

The Hothouse Project

Charles Shaar Murray's Journalism as Craft and Art writing course

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Autumn 2013 coursework

LUKE THOMSON: The Collini Case

Ferdinand Von Shirak, translated from the German by Anthea Bell

Penguin Books £7.99.

Page one: a defenceless 85-year-old man is brutally slain, shot from behind, his skull crushed. The killer placidly awaits the police, clearly culpable of a cowardly murder. A young lawyer, Caspar Leinen, is assigned his hopeless defence. The killer makes no attempt to deny the charges, nor, it seems, did he know the victim. He alone is guilty of the murder.

In January 2012, a few months after the original publication of this novel, the German Minister of Justice appointed a committee to reappraise the mark left on the Ministry of Justice by the Nazi past. This novel constituted one of the points of reference.

Not an average crime fiction novel then, and still less a whodunit. The bulk of the novel is a painstaking report of a trial. Tense and disturbing, it would have more in common with the work of Heinrich Böll, whose main focus was the Nazi era, particularly from the perspective of ordinary people, than with any crime novel. Historical fiction, or even modern law, might be an equally fitting category than 'crime'.

The author, born in Munich 1964, is the grandson of Baldur von Shirach, a Nazi who headed the Hitler Youth. Later Gauleiter and Reichsstatthalter of Vienna, he was eventually sentenced at the Nuremberg war trials to twenty years for crimes against humanity. It is no coincidence that the novel features a grandfather with a murky past. This is Ferdinand's third book. It would be fair to say that he has become one of Germany's top authors in spite of, not because of, his famous surname.

Yet at the same time, this is a page-turner with ample doses of suspense. The young defence lawyer working on his first case is a believable hero, his loyalties divided between the murderer he must defend and an ex-sweetheart, granddaughter of the victim. He must also confront his mentor, the experienced lawyer for the prosecution, Hans Mattinger. Twists in the trial challenge him till the final outcome.

The background to the murder — events in occupied Italy in 1943 — make for an uncomfortable read and seem very relevant today, especially with reference to the so-called ‘war against terror’, particularly at a time when the British army is planning its withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Dealing controversially with the sometimes excessively mild ways in which the post World War II justice system in Germany dealt with former Nazis, this provocative book raises many questions. Is the murderer ultimately guilty? Or the victim? Who else?