

## Books: Berlin Noir, Rome Noir

by Gina Cariño



Besides the usual guidebook, what do people read when they travel? It often depends on where they are traveling.

DUBLINERS in Dublin, THE DECAMERON in Tuscany, MYRA BRECKINRIDGE in L.A... Hesse in Germany, Max Frisch in Switzerland... A Gala biography when tracing the Dalí triangle in Girona, a primer on César Manrique while discovering your mineral self in Lanzarote... CRIME AND PUNISHMENT in St. Petersburg in the course of a run-through of Raskolnikov's route!

Yes, crime! If you're visiting a great metropolis, read something set in that metropolis, and make it NOIR. Then you can almost put aside your tourist's map. Crime novels are surprisingly good mappings of cities, sections of cities, or layers of cities. They give you a particularly visceral sense of what's going on in a certain place at a certain time. And they transport you to a wide range of locations and atmospheres, acquaint you with a wide range of characters and walks of life.

For anyone Berlin-bound, how about some top-class crime literature? BERLIN NOIR is a trilogy of masterfully-plotted novels by Philip Kerr. They are: MARCH VIOLETS, THE PALE CRIMINAL, and A GERMAN REQUIEM.

The first two happen in pre-war Berlin. The third starts with post-war Vienna but goes back to pre-war Berlin. Kerr gives us a sinister parade of guys from the SA, SS, Sipo, Orpo, Kripo (Criminal Police), and Gestapo, plus Jews, jazz, jewels. And in between, the proverbial ex-cop, now a private investigator working from the Alexanderplatz, who is of course cynical, cultured, sexy, sans souci, and not completely incorruptible. Bernie is his name. Warning: Bernie Gunther's sense of humor is a bit male chauvinist, even homophobic, probably like that of any Berlin "bull" in those days. Well, at least he hates Nazis.

The actual sleuthing is interspersed with brilliant historical and socio-political asides on the Nazi hatred of "international Jewry," "international Bolshevism," and other internationals. There is nothing like the crime novel to map out the periods of history that obsess you. And the detective will take you through the scenes and streets of a Berlin still undivided. He'll even take you to the international food delicatessen of the KaDeWe department store on the Ku'damm (Kurfürstendamm). The deli was there even then! How thrilling!

For the Rome-bound, I don't recommend Dan Brown's ANGELS AND DEMONS. The scenes of the crimes are too much along the usual sightseeing itinerary, and because the chase happens in a single night, the tour is too fast. There is no time for sitting around in non-sights, including people's living rooms and kitchens. I recommend UNHOLY TRINITY, by Paul Adam. It sounds trashy, but it'll do for our purposes. The main character, Andy Chapman, lives in Rome, in the Trastevere quarter. He wasn't just suddenly flown in from the U.S. and the CERN. More importantly, the plot brings us back to the "partisans" and the Fascist Blackshirts of the final days of Mussolini. Nothing like the Noir genre of fiction to map out periods of history that obsess you. And IN SITU.