



Lumen

Ben Pastor

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"Pastor's plot is well crafted, her prose sharp. . . . A disturbing mix of detection and reflection."—*Publishers Weekly*

"A mystery, it rivets the reader until the end and beyond, with its twist of historical realities. A historical piece, it faithfully reproduces the grim canvas of war. A character study, it captures the thoughts and actions of real people, not stereotypes."—*The Free Lance-Star*

Part wartime political intrigue, detective story, psychological thriller, and religious mystery, Ben Pastor's debut follows a German army captain and a Chicago priest as they investigate the death of a nun in Nazi-occupied Poland.

In October 1939 Captain Martin Bora discovers the abbess, Mother Kazimierza, shot dead in her convent garden. Her alleged power to see the future has brought her a devoted following; her work and motto, "Lumen Christi Adiuva Nos" ("Light of Christ, help us"), appear also to have brought some enemies.

Father Malecki has come to Cracow, at the pope's bidding, to investigate Mother Kazimierza's powers. The Vatican orders him to stay and assist Bora in the inquiry into her killing. Stunned by the violence of the occupation and the ideology of his colleagues, Bora's sense of Prussian duty is tested to the breaking point. The interference of seductive actress Ewa Kowalska does not help matters.

Ben Pastor, born in Italy, has lived for thirty years in the United States, working as a university professor in Vermont. She is the author of other novels, including *The Water Thief* and *The Fire Walker* (St. Martin's Press).

Lumen Details

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From Reader Review Lumen for online ebook

Nancy Oakes says

Lumen is an interesting book. It is a novel of crime fiction, but the actual crimes and their solutions tend to take a back seat to the main character, Captain Martin Bora of the Wehrmacht Intelligence division. Bora is recently arrived in Cracow, just after the German army has invaded Poland, and finds himself involved in an unusual case involving the Abbess Kazimierza, a nun who supposedly has prophetic powers and who at times bears the stigmata. He had seen her before her death when he would accompany his superior officer Colonel Hofer, who went to see the Abbess on personal matters, so when she is killed, Bora is assigned to look into the case. He is assisted in his work by Father John Malecki, an American priest who has been assigned by the Vatican to investigate claims of her mystical abilities, and then later to examine the circumstances of her death. Bora is young, still in his 20s, newly married, and has left his wife behind in Germany. But his investigative prowess does not actually take center stage in this novel -- although he's quite good at what he does -- it is his gradual awareness of growing doubts about a cause that supports mass killing, cover ups, racial superiority and the deaths of innocent people which make Bora stand out as a character. He's a scrupulous person whose sense of duty doesn't necessarily extend over the full range of Nazi ideology and practices, and his own moral compass makes him a target for potential enemies in the SD (the Sicherheitsdienst -- Security Service), who were responsible for overseeing and carrying out many of the atrocities perpetrated against the Polish people. And there's no room in the Wehrmacht for a "young captain with scruples," according to his commanding officer Colonel Schenck:

"If you start feeling sorry so early on, Bora, you're screwed. What should you care? We have our orders and the SD have theirs. It was only an accident that you didn't have similar orders. And these Polack farmers -- they aren't even people, they're not even worth reproducing. I can see you're perturbed, but believe me, don't start caring...We're all in it. If it's guilt, we're all guilty. This is the way that it is."

Scenes change quickly in this novel, and the action is offered up from different perspectives throughout the story. The investigation into the death of the Abbess lasts from beginning to end, while other mysteries crop up in the meantime adding to the crime elements of the novel. At the same time, it's a solid piece of historical fiction, examining the psyche of a man who finds himself in a situation where normal laws don't apply and the world seems to have gone crazy. There are, believe it or not, bits and pieces of humor in spots, but overall, given the circumstances, there's little to smile about during this time. Pastor's novel is no lightweight thriller; she's written a much edgier story of a dark time in history.

Definitely recommended. Lumen is supposed to be the first in a series of books about Martin Bora, so I'll look forward to the second.

