

A DARK SONG OF BLOOD

by Ben Pastor

This is what genre fans would call - rightly - a history-mystery. The biggest mystery, however, is why it has taken ten years for this splendid thriller to be published in the UK and with a change of title from the original “Kaputt Mundi” which is a fabulous pun given the novel’s setting: Rome in 1944 in the months leading up to the city’s liberation from the Germans and their remaining Fascist allies. It is the third in Pastor’s excellent series featuring the wounded, aristocratic German army officer Martin von Bora as a reluctant detective investigating three suspicious deaths in a time and place where death is common place.

Having a “good German” hero during the Second World War brings immediate comparison with Philip Kerr’s Bernie Gunther series and although different in style and pace, the Bora books certainly hold their own. Pastor’s writing, emotions and attention to period detail, however, stand comparison with the European spy stories of Alan Furst, which is a pretty exclusive club to be a member of. As with Furst, there are passages, often doom-filled poignant scenes, which stay long in the mind after finishing the book.

In *A Dark Song of Blood*, there is a section where Bora meets his estranged wife and the result is absolutely heart-breaking, and also a supremely tense race-against-time to rescue his Italian policeman side-kick from a mass execution (a true incident) by the SS in retaliation for partisan attacks. Ben (Verbena) Pastor, an Italian, is pitch-perfect when it comes not only to her historical settings, but also to the psychology and frailties of a large cast of predominantly male characters (soldiers, political satraps and Vatican cardinals), though her female characters are equally well-defined and memorably tinged with sadness. There is a fourth Bora novel (*The Tin Sky*) currently only available in Italian and Spanish. Will somebody please make sure I don’t have to wait for ten years for that one!

Mike Ripley