

Nazi Noir

Gunther soldiers on in Kerr's latest

Suspended Sentences

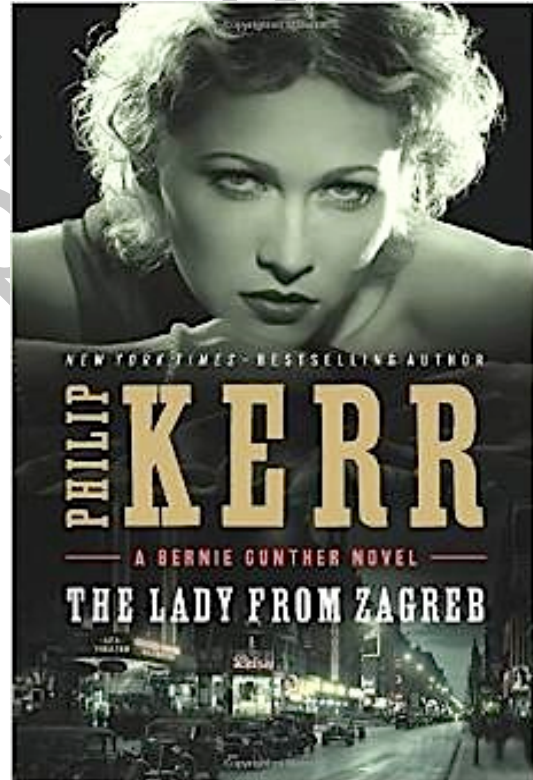
by Jim Napier

The tenth in the impressive Bernie Gunther series, *The Lady From Zagreb* features the former Berlin cop who finds himself one of the many who now serve Nazi masters, and who constantly strive to walk the narrow (and dangerous) path between following outrageous orders while maintaining some vestige of personal integrity. In his latest outing Gunther does both, in the process alternating between solving more than one murder yet adding to the death toll himself when it proves necessary.

The tale begins in 1956, on the French Riviera. Gunther recalls the events of the mid-nineteen forties, and his relationship with a devastatingly beautiful Croatian actress named Dalia Dresner, with whom he'd had a brief but intense relationship at the time. The story soon returns to Berlin during the same era, just after the infamous butcher Richard Heyrich had been killed by Czech patriots, for which the Nazis were taking horrific reprisals.

In the midst of this turmoil the Germans, of all people, have arranged an international crime conference and its organizer, General Arthur Nebe, has tapped Gunther to be their keynote speaker. He's

been ordered to give a talk on a well-known case in which he ran to earth a notorious strangler. Gunther does not miss the irony of focusing on a lone killer's actions in the face of the



much more significant atrocities being perpetrated at that very moment by his Nazi masters. Adding to this macabre piece of political theatre, the conference is taking place at Wannsee, the very site where the Nazis had only recently met to

determine the fate of Germany's – indeed Europe's – Jewish population.

During the conference Gunther is introduced to Paul Meyer-Schwertensbach, a Swiss policeman and crime writer who takes a professional interest in Gunther's work. He is reluctantly drawn into playing host for the officer and his assistant during their visit. But when an elderly lawyer is murdered nearby, Gunther begins to wonder if they might have been involved.

Meanwhile Josef Goebbels, the Minister of Truth and Propaganda, has become besotted with the film actress Dahlia Dresner. She'd been a star in Germany, and he wants her to return from Zurich to make a film for him. The problem is, Dahlia isn't interested. Goebbels dispatches Gunther to Switzerland with *Carte Blanche* to persuade her otherwise, but fearing that he might, like so many before him, fail to return, he arranges a hostage who remains behind.

When he learns that Bernie is headed for Switzerland, General Walter Schellenberg "asks" (a word that has a special connotation in Nazi Germany) Gunther to deliver to drive a new Mercedes-Benz roadster to Zurich, a gift for Herr Meyer. It seems that, despite their famous neutrality, the Swiss and the Germans are involved in some sort of arrangement, and Gunther figures the roadster is to sweeten the deal.

Before it has ended Gunther will find himself in some very strange company, searching Yugoslavia for a Catholic priest or a Slavic war

criminal – he's not sure which – trying to convince shadowy interrogators that he's not a high-ranking Nazi officer, and trying to avoid the Swiss police. It will require all of his wits to survive, let alone succeed in his several missions.

As the tale moves toward its conclusion it returns to the Riviera in 1956, where Gunther is reunited with someone from the events of the forties, to a conclusion that fits perfectly with the jaded plotline and leaves the reader wanting more.

As we've come to expect, Philip Kerr's latest, though nominally a work of fiction, is based solidly and uncompromisingly on fact. The major characters are all drawn from the events of the day, and run the gamut from Germans to Swiss to Slavs to Americans, though in some cases the names have been changed. As a result, the reader is left with a clear indication of the events and personalities of the time. And in a bonus at the end, Kerr describes the postwar fate of many of the real-life figures in the story.

Peppered with dark humour and dialogue fueled by Bernie Gunther's insolence, the reader constantly wonders just how far he can – or will – go before he crosses the line and prompts his Nazi masters to be rid of him. Philip Kerr has done the nigh impossible: given readers an admirable figure who is more than a little flawed, and setting his actions against a background of the brutalities of the Third Reich and all the other horrors of war. It is a superb example of Nazi Noir, the narrative and dialogue

echoing the glib, cynical interplay we have come to admire in the great period noir classics of the silver screen. Kerr effortlessly weaves a complex tale that moves from the corridors of the Nazi hierarchy, where everything is black or white, to the morally ambiguous arena of what are at their core are ordinary people on the fringes of power, simply trying desperately to stay alive, and where the real trick is figuring out who is which. As Gunther says,

Evil doesn't come wearing evening dress and speaking with a foreign accent. It doesn't have

a scar on its face and a sinister smile. It rarely if ever owns a castle with a laboratory in the attic, and it doesn't have joined-up eyebrows and gap teeth. The fact is, it's easy to recognize an evil man when you see him: he looks just like you or me."

The Lady From Zagreb is, hands down, the best thing I've read in many month – if not longer.

The Lady from Zagreb is published by G. P. Putnam's Sons (Penguin), April 7, 2015.

Originally reviewed on *January Magazine*, April 25, 2015.

Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing The Evidence*, *January magazine*, the *Montreal Review of Books*, the *Ottawa Review of Books*, and *Amazon.com*, as well as on his own award-winning crime fiction site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