John says

This is one of the oddest and most engrossing novels I've read in a while. In one sense it's a crime novel/mystery, with not one but two homicides to investigate, and two different killers. In another sense it's a war novel, being set not long after the 1939 invasion of Poland by the Nazis. Added to which there are subtexts that seem to be ruminating on matters like the relative, subjective nature of good and evil.

A visionary abbess has been killed in Cracow, and the Nazis occupiers are concerned because, should the

crime prove to have been committed by one of their own, there might be a public outcry and rioting. And the possibility that she might have died at German hands is a real one: the SD are on a murderous rampage through the countryside and, unchecked as they are, who's to know what other atrocities they might commit on mere sadistic whim. Intelligence officer Captain Martin Bora is thus put in charge of the investigation and the Cracow cops are barred from it. Also involved is the Chicago Catholic priest Father Malecki, who was sent here to evaluate whether the abbess genuinely had the gift of prophecy, with an eye toward possibly her eventual beatification.

Bora and Malecki, for a while hugely suspicious of each other, must somehow cooperate to find out what happened. Both have problems with superiors who seem intent on putting obstacles in their way.

And Bora has another death to investigate. He was billeted in a luxury apartment (the Jewish owners having been evicted, and likely worse) with another officer called Retz, whose constant womanizing drove Bora crazy. Now Retz has been found dead with his head in the gas oven; the official verdict is suicide, but some tiny clues make Bora pretty certain there has been foul play.

Because of the general lack of concern among Bora's superiors about either case -- the latter is regarded as "case closed" while, as for the former, the attitude is who really cares about the death of a Polack? -- he must carry on doing his other duties as well. And the narrative follows along with him as he does so. This is one of the reasons this is such an odd duck of a novel: for sometimes quite long stretches the mystery aspects are forgotten. This could, I suppose, give the impression that the text is wandering a bit, but in fact they're absorbing and their presence has the interesting effect of making Bora (and the story) that much more real. Although Bora is perfectly capable of committing acts that you or I would find repulsive, at the same time he himself is repulsed by many of the deeds he witnesses his countrymen perform. Even though he's a Nazi, he has a core of honor, of integrity, even of decency, and as the book progresses we see this inner Martin Bora stir more and more. The realization is dawning on him that perhaps it's not that the brutal criminals he sees are perverting Nazism but that Nazism itself is fundamentally wrong -- and that the Germans should not be here in Poland. It's this slow process of redemption -- even though we see only its earlier stages (there are sequels) -- that makes *Lumen* so fascinating.

Ben Pastor, though born in Italy, was for many years an academic in the US. She has now I believe returned to Italy, where she continues to write about Martin Bora. (She has a series, too, about a Roman detective.) However, I enjoyed *Lumen* sufficiently that I'm somewhat timid about trying any of the sequels. This is a novel that's complete and completely satisfying in its own right.

Overall, this is a book I'd heartily recommend . . . although I could see some thriller readers being frustrated by what they might see as its perversities.

Chris says

The problem I had with this book was the fact that mystery wasn't really that mysterious and the character of Bora himself. While the book would be interesting because of a man's disenchantment or realization of what the Nazis are, this idea is subdued in the character. There really isn't much sense of conflict within the character.

Also distracting from the mystery is the fact that the Nazis apparently talked about sperm a lot.

Alot.

So much so.

The writing in terms of description and word choice is good. But the characterization felt a little weak in terms of Bora, who must carry the book. And he doesn't.

Steven Z. says

The key figure in Ben Pastor's excellent historical mystery LUMEN seems to be a murdered nun. Mother Matka Kazimierza was not just any nun. Known as the "Holy Abbess," Kazimierza was considered a visionary who could supposedly predict the future. In early October, 1939 her body is found in a convent in Cracow, Poland by a German officer who was surreptitiously meeting with her as he tried to cope with the approaching death of his four year old son. The Germans were slowly wrapping up control of Cracow following their invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. In addition they were implementing joint occupation of the country, as per the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 26, 1939, as the Soviet Union had invaded Poland in mid-September to seize their half of the country. The German Commander, Lt. Colonel Emile Schenck appoints Captain Martin Bora to head up the investigation into the nun's death.

