

# Berlin Noir

## *Philip Kerr's Novels of the Third Reich and After*

by Nancy Bilyeau

**A** group of watercolor landscapes went on sale at a German auction house in February 2019, supposedly the work of a young and impoverished Adolf Hitler while he was struggling as an artist in Vienna. The paintings, along with a Fuhrer armchair decorated with a swastika, failed to find a single buyer, but not necessarily because people were repulsed. There is, distressingly, a thriving market in Hitler—and Nazi—memorabilia. This particular lot, though, were widely dismissed as fakes.

Artwork authenticity aside, the existence of the auction caused considerable embarrassment. “This is in bad taste,” lamented the mayor of Nuremberg to reporters.

At first glance, it might seem as if a series of mystery novels featuring a German detective during the Nazis’ rise to power, World War II, and Europe’s postwar recovery might very well land in the category of tasteless as well. That would be a tragic mistake, for the 14 Bernie Gunther novels written by Philip Kerr offer not only first-rate mystery plotting, atmospheric prose, and witty dialogue but also philosophical insights into the nature of ambition, loyalty, and identity.

Kerr was born in Edinburgh on Feb. 22, 1956. He gained a master’s degree in law and philosophy from the University of Bir-

ingham, worked as an advertising copywriter for Saatchi and Saatchi, but, he has said, began his writing career with a tale of pornography penned at the age of 12. Every one of those parts of Kerr’s life is gainfully employed in the Bernie Gunther books.

When an author begins a series, those first interviews on what drew the writer to this particular protagonist and setting can stick to him like industrial-strength adhesive. In the case of the Bernhard Gunther books, Kerr’s explanation was Chandleresque, literally. “His idea for Bernie came the moment he found himself wondering what Raymond Chandler would have come up with if instead of leaving London for Los Angeles, he’d gone east, to Berlin,” was how *The Telegraph* put it in a Kerr profile.

*March Violets*, published in 1989, launched the character of Bernhard Gunther, a World War I veteran and Berlin cop turned private investigator, drinking too much at his secretary’s wedding because he half-wishes he’d married her himself but at age 38, he feared he was too old for her. Bernie copes with these feelings by insulting people at the wedding, particularly the groom. With a partner who irritates Gunther and duplicitous women to deal with, *March Violets* was Chandleresque indeed. Set in 1936,

it was also filled with vivid descriptive writing of Berlin and vicious businessmen uneasily circling Nazi power brokers, and the vulnerable caught in between. The mystery itself held a reader’s attention on every page, building to a searing climax.

The reviews for *March Violets* were effusive. Kerr followed it with *The Pale Criminal*, set in 1938, in which Bernie is forced back onto the police force by no less than SS General Reinhard Heydrich in order to find a murderer. Throughout his series, Kerr displayed a talent for weaving in the real-life people of the era with his fictional creations, from Joseph Goebbels to Eva Peron. But even among his ghastly gallery of Nazi sociopaths, Heydrich is the star. He first appears in *March Violets*. Kerr, exceptionally adept at characters’ physical description, summons up Heydrich for the reader like a genie rubbing a bottle: “His face was of an unusual construction. Its central feature was its protruding, hawklike nose, which had the effect of making the chin seem weak; above the thin nose were glassy blue eyes set rather too close together, and slightly slanting, which lent him an apparently world-weary, cynical air.” Because of his superior abilities as a homicide cop, Gunther, without having any say in the mat-

ter, is appointed Ober-Kriminal Kommissar (chief inspector) in KRIPPO, a criminal investigative unit.

The third novel in the series was *A German Requiem*, and in it Kerr did his first time jump, something he would do a lot more of in the series. It is 1947, Bernie is married to his second wife, Kirsten, but she is cheating on him with American officers. The fact is, Gunther can't find it in his heart to blame her. They are starving in the Berlin rubble. As Kerr writes in the beginning of the novel: "These days, if you are a German you spend your time in Purgatory before you die, in earthly suffering for all your country's unpunished and unrepentant sins, until the day when, with the aid of the prayers of the Powers—or three of them, anyway—Germany is finally purified."

