

The Bishop's Villa

Sacha Naspini

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In a remote Italian town, an unassuming cobbler is drawn into helping partisans fight against fascists and Nazis in Sacha Naspini's novel *The Bishop's Villa*.

Despite missing several fingers, René is the cobbler of Le Case. He's in love with his neighbor, Anna, whose partisan son is executed by the authorities. Grief-stricken, Anna joins the partisans, asking René to cover for her. This subterfuge propels him into a dangerous game with the Italian fascists running Le Case and the Nazis who subsequently occupy it.

René is incarcerated in a villa used as a prison for partisans and Jewish families; the villa is also being rented as a residence by a bishop who is aware of its goings-on. With the Allies advancing, the Nazis begin deporting the Jews and destroying the evidence of their crimes. Meanwhile, the partisans prepare to liberate their own from the villa. René has one wish: to find Anna, who he believes is imprisoned with him.

Narrated with immediacy, the book makes palpable its complex themes of collaboration versus resistance. Amid widespread collusion, including by the Church, some are compelled to resist the Nazis, as with a prison guard who becomes René's friend. And René's "secret weapon" is sabotaging soldiers' boots, demonstrating that even small acts of resistance matter. With most of Le Case's inhabitants refusing to acknowledge the horror in their midst, ideas of collective responsibility and guilt also hang over the story.

A poignant tribute to the memories of victims of the Nazi regime, the historical novel *The Bishop's Villa* is set in an Italian seminary that served as a prison during the Holocaust.

YELENA FURMAN (November / December 2024)

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