LUMEN is the first in Pastor's well received series of historical mysteries that take place during World War II that Capt. Bora, a well-educated Ph.D from the University of Leipzig, and veteran of the Spanish Civil War is the main character. For the investigation of the "Holy Abbess" Bora, a Jesuit himself must collaborate with Father John Malecki, an American priest from Chicago who had been sent by the Archbishop to study the phenomenon of Matka Kazimierza. Once she was murdered he was instructed to remain in Cracow and assist in the investigation with the German authorities.

Bora faced a number of difficulties in dealing with the case. First, his roommate Major Richard Retz had a very productive love life that made Bora very uncomfortable as he was expected to stay away from their apartment for Retz's liaisons. Second, were his personal values. Though only in Cracow for a short period of time he witnessed a number of things that more than troubled him. The use of Jewish slave labor; executions; beatings; revenge killings; rape; massacres; seizure of private property; enforcement of racial laws; and the destruction of books and documents from university libraries all went against his moral code. Third, he resented the constant lectures from his commander concerning what was expected of the pure blooded Aryan male – propagate the Reich for the next generation. Lastly, trying to work with Father Malecki whose loyalties and values seemed to conflict with his own. As the story evolves Bora's moral confusion no longer controls him as he witnesses what Nazism has brought to Poland. Bora's consciousness raising awareness stems from seeing Ukrainians hanged, and "Polack farmers" shot, and while some remained alive locked in a barn to be burned to death.

Pastor has an excellent grasp of historical events that are woven into her story. German-Russian distrust is on full display over boundaries and accusations that each side is engaging in atrocities. The action of the German SD, or secret police reflect everything Bora finds reprehensible about Nazi rule. The competition between the Wehrmacht and the SS for control of certain investigations, jurisdiction, and territorial oversight is analyzed carefully.

The core of the story involves why the "Holy Abbess" was murdered? Was it a result of her predictions for

the future? Did she help the Polish underground? These questions factor into the investigation as does the Abbess' predictions as to whether they were apocalyptic or political.

Pastor does a remarkable job developing her characters, particularly the relationship that grows between Bora and Father Malecki. The author also develops the characters of a number of Polish actresses, especially Ewa Kowalska and her daughter Helena Sokora who were both involved with Bora's roommate. There are numerous other characters from the Polish Archbishop, SS Captain Salle-Weber, Lt. Colonel Nowotny, the German coroner, among others who greatly impact the plot.

Pastor's novel is a combination of the Catholic faith, politics, ethics, as some are conflicted by events, while others seem to enjoy what ultimately will lead to the Holocaust and murder of countless Poles. Lumen (light) and darkness are in conflict with each other throughout the story and through Bora's quest for truth the reader should have a satisfactory read. If you are a fan of Philip Kerr's Bernie Guenther series you will especially enjoy Pastor's work. I look forward to enjoying, LIAR MOON the next installment of the Martin Bora series.

Susan says

Set just after the German invasion of Poland in 1939, this is a well written, intelligent thriller. Captain Martin Bora is a young officer who wants to make his mark, while being uncomfortable about many of the things he witnesses and also takes part in. The author makes us both aware of Bora's complicity and yet also his humanity. "His eyes burned and ached with smoke, and he wouldn't wipe them for fear of appearing moved, because he wasn't," as one passage puts it so well. His troubled encounter with a previous piano teacher and his complaints about shootings leads to his superior office, Colonel Schenck, stating, "We're all in it. If it's guilt, we're all guilty".

When Bora first arrives in Poland, he is billeted with Retz, who is out to enjoy life and relishes the advantages of uniform. He is also working with Colonel Hofer, who has been visiting an Abbess, Mother Kazimierza, claimed to be a saint. This leads to Bora visiting the convent with Hofer, where he comes into contact with Father Malecki, a priest and American citizen, who has been given the task by the Church of investigating the unofficial cult surrounding the Abbess. When Mother Kazimierza is shot, Father Malecki unwillingly has to help Bora investigate. Was she a saint? Was she involved in the underground or working with the Germans?

