

When art imitates life:

Philip Kerr weaves fact with fiction

Suspended Sentences

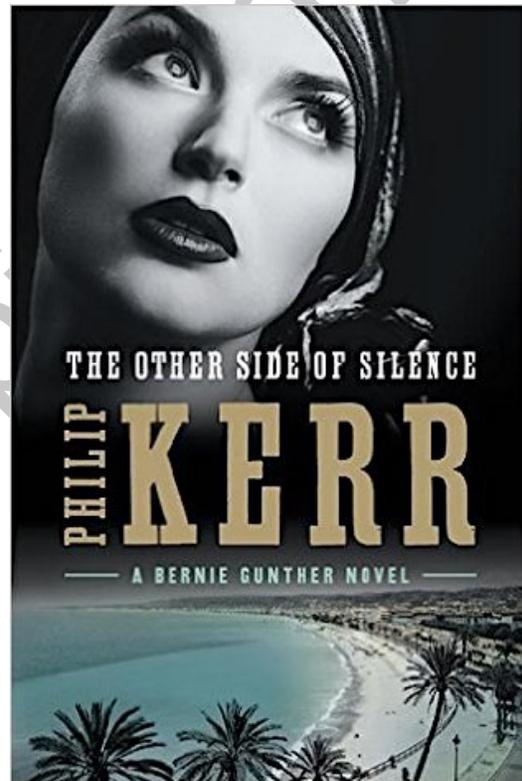
by Jim Napier

Ten novels in, Crime writer Philip Kerr is showing no sign of slacking off. In his long-running series featuring ex-cop and private detective Bernie Gunther Kerr skillfully weaves fact with fiction to produce another spellbinding tale rooted in events of the Second World War, and addresses his trademark themes of guilt and responsibility on all sides.

Aware of his own vulnerability as a morally-compromised homicide detective during the Nazi years, Bernie Gunther is determined to keep a low profile. So it's not surprising that in 1956 we find him working as a deferential concierge in the Grand Hotel in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, on the French Riviera. Like concierges around the world Bernie focuses on his job as a fixer, discretely ministering to the needs of the hotel's upscale clientele.

All that is about to change as one evening Bernie finds himself roped into becoming the fourth hand in a game of bridge. To his chagrin he finds the game is presided over by none other than Somerset Maugham

at his home, the Villa Mauresque, located on the edge of town.



But Bernie soon learns that his invitation does not rest on his prowess at cards. His host is being blackmailed for his homosexuality, and while France may be tolerant of one's personal proclivities, England and the US—where many of Maugham's personal fortune lies—are not; public exposure could jeopardise an American film

deal and prevent him from returning to his homeland, where homosexuality is still a crime.

Aware of Bernie's formidable investigative skills, Maugham enlists him in an effort to deal with the issue. But complicating matters Maugham had worked during the war for the British Secret Service, who take a more-than-casual interest in the case, wondering whether there is a mole within their organization and what the implications might be for their own situation.

There is another fly in the ointment as well, in the form of a former captain in the Sicherheitdienst—the intelligence arm of the Nazi Party during the war, and closely allied with the Gestapo. The captain and Bernie have a personal

history, and are destined to play a game of cat-and-mouse, where the prize is not merely whose slimy past is exposed, but also who lives or dies.

The Other side of Silence (G. P. Putnam's Sons) is a layered and nuanced *tour de force*, a compelling and insightful novel. As always his work is rooted firmly in historical fact, and many of the characters in his novel are not merely based on figures from real life, but carry their actual names. Kerr has even appended a brief account of each of them, including their fates, at the end of the book—which adds greatly to the reader's enjoyment. This is a fine book for armchair historians and those who simply enjoy an entertaining and literate read. Highly recommended.

Jim Napier is a crime-fiction reviewer based in Quebec. His book reviews and author interviews have been featured in several Canadian papers as well as on such websites as *Spinetingler Magazine*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots*, *Reviewing the Evidence* and *Type M for Murder*. Napier also has an award-winning crime-fiction site, *Deadly Diversions*, and recently published his own crime novel titled *Legacy*, the first of a series. He can be reached at jimnapiermysteries