These three novels became known as his Berlin Noir trilogy, and for quite a while Kerr himself seemed to believe he was finished with Gunther. For 15 years, he wrote other books, including children's books under the name P. B. Kerr, nonfiction, and an ambitious near-future techno thriller titled *A Philosophical Investigation*.

But in 2006 Bernie Gunther returned. With *The One From the Other*, Kerr told a story of the private investigator searching for a vanished war criminal in 1949. The Bernie books came regularly after that, as did the leaps in readership and the awards. *Field Gray* (2012) and *The Lady From Zagreb* (2016) were both nominated for Edgar Awards.

Kerr did not shrink from hurling his protagonist into some of the worst possible places to be in World War II, from Poland to a Red Army prisoner camp. Sometimes he was a homicide detective, sometimes he was an officer in a branch of the SS. There was always a stubbornness in Bernie, as he refused to join the Nazi party and struggled to do his job within the structure of the rule of law. But what can the law possibly mean in a country governed by those slaughtering millions of helpless civilians along with enemy armies? As Jane Kramer of *The New Yorker* put it, Gunther is "one of crime fiction's most satisfying and unlikely survivors: the good cop in the belly of the beast."

Doubtless aware of this, Kerr has other characters accuse Bernie of having much to answer for in simply staying alive among the company he kept. As one adversary puts it: "You, who were a member of KRIPPO and the SD for almost 20 years. Some of those so-called policemen you reported to were the worst criminals in history. Hey-

drich. Himmler. Nebe. And you worked for them all."

It is in his 12th Bernie Gunther book, *Prussian Blue*, published in 2018, that the talents of Phillip Kerr coalesce perfectly, just like the shade of blue referenced in the title, invented by a German chemist in the 18th century. The book runs on two time

German Secret Police, the Stasi (who also existed in real life). Despite the fact that Bernie has saved his life three times, Mielke has a terrible mission for him: travel to England to assassinate a female spy gone rogue by giving her slow poison.

Gunther, bearing a legitimate grudge against the spy, Anne French, agrees. But



*Dubbed "the good cop in the belly of the beast," German detective Bernie Gunther struggles to do his job within the structure of some of the worst regimes of the 20th century. He is often accused of having much to answer for in simply staying alive among the company he kept.*

tracks. It begins in 1956. Although his age is not explicitly given in the novel, going by Kerr's own established timeline, Bernie is 58 years old. He's through with running around Argentina and Cuba and is trying to stay out of trouble, not always successfully. Gunther has found a good job at the desk of the Grand Hotel Cap Ferrat on the Riviera. But he's lonely, and that is why a letter from his estranged third wife, Elisabeth, sends him eagerly to the nearby Hotel Ruhl for a promised reunion. Of course Elisabeth is not in France. Instead, Bernie is strong-armed to a table heaped with the best food and wine and, sitting at the table gorging himself, General Erich Mielke of the East

it's soon revealed that Gunther has no intention of playing assassin for the East Germans. Knowing they will kill him if he refuses, Bernie escapes a train by killing his Stasi handler and sets out on a desperate flight through France while the nation's police search for him. His destination: The Germany he hasn't seen for years, and longs for. As Bernie explains himself to the reader: "Running away is always a better plan than you think; just ask any criminal. It's only police who will say that running away doesn't solve anything; it certainly doesn't solve crimes or make arrests, that's for sure. Besides, running away was a much more appealing idea than poisoning some English-

Berlin's Brandenburg Gate



woman I'd once slept with, even if she is a bitch. I've got more than enough on my conscience as it is."

With this storyline on fire, Kerr introduces a second one that is, incredibly, even more fascinating. We're in Berlin, 1939, just months before Hitler orders the invasion of Poland and the onset of World War Two. Gunther, a high-level Kommissar, is summoned to the office of General Heydrich, nearing the height of his powers. Bernie is being ordered to Bavaria to solve the shooting of an architect at the Berghof, Hitler's favorite retreat. The potentially embarrassing murder must be solved before Hitler arrives in less than a week for his birthday celebration. Heydrich jeers at his Kommissar's insolent remarks, saying, "Turning you into my stoooge is one of my long-term projects." He also makes it clear that Gunther has been chosen for the job because "You're expendable and you know it." This can't be taken lightly coming from the man who once threw Gunther in Dachau for laughs.