Everything about this book works well, drawing you in and demanding to be picked up and read. Bora is a very human character and you feel both for him and Father Malecki and the difficult positions both find themselves in. Colonel Schenck, with his obsession about reproduction, and Retz and his complete selfishness, bring depth to the book. Everyone has something to hide and even Bora and Malecki cannot be open with each other, even if investigating together. I highly recommend this book and hope that more in the series will become available soon. If you enjoy this novel (and you will!) you may also like The Warsaw Anagrams and Zoo Station.

Gram says

Set in the aftermath of the German invasion of Poland in late 1939, this is a well written thriller about a Wehrmacht captain, Martin Bora and an American Catholic priest, Father Malecki who join forces to investigate the death of an Abbess, Mother Kazimierza, claimed to be a saint.

The story is full of religious overtones as Martin also has to deal with his horror at the massacres of countless Polish civilians by the mobile killing units of Germany's SD (Sicherheitsdienst). And when he tries to document these murders in a report to his superiors, he is warned that it will affect not only his military career but also his life.

Meanwhile, he has to deal with the mysterious death of his roommate, Major Retz, (a lusty, drunken individual whose character is almost the complete opposite of Bora's) who seems to have committed suicide. As the story unfolds, Martin becomes convinced that Retz was murdered.

Much of the story is taken up with Bora's conflict of acting on orders as an Army officer, while agonising over the murder of civilians by the SD and the actions of the SS as they round up Polish Jews for deportation. And his erstwhile partner, Father Malecki, also has to tread a fine line between officially investigating claims that the dead Abbess was a miracle worker and deserves sainthood while also trying to help stem the threats of violence and death to Polish civilians.

In recent times, there seem to have been a surfeit of books about the work of "good Germans" during the Second World War, but this story gives an insight into the mind of a decent man who, in his own small way, does his best to mitigate the vicious excesses of a conquering army.

Moloch says

Nell'imbarazzo della scelta fra tutti i libri che ho in casa o sul Kindle, non sapevo che pesci pigliare, e così ecco che ho preso in mano uno degli ultimi acquisti, che aveva attirato la mia attenzione qualche mese fa quando se ne era parlato nel gruppo "Goodreads Italia". Questo nonostante *Lumen*, di Ben Pastor, sia il primo di una serie di gialli, e io sono un po' "stanca" di queste innumerevoli serie con detective/commissari/marescialli della più varia estrazione come protagonisti (poi magari, alla faccia della coerenza, le leggo e me ne innamoro, ma mi ha stufato "l'idea"), e non mi piace cominciarne una se non ho a portata di mano le puntate successive (nel caso non riesca più a fermarmi).

Ottobre 1939: all'indomani della fulminea conquista tedesca della Polonia, spartita con l'alleato sovietico, arriva a Cracovia il giovane capitano della *Wehrmacht* Martin Bora. La guerra, è evidente, non durerà ancora per molto, c'è solo da controllare quello che ora è il Governatorato generale, annientare le ultime disperate sacche di resistenza, nonché avviare altre operazioni più segrete di cui si occupano le SS e i Servizi di Sicurezza. Per Bora, se si dimostrerà efficiente e affidabile, quello potrà essere l'inizio di una brillante carriera.

Aristocratico (il nome sarebbe Martin *von* Bora, ma ha rinunciato alla particella nobiliare), algido, nobilmente composto e controllato, profondamente imbevuto dei valori di onore e senso del dovere propri della tradizione militare germanica, terribilmente innamorato della giovane moglie, che ha dovuto lasciare per il fronte pochi giorni dopo le nozze, per lui la prima sgradita sorpresa è scoprire che è alloggiato, in un appartamento requisito a una famiglia ebrea, assieme a un commilitone dal carattere totalmente opposto, il maggiore Richard Retz, volgare, bevitore, la cui unica preoccupazione è riallacciare i contatti con la sua antica amante, l'attrice polacca Ewa Kowalska, portandosi a letto anche altre donne, tra cui la stessa figlia di lei, Helenka. A Cracovia, nella Polonia profondamente cattolica, badessa del convento di Nostra Signora delle Sette Penne è Madre Kazimierza, personalità carismatica, che ha fama di avere doti mistiche e profetiche e gode di grande prestigio presso la popolazione: fra i suoi devoti, inaspettatamente, c'è anche il colonnello tedesco Hofer. Dal Vaticano, per indagare sul caso della suora, che pare abbia anche le stimmate, è stato mandato il padre Malecki, americano di origine polacca.

