

When imagination is rooted in reality

WWII novel skillfully explores history

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Many otherwise thoughtful people mistakenly believe that fiction writing – and crime fiction in particular -- is merely escapist literature. They deride reading novels as a waste of time, arguing that one would be better served by reading non-fiction works.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Much of what passes for non-fiction isn't: it's the result of dated or flawed research or actual bias, misleading readers every bit as much — if not more — than well-researched works of fiction.

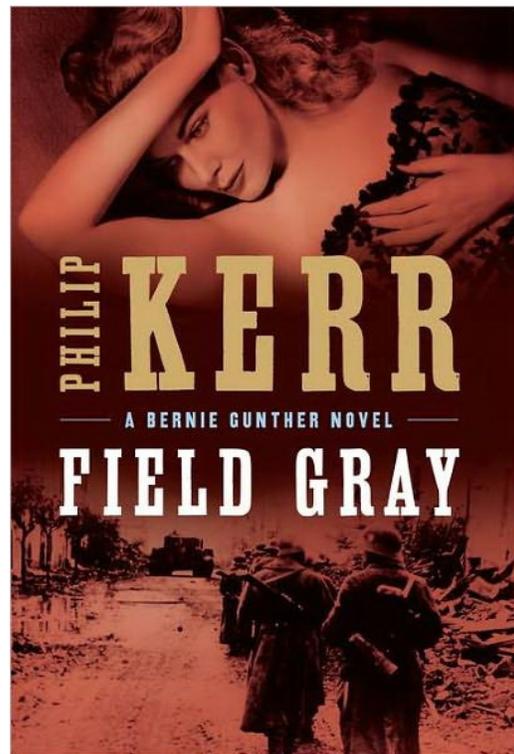
Moreover, in the hands of a skilled novelist events from the past can come alive, and readers can gain important insights into what happened, how they happened, and why people behaved as they did. Such knowledge can help us to move beyond the past and carve out a better future, both for ourselves and those who come after us.

WWII was arguably the most significant moment of European history since the Reformation. Although the war was indeed worldwide, nowhere were those questions more compelling than in the Third Reich, where basically honest, ordinary people were thrust into the maelstrom of events they neither understood nor controlled. It not only redrew national boundaries and resulted in the deaths of tens of millions of

people; it also forced us to confront two basic questions of human existence: what sorts of actions are we as a species capable of, and how far should each of us go in confronting the spread of unspeakable evil?

And the old adage still holds true: those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

In this week's pick, then, Philip Kerr addresses one of the most difficult places and periods in human history to comprehend: Germany during the Second World War.



Philip Kerr

The Scottish-born writer Philip Kerr has penned some of the most insightful and significant novels of the past twenty years. His Bernie Gunther series chronicles the saga of an ex-police detective and PI in Berlin prior to the war, and follows him as he is co-opted into joining Kripo, the investigative arm of the State Security Police. Then, in the aftermath of the war and a turn in a Russian POW camp, Bernie re-establishes himself as a PI, helping people to trace their missing relatives. But Bernie's past won't leave him behind, and there are people who want to judge him for his wartime actions, and others who merely want to use him. *March Violets*, the first novel in Kerr's Berlin Noir series, earned him the prestigious *Prix du roman d'aventures* in 1993, and after penning a series of standalones he returned to the Bernie Gunther tales, garnering the CWA Ellis Peters Historical Award for 2009's *If the Dead Rise Not*. Since then Kerr has gone from strength to strength, building up a global following of enthusiastic fans along the way. His most recent effort, *Field Gray*, is a true tour de force, and will win him many more readers.

Field Gray

(Marion Wood Books/Putnam, 2011)

Not surprisingly, as *Field Gray* opens Bernie is already in trouble. He's in pre-Castro Cuba, a nation ruled politically by the dictator Fulgencio Batista, and dominated economically by the underworld boss Meyer Lansky. Bernie works for Lansky, but is pressured by a local police official to spy on his boss. Not a career move calculated to enhance one's longevity, but Bernie is threatened with deportation back to Germany, where he's wanted for murder. As

Bernie says, 'A man doesn't work for his enemies unless he has little choice in the matter.'

Before long Bernie is headed for the eastern tip of Cuba in his boat with a passenger, a woman fleeing Havana for shooting a policeman. When their boat is stopped by American military looking for gun smugglers, the woman panics and shoots one of the boarding officers, and both are arrested. It's not long before the Americans learn who they've got, and Bernie is returned to Germany to be investigated for war crimes. The balance of the tale spans a twenty-year period from the mid-30s to the mid-50s, covering the buildup to World War II, the war itself and finally its aftermath. Layer by layer, Bernie's life is laid bare to the reader, who cannot help but ask himself *what would I have done in that situation?*

An impeccably-researched, rich soup of a novel

Field Gray is an ambitious work, structurally complex and narrated from a first-person point of view with multiple flashbacks spanning three decades.

Dark and cynical, the novel is classic Noir. Anti-hero Bernie Gunther has been compared to Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe: he is a loner with a smart mouth that frequently gets him into trouble. Bernie's virtue is that he always says what's on his mind; it is also his vice, often earning him a beating or worse.

Peppered with Bernie's dark humour, Kerr's novel explores at length the moral landscape of all sides during the Second World War, where it seems no one can lay claim to the high ground. Bernie's character may be ambiguous, but his questions are probing and he is not

easily put off from examining in painful detail the intersection where conscience and compromise collide. Kerr explores this moral no-man's-land, offering penetrating insights without ever lapsing into an apologia.

Field Gray is an impeccably-researched, rich soup of a novel by one of the finest writers of our day, the sort of exquisitely-nuanced tale that John Le Carré might have written if he'd been German. Transcending the boundary between the literary novel and crime writing, it is a fine example of how, in the hands of an accomplished writer, a work of fiction can indeed shed light on the world of fact while at the same time provide a gripping read.

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