*Prussian Blue* contains some of the best of Kerr's own black humor, such as Bernie's approaching his superior's building in Berlin: "Prinz Albrechtstrasse was always the quietest street in Berlin and for much the same reason that the remoter parts of the Carpathian Mountains were avoided by all sensible Transylvanians. Like Castle Dracula, number 8 Prinz Albrechtstrasse contained its own pale-faced prince of darkness."

Even funnier is a later passage: Gunther has arrived that same night at his destination, Berchtesgaden, an Alpine valley town that surrounds the Berghof, to be briefed by the distinctly unpleasant Martin Boorman. The thought of Gunther getting a few hours' sleep before starting his investigation outrages Boorman, who pushes amphetamines

# PHILIP KERR

## Reading List

**BERNIE GUNTHER NOVELS**

- March Violets, 1989
- The Pale Criminal, 1990
- A German Requiem, 1991
- The One From the Other, 2006
- A Quiet Flame, 2008
- If The Dead Rise Not, 2009
- Field Grey, 2010
- Prague Fatale, 2011
- A Man Without Breath, 2013
- The Lady From Zagreb, 2015
- The Other Side of Silence, 2016
- Prussian Blue, 2017
- Greeks Bearing Gifts, 2018
- Metropolis, 2019

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on him: Prevatin. After the drug kicks in, Gunther finds himself shouting at a Nazi engineer: "It's a murder I'm trying to solve—a murder at the Leader's house—it isn't the crossword in today's newspaper. If Adolf Hitler can't come down here next week because I couldn't catch this maniac then it won't be my guts hanging on the Leader's perimeter fence.' I might even have smashed a cup or saucer on the engineer's carefully combed head but for the AH monogram

on the pattern, which gave me a little pause."

*Prussian Blue*, also nominated for an Edgar award, is a book in which Gunther's actual powers of detection and deduction are showcased to advantage—such as when he finds the murder weapon—while quoting German philosophers throughout. In a single paragraph near the book's end, when Bernie finally crosses the border, both Nietzsche and Goethe are referenced, as well as Bernie comparing himself to "Odin, seeking some kind of knowledge that might aid my own futile, twilight bid for immortality."

The news that *Greeks Bearing Gifts*, the next book in the Bernie Gunther series, would pick up where *Prussian Blue* left off sent fans into a happy frenzy. However, the saddest possible news followed. On March 23, 2018, Philip Kerr died of bladder cancer, leaving family, friends, and devoted readers in a state of devastation.

Published in the United States on April 3, 2018, *Greeks Bearing Gifts* also features blistering good writing and a tantalizing mystery. In the beginning, Bernie has managed to obtain a false identity and a new job: mortuary attendant at the Munich city hospital. As Gunther informs the reader: "You'd think the dead could look after themselves but of course, people die in hospital all the time and, when they do, they usually need a bit of help getting around." By the end of the novel, Bernie is nowhere near Munich's morgue. Moreover, he seems poised for an exciting challenge in the next book.

A final Bernie Gunther book was published on April 9, 2019, but it does not vault Bernie into the hot spots of the Cold War. *Metropolis*, a manuscript completed shortly before Kerr's death, is an origins story. It begins in Berlin, summer of 1928. Bernie is a young cop; he's only mildly cynical, and he's eager for the approval of the bosses he admires, one of them Jewish.

The book's mystery is well constructed. Yet reading *Metropolis*, one can't help feeling sorrow for not only what Bernie's beloved Berlin is about to suffer but also what Philip Kerr's readers must accept: a talent ended too soon. It would be marvelous if Gunther could continue throughout our modern age, unfettered by mortality. Imagine how he would handle the mystery of the fake Hitler memorabilia unsuccessfully auctioned in Bavaria. No one could doubt that the culprits would be brought to justice in no time. ✦

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