Bene, dunque questa è la situazione, quando avviene il fatto che mette in moto gli eventi: Madre Kazimierzka viene uccisa. Da chi? Dai tedeschi, infastiditi da alcune sue profezie interpretabili in chiave politica? Dai partigiani polacchi? Ma perché? È proprio Martin Bora a dover indagare, assieme a padre Malecki. Sulla scena arriva anche il sostituto di Hofer, crollato dopo la morte della sua guida spirituale, il colonnello Schenck, uno dei personaggi più interessanti del romanzo: fanatico dell'eugenetica e della perpetuazione della razza, con i suoi assillanti consigli non richiesti a Bora sulla necessità di procreare e di non disperdere la propria energia sessuale, riesce ad apparire allo stesso tempo imbarazzante e ridicolo ma anche sinistramente inquietante (ma bella anche la figura del patrigno di Bora, che compare solo verso la fine, emblema di militare "vecchio stile", conservatore e autoritario ma anche profondamente ostile a questa nuova classe dirigente fanatica, volgare ed efferata, che disprezza).

Ma l'indagine sulla suora (e quella su un'altra morte che avverrà dopo) è solo una parte dei doveri del protagonista: il giovane ufficiale è costretto ad immergersi in una guerra, e soprattutto nella "routine" dell'amministrazione dei territori occupati, le cui modalità gli risultano estranee e sempre più ripugnanti. Il suo spirito di osservazione e la sua coscienza lo portano a vedere cose di cui i suoi superiori nell'esercito preferiscono non occuparsi e che le SS e i servizi di sicurezza gli consigliano "caldamente" di lasciar stare, se ha a cuore la sua carriera. E Bora, schiacciato fra la sua coscienza di cattolico e il dovere dell'ubbidienza, ancora, a queste date, si piega, ma già avverte che la sua guerra e la sua "carriera" saranno molto diverse da come le aveva immaginate.

Mi sono dilungata fin troppo. Come spesso accade, la risoluzione del mistero (anzi, dei due misteri) conta meno della psicologia e dei tormenti del protagonista, e soprattutto, in questo caso, del tragico contesto in cui è ambientata la storia (tanto è vero che la scoperta di "chi è stato" avviene in modo assai poco coinvolgente e interessante). L'autrice, nell'appendice (scritta a distanza di anni dalla pubblicazione originaria del romanzo, datato 1999, in occasione di questa edizione uscita per Sellerio nel 2012), spiega che, se per la creazione del personaggio di Bora esistono modelli reali (il più ovvio è sicuramente Claus von Stauffenberg), ciò che le interessava era analizzare i conflitti fra le imposizioni e le aspettative delle figure autoritarie da cui Bora ha scelto di essere controllato (la sua famiglia, l'esercito, la Patria, la moglie distaccata e frivola, che in *Lumen* non compare mai ma che è ossessivamente presente nei suoi pensieri) e la sua coscienza interiore, il suo senso del bene e del male.

Attenzione agli spoiler (come sempre nascosti) in questo prossimo paragrafo. La mia "debolezza" è quella di affezionarmi troppo ai personaggi secondari: in questo caso, (view spoiler). Devo ammettere che non mi sarebbe dispiaciuto se (view spoiler); purtroppo invece (view spoiler) e io, lo ammetto, non sono riuscita a "godermi" la seconda parte del romanzo nella stessa misura della prima, (view spoiler)

Come detto, questo è il primo romanzo di una serie che per ora conta nove puntate, anche se si fanno riferimenti (piuttosto precisi) a indagini precedenti di Martin Bora (durante il periodo in cui fu volontario in Spagna): saranno probabilmente spunti che l'autrice svilupperà in libri successivi (o ha rivisto e ampliato il romanzo per la ripubblicazione?).

