokurov's Trilogy (*Taurus*,

Moloch, The Sun); Takei's *Our Mother*; *The Last of the Mohicans*; *The Searchers*; *The Full Monty*; *the Shrek saga*; *Twelve Angry Men*; *Paths of Glory*; *Apocalypse Now*; *To Kill a Mockingbird*; *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *Life of Brian* . . .

Five favourite musicians or bands?

Aside from The Beatles (an inescapable generational choice), I am very fond of classical music. Schubert, Brahms, Puccini (Tosca above all), Stravinsky (*Petrushka* and *Sacre du Printemps*) are my favorites.

Your chief characteristic?

Being physically female and mentally androgynous.

Your bedside reading?

At the moment, a wonderfully informative and witty essay by linguist Francisco Villar, *The Indo-Europeans and the Origins of Europe*. Otherwise, crossword puzzles.

Your motto?

I have two: *Et si omnes, ego non* ("Even though all may do so, not I"), and Cats rule!