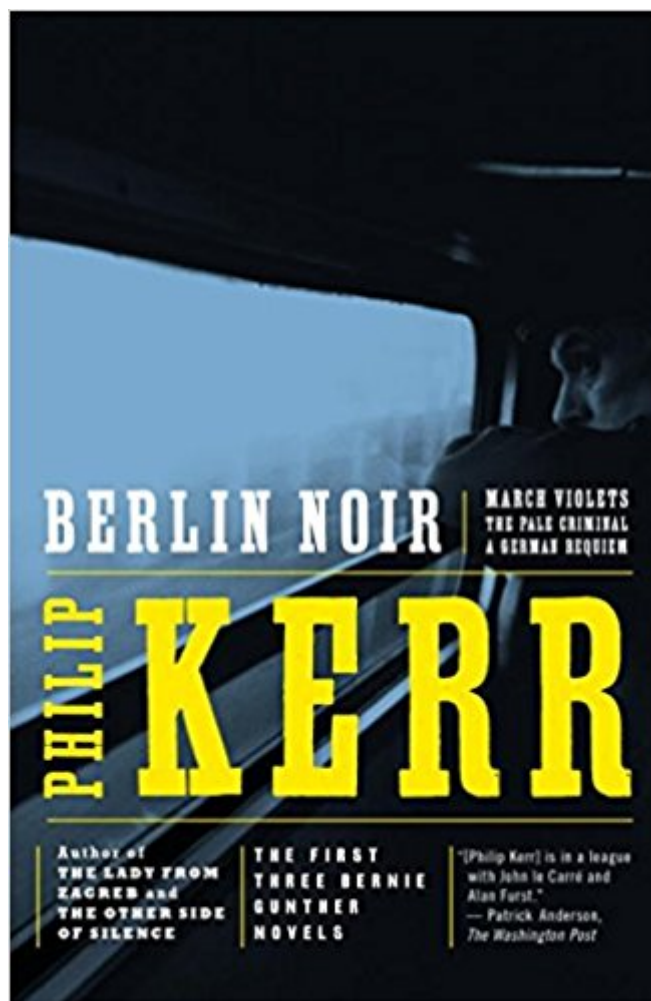


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Berlin Noir: March Violets; The Pale Criminal; A German Requiem



Synopsis

In *BERLIN NOIR*, Philip Kerr's first three Bernie Gunther novels -- *MARCH VIOLETS*, *THE PALE CRIMINAL*, *A GERMAN REQUIEM* -- are compiled in one volume, the perfect introduction to the "best crime series around today" (The Daily Beast). Ex-policeman Bernie Gunther thought he'd seen everything on the streets of 1930s Berlin. But then he went freelance, and each case he tackled sucked him further into the grisly excesses of Nazi subculture. And even after the war, amidst the decayed, imperial splendour of Vienna, Bernie uncovered a legacy that made the wartime atrocities look lily-white in comparison...

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Customer Reviews

Now published in one paperback volume, these three mysteries are exciting and insightful looks at life inside Nazi Germany -- richer and more readable than most histories of the period. We first meet ex-policeman Bernie Gunther in 1936, in *March Violets* (a term of derision which original Nazis used to describe late converts.) The Olympic Games are about to start; some of Bernie's Jewish friends are beginning to realize that they should have left while they could; and Gunther himself has been hired to look into two murders that reach high into the Nazi Party. In *The Pale Criminal*, it's 1938, and Gunther has been blackmailed into rejoining the police by Heydrich himself. And in *A German Requiem*, the saddest and most disturbing of the three books, it's 1947 as Gunther stumbles across a nightmare landscape that conceals even more death than he imagines. (For a review of Kerr's latest novel, *The Grid*, see our Thrillers section.)

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This trilogy is a great introduction to the excellent Bernie Gunther series by Philip Kerr - one of the best hardboiled police/crime series I have read for a long time. It is extra special because the series is set with meticulously researched historical detail in Nazi Germany before and after the war and is seamlessly integrated with some of the key happenings and powerful personalities of that time. Bernhard (Bernie) Gunther is a hard-boiled Berlin detective who served eleven years as a homicide detective in Kripo (Berlin's criminal police) and left in 1933 when the National Socialists started to purge the force of all non-party members. He becomes a private investigator and then is forced back to Kripo by the Nazis. After witnessing mass killings he fights on the Eastern Front and becomes a POW with the Russians. Gunther was never a Nazi or a war criminal but went through the war at the front because opposing what was happening was too painful to contemplate. He is not averse to some brutality where necessary in his work, has a tough and rough sense of humour, is constantly cynical but while he is sometimes morally-compromised he has a pragmatic sense of right and wrong.