Al solito, ora si pone il "dilemma": andare avanti con la serie oppure no? In genere, quando parto con la prima puntata, tiro dritta come un treno fino alla fine, rischiando spesso "l'indigestione" (arrivata agli ultimi romanzi mi stanco, mi sembrano ripetitivi, mi viene voglia di qualcos'altro, mi "rovino" un po' l'esperienza...): è successo più o meno così con Eymerich, con Brandstetter, con *Cut & Run* ecc. Forse vale la pena di proseguire con le indagini di Martin Bora (è un contesto che mi interessa, il personaggio e i comprimari non sono banali), però magari non subito: non è che, a differenza degli altri esempi citati, sia rimasta col desiderio impellente di ritrovare immediatamente il personaggio.

Dolceluna says

La mia prima lettura thriller ambientata in un periodo storico che in genere apprezzo molto, quello della seconda guerra mondiale. Con la precisione siamo nell'ottobre del 1939 nella Cracovia occupata da poco dalle truppe tedesche: Martin Von Bora, giovane capitano della Wehrmacht, occupato nelle operazioni belliche, viene anche incaricato di indagare sulla morte di Madre Kazimierza, badessa venerata dalla popolazione come una santa capace di operare miracoli. Coadiuvato nelle indagini da padre Malecki, sacerdote americano ma di origine polacca inviato dal Vaticano a Cracovia per verificare l'autenticità dei prodigi che faceva la badessa, Bora si rende conto che sul capo della religiosa gravavano interessi diversi e che molte persone avrebbe potuto desiderare, per ragioni diverse la sua morte; lo stesso superiore di Bora, il colonnello Hofer, faceva spesso visita alla badessa nella speranza che potesse guarire il suo figlioletto, gravemente malato. Peccato che, nel corso delle indagini, anche Hofer venga ritrovato morto e il panorama inizi a complicarsi un po'.

Sinceramente, come thriller in sè, "Lumen", è piuttosto piatto: la parte investigativa, al di là della trama allettante, risulta infatti lenta e fiacca. Ma come romanzo storico, con l'aggiunta di questo, seppur flebile, retrogusto giallo, beh, è davvero un cioccolatino. L'atmosfera della Cracovia degli anni '30, una città destabilizzata dall'autorità tedesca e in preda al disordine e alla violenza crescente, fra i quartieri popolari, la costruzione del ghetto, le campagne devastate e il convento in cui viene ritrovata morta la badessa, si respira a pieni polmoni. E così il suo clima di confusione, di paura, di mistero e di sospetto, per l'occupazione di una forza militare esterna e per la scoperta del cadavere di quella che, nella città, era considerata una donna benedetta.

Per la prima volta poi, ho seguito un protagonista che sta dalla parte del "nemico", degli invasori, dei tedeschi, ma un protagonista molto particolare, diviso fra il suo senso di obbedienza e il suo personale senso di giustizia derivato dalla sua forte sensibilità e da un'educazione umanistica. I dialoghi fra Bora e i suoi superiori e le loro richieste nei suoi confronti mi hanno confermato la metodicità, la rigidità, oserei dire l'assurdità della loro mentalità, in quello che è considerato uno dei momenti più bui e più folli della storia contemporanea in Europa.

In definitiva è un bel romanzo storico, e, a mio avviso, come tale va letto e come tale potrà essere apprezzato.

Jane says

Having read and really liked the first two of Pastor's Roman mysteries, I read this installment in her Martin Bora series. Although not as impressed by this series as by the former, I still found this novel to be well worthwhile. Well plotted and well written, this one concerned a Wehrmacht captain in Intelligence, Martin Bora, during the Nazi occupation of Poland. The story begins in late fall 1939, when Captain Bora is called by his then-superior to investigate the death of an abbess, Mother Kazimierza, a prophetess and stigmatic. Through her prayers, she supposedly has worked miracles. Bora works with a Polish-American priest [America has not yet entered the war] to find the culprit. Later, Bora's roommate, a Major Retz, dies; is it suicide, or as Bora suspects, murder? The author leads us through many twists and turns to ingenious solutions. The Latin word *Lumen* in its many meanings besides "light" is an important clue. A large part of the novel is Bora's character development: all through the novel his Prussian devotion to duty wars with his

innate decency and morality after witnessing some of the excesses of senseless brutality and cruelty by the occupying forces.

Keith Currie says

Congratulations to the publisher for reissuing this fine novel and making it available to a new readership. When I read the first Martin Bora novel some years ago, I was really impressed and looked forward to more of the series. The series is available in Italian, French, German, Dutch, Polish and other languages but up to now not in English, the language the books were originally written in! In Lumen Pastor has created a wonderful evocation of a time and a place, Krakow and its hinterland shortly after the German occupation, and before the Germans are fully settled in. The edginess and brutality on the streets and in the countryside provide a counterpoint to the claustrophobic world of the convent where the murder of the abbess takes place. The investigator, Captain Martin Bora of the Wehrmacht, like all the characters in the book, is deftly and convincingly drawn, a soldier with duty, obedience and the army in his blood, a cultured man who denies his aristocratic background, a lapsed Catholic nevertheless affected by decency and conscience, a husband who has made a bad marriage. Part of what is fascinating about this novel is how the reader can observe Bora's growing disillusion and disengagement with the Nazi authorities he serves. Another noteworthy aspect is how Pastor draws those Nazis. They are by no means caricatures and it is thought-provoking to consider their own mindsets and justification of behaviour. I suppose what is at the heart of this novel is the question of the value of focusing on an individual murder when mass murder is taking place all around. Read it. If you want to be made to think, you will not be disappointed.

I fervently hope that more of the Bora novels will now become available in English. Otherwise, I will just have to learn Italian!

Alfonso D'agostino says

<http://capitolo23.com/2018/12/29/rece...>

Il successo di un buon libro giallo o noir, si sa, sta spesso nel suo protagonista. Tanto più – ovviamente – se ci troviamo alle prese con una serie.

Martin Bora, ufficiale della Wehrmacht tedesca in piena seconda guerra mondiale, non è una eccezione. Io l'ho conosciuto in ritardo, nonostante almeno un paio di amici me ne cantassero le lodi: colpa, credo, di una prima e frettolosa lettura durante un viaggio in treno che ricordo confusamente di aver interrotto dopo poche pagine. Capita, ci sono libri che fanno viaggi immensi e poi ritornano (semicit.)

(che poi, a pensarci bene, un protagonista che si chiama Bora non può non incontrare il mio campanilistico gusto personale)

Martin Bora non è il tipico investigatore a cui siamo ormai più che avvezzi: Bora è prima di tutto un soldato, un vero militare, ligio al dovere, al giuramento fatto, quasi uno spartano. Ma ha anche una personalità complessa che forse non ti aspetteresti: una certa curiosità intellettuale, un amore per la ricerca della verità a discapito della “carriera” e soprattutto una umanità che poco ha a che fare con il ruolo che ricopre. Ne derivano azioni – anche terribili – che vanno inquadrare nel periodo storico che la trama di Lumen propone:

siamo in pieno secondo conflitto mondiale e nella Polonia occupata dai nazisti.

L'assassinio di una monaca polacca in odore di santità, avvenuto dentro il poco accessibile convento, e le mille possibili interpretazioni del termine latino Lumen (che alla monaca era indissolubilmente legato) danno il via ad una indagine e – forse soprattutto – all'amicizia fra Bora e un prete americano: un rapporto complicato e commuovente, profondo ben oltre il ruolo dei due personaggi e che oltrepassa più volte il vincolo di ubbidienza al dovere e le sue conseguenze, vero concetto cardine del romanzo.

E la successiva avventura di Martin Bora è già pronta lì, sul mio comodino.

Sandra says

Lumen è il primo romanzo di una serie scritta dalla scrittrice italoamericana Maria Verbena Volpi (pseudonimo Ben Pastor), con protagonista il capitano della Wehrmacht Martin Bora. Non mi piacciono le letture seriali, ho voluto provare a vedere come era questo giallo tra virgolette, di cui mi era stato parlato bene.