March Violets: A Bernie Gunther Novel, set in 1936, has Gunther investigating the murder and torching of the daughter and son-in-law of a powerful German steel magnate and an associated safe robbery. The investigation gets mixed up with Nazi issues and Bernie gets involved with Goering (in a cameo role) and Reinhard Heydrich, the prime architect of the Holocaust.

The Pale Criminal: A Bernie Gunther Novel, set in 1938, has Gunther forced back into Kripo by Heydrich to find a serial killer of Aryan teenage girls who are Nazi sympathisers.

A German Requiem: A Bernie Gunther Novel is set after the war in Berlin and mostly in occupied Vienna. Bernie is asked to help a former colleague and black marketeer accused of the murder of an American officer. In the process he gets dangerously involved with both the "Amis" and the "Ivans" in Cold War tensions and with some major war criminals.

Philip Kerr is a first class thriller author who can write heavily-plotted, hard-boiled and frequently violent crime novels seamlessly set against a fascinating background of Berlin before the war and Vienna after the war. This is wonderful stuff for a crime-fiction junkie like me who loves his doses of history with a crime-fiction background. This is the first time that I have read through a trilogy without a break and I really enjoyed all of the books - highly recommended. I am hooked on reading the rest of the series very soon.

These novels are on re-reading--among the best. The Chandler vision of LA is not only borrowed but returned with a gratuity. I wonder if there could be meeting between Marlowe and Gunther. Who would be the toughest?

When a book has 100+ reviews on and averages out to 4.5 stars, there probably not a lot to add. This I will keep this short. This collection of three novels form the Bernie Gunther series is a great start for the series. You get a peek at the pre-war Nazi era, around the time of the 1934 Berlin Olympics. Then a look at some of the darker days in the middle of the war as Gunther winds up hauled back into the government against his will. Both books are also tight crime dramas with very bad bad guys and good guys who drink and smoke. But for me the star of the series is 'A German Requiem,' set in 1947, with Berlin still filled with rubble (and to a lesser extent, rubles). In that third book, Gunther is convinced to head to Vienna on a case where he is trying to prove the innocence of a shady character in jail for murder and known as a pretty serious smuggler. For me, as good as the crime part of the story are in that last book, the details about shortages, violence, literal rape and pillage by the invading Russian troops is brilliant. Pack that it with early post-war Vienna, one of the first squabbles in what would become the Cold War, and you have a really good book. The comparisons to Raymond Chandler and other pulpy fiction to me are not that apt. Though Kerr writes in a classic crime novel form, he mops the floor with Chandler as a stylist and his stories are far more complex. Read these books on their own, enjoying them on their own terms, and leave your 40's and 50's Americans on their own.

One of the blurbs on this book states that the writer, Phillip Kerr, is "in a league with John le Carre." Being a big Le Carre fan, I would have to agree. Almost a cross between Raymond Chandler and le Carre, actually. I was instantly hooked by his writing style. Here is just one small example: "There's only one thing that unnerves me more than the company of an ugly woman in the evening, and that's the company of the same ugly woman the following morning." The dialogue is great and cracking as well without being too cliché: here part of the interrogation of our hero (Bernie Gunther) by a couple of Gestapo men, after having to shoot a man to death who tried to kill him in his apartment: "And I suppose he tried to kill you because he didn't like your cologne," said Tesmer "You noticed it too, huh?" I saw Stahlecker smile a bit at that, but so did Tesmer, and he didn't like it..... "I've told you the truth Tesmer. I opened the door and there was Herr Kolb with the lighter pointing at my dinner." "A (gun) on you, and yet you still managed to take him. I don't see any holes in you, Gunther." "I'm taking a correspondence course in hypnotism. Like I said, I was lucky. He

missed." "Listen, I don't mesmerize easy. This fellow was a professional. Not the sort to let you have his lighter for a bag of sherbert." "A professional what--haberdasher? Don't talk out of your navel, Tesmer. He was just a kid." This was the type of book I HATE to finish, because I always want more. Thankfully, I have plenty of other Phillip Kerr novels yet to read.

I think that the Gunther books constitute a solid if unspectacular example of detective fiction featuring a cynical world weary protagonist. The books are well written and engaging for the most part. The main drawback is really the author's seemingly unquenchable needs to fall back on the familiar tropes of this type of story like the protagonist's ability to bed every attractive woman with whom he comes into contact. Very tiresome.

Three mysteries featuring Bernie Gunther, a private investigator trying to survive in World War 2 Germany. Although he's a jaded character, Bernie ultimately comes across as someone trying to live honorably in indescribably dangerous atmosphere.

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