Giallo tra virgolette perché la trama gialla è fiacca e non coinvolge, le indagini riguardano l'assassinio di una suora, la madre superiore di un convento di Cracovia trovata morta per un colpo di pistola nel chiostro del monastero. A ciò si aggiungono le indagini per la morte di un maggiore tedesco che divideva la casa con Martin Bora, un gaudente militare che si dedicava più a correre dietro alle sottane delle donne polacche che alle attività marziali, un porco, in parole povere. Chi indaga è Martin Bora, ed i fatti, visti i riferimenti all'esercito tedesco, si svolgono a Cracovia nel 1939, quando la Germania occupò la Polonia ed ebbe inizio la seconda guerra mondiale.

Il lato più interessante del libro è proprio questo: l'ambientazione storica e il personaggio di Martin Bora, che nasce come un freddo ufficiale ligio al dovere e si evolve, attraversando una crisi di coscienza che lo coinvolge sia dal lato strettamente personale e sentimentale che soprattutto dilaniando il suo animo tra dovere militare e la propria coscienza, tra la morte che l'esercito tedesco, di cui le SS sono il braccio violento e la bocca che ingoia vite umane, porta nella terra conquistata, e il senso di umanità e di rispetto per la vita che in Martin Bora, aristocratico, colto, musicista, laureato in filosofia, cattolico e lettore di Thomas Mann (messo all'indice dai nazisti), non è fortunatamente morto ma sopravvive come un "lumen", una luce nelle tenebre.

In fin dei conti è stata una lettura che mi è piaciuta per l'ambientazione storica e per lo studio psicologico del protagonista ed anche dei comprimari, quale padre Malecki, un prete americano che collabora con Bora alle indagini divenendo alla fine suo confessore e confidente, anche lui alle prese con una sua crisi di coscienza personale tra la fedeltà alla Chiesa, connivente con i tedeschi, e alla sua coscienza.

Elli says

Church vs. State? Not really. Similar basic beliefs, but strongly different areas of sensitivity, although both were quite sensitive and both really felt strongly antagonized by the lack of prioritized concern for other people in the line of fire, so-called! But, who killed the Abbess and for goodness sakes, why! All of a sudden priest and Wehrmacht captain are collaborating on a murder in Poland. And as situations become clearer, a few other situations come to light including more deaths. Very interesting book. My only real complaint is that at the end a birds eye view was given to future sequels to the new Martin Bora series. I would have

rather learned these details when reading the books as they come out!

Beata says

An interesting read and I liked Bora, Polish words need to be reedited, though. Sometimes an author wants to squeeze in too much factual info into fiction and you feel it is too much. Will definitely follow Bora.

Tony says

Set in the months following the German invasion of Poland in 1939, this first book in the Martin Bora series follows a Captain in the Intelligence arm of the German army who is tasked with solving the murder of a famous Polish nun in Cracow (aka Krakow). He's given a sidekick or sorts, in the form of a visiting Catholic priest from Chicago, who has been sent by the Vatican to write a report about the nun as a possible candidate for sainthood. Meanwhile, he must also deal with the odious womanizing officer he is roommates with, and the troubling increase in civilian killings he learns of. Captain Bora is a thoughtful, university educated, sober soldier, whose notions of honor and law conflict with the wartime reality and his own desires. The result is a mystery that spends a good deal more time on his moral struggles than your typical whodunit.

The book does a very good job of placing the reader in the early moments of World War II, as seen through the eyes of a willing soldier who isn't yet aware of the nature of the beast he's a part of. Some of the book's best moments are when Bora comes into contact and conflict with the SS, who are clearly engaged in some completely different and separate agenda from his own straightforward military one. There are other nice details, such as references to Bora's previous service in Spain during the Civil War, and a tense meeting with a Soviet unit (recall that at the time, Germany and the USSR split Poland between them). Unfortunately, the period detail isn't enough to sustain the somewhat plodding pace of the story, which wheezes slowly through Bora's investigation of the nun's killing and a subplot involving several Polish actresses involved with his roommate. There's also a lot of discussion of religion and faith with the Chicago priest that didn't connect with me at all. The premise of a German army "detective" is a good one, but on the whole it feels like a first book in need of an experienced editor who could give it a little more shape and trim some of the fat. Originally written and published in 1999, it has been republished in conjunction with the second in the series, *Liar Moon*.
