



River of Shadows

Valerio Varesi (Author) , Joseph Farrell (Translator)

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In a bleak valley in Northern Italy, the River Po is swollen to its limits. The thick fog that usually clings to the town, blurring its surroundings and plunging its inhabitants into near-blindness, has been driven out by the raging storm. So when an empty barge drifts downriver, the fact the owner is missing does not go unnoticed. That same night Commissario Soneri is called in to investigate the murder of the boatman's brother. The brothers served together in the fascist militia fifty years earlier - could this be a revenge killing after so long? Soneri's investigation meets with a wall of silence from those who make their living along the banks of river. As the fog descends and the valley is hidden once more, Soneri must navigate fifty-year-old loyalties and deep-rooted rivalries before he can find out the truth.

River of Shadows Details

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From Reader Review River of Shadows for online ebook

Desiree says

This Italian detective novel is set in the Po valley. The protagonist is a bit of a loner (commissario Soneri) who is a lot on location and doesn't care much about keeping in contact with his station.

As in most detectives that are set in Italy there is quite a bit of rivalry between the police and carabinieri.

The story is set against the backdrop of the ever rising Po which gives the story an extra exciting dimension.

One of the recurring themes in the book are the meals the commissario is eating, which make your mouth water and make you want to hop on the first plane to Italy.

I especially liked the descriptions of the characters and the 50 years of simmering resentment between fascists and partisans gave an interesting dimension to the book.

NADIOUCHKA says

Sur fond de musique de Verdi et par un temps diluvien qui dure depuis plusieurs jours, le Pô est en crue. Nous sommes donc en Italie et le livre commence par la surveillance de la montée des eaux.

Valerio Varesi nous emmène avec « Le Fleuve des brumes » (« Il fiume delle Nebie ») dans une enquête commençant avec la dérive inattendue de la péniche du vieux Tonna qui lui, a disparu. On croyait sa péniche chargée de céréales mais rien n'est moins certain.

C'est le commissaire Soneri qui intervient car il est appelé pour ce qui semble être un suicide, celui du frère de Tonna. Deux disparitions coup sur coup ? Ou peut-être pire ? La coïncidence est plutôt étonnante surtout quand on apprend que les Tonna ont été des militants des Chemises Noires.

Mais cette enquête va se dérouler de façon « tranquille », au gré du courant du fleuve, dans un univers moite, au bord des berges détrempées.

Soneri, amateur de bons petits plats, de parmesan et d'un certain petit vin pétillant servi dans l'auberge du « Sourd », est très observateur – pour lui la péniche de Tonna était plutôt destinée au transport d'autre chose de plus rentable – il semble se laisser dériver mais il a beaucoup de patience et de ténacité car il doit, parfois, se heurter à de hautes personnalités. Et puis les personnages qui l'entourent sont bien silencieux quand il s'agit d'évoquer le passé.

Mais heureusement que sa compagne, la fougueuse Angela (avocate de son état et amatrice d'expériences plutôt coquines), lui donne parfois des indices inattendus qui le font avancer.

Dans ce polar, on retrouve souvent la musique de Verdi : air de Aïda sur le portable de Soneri, parfois du Falstaff au cours de la lecture...

Si le fameux fleuve, le Pô est dans les brumes, c'est aussi le cas du commissaire qui va devoir faire preuve d'une grande force de déduction et de persévérance. Ce fleuve, avec sa crue et sa décrue, semble représenter également le passé qui remonte lentement et le présent où rien n'a été vraiment oublié.

L'auteur fait preuve d'un grand talent d'écriture avec cette ambiance lourde, en nous entraînant dans cette sombre enquête où ce nombreux événements vont survenir petit à petit, mais tout cela dans un style fluide, comme celui de l'écoulement des eaux du fleuve.

L'Obs a défini ainsi « Le Fleuve des brumes » : « Il y a là-dedans un charme fou (ou flou comme le suggère mon ami Krout) : on se laisse embarquer dans ces paysages détrempés, on dérive au fil des phrases. On adore. »

Je lui donne entièrement raison et pour moi c'est encore un nouvel écrivain que j'ai découvert.

Ravi Singh says

I'm not one for detective fiction but I did read this as I bought it from a charity shop. Gruesome in places but a truthful storytelling experience of a detective putting pieces together and subversive characters trying to remain out of the reach of the law, plenty to justify their cold and cruel actions. The history of Italian fascism and its battles with communism after the world wars are all too true and shown there in the backdrop of a very haunting, chilling and realistic Italy. Italy is all too often romanticised for the tourist, but this dark and gritty Italy is also one to read about, especially in such macabre circumstances!

Mikee says

A wonderful, powerful book about life and death along the Po, and memories that never fade. I await more books from this author.

Allyson says

The first of the Commissario Soneri novels translated into English, this Noir crime is steeped in the atmospherics of place and of the past. Varesi's plot develops as slowly and swirlingly as the river Po, which is central to the plot. If anything, Varesi's central character is the river and the Po valley which is evoked in Gothic images of mist, rain, grey moodiness and darker deeds. The return of the past haunts the novel and the murders that occur and the reader is soon aware that landscape, history, memory, language, culture and food are interwoven.

For readers who prefer American Noir or American murder mysteries this book will not be pleasing. Those who prefer a more European style murder, then this novel will be enjoyed. There are infelicities in translation, but no translation is ever like the original. However, the atmosphere of the novel is more than adequately brought to the fore, as is the strange and uncertain character of Soneri.

Varesi's books were made into a television series *Nebbie e Delitti* starring Luca Barbareschi which caught the atmosphere of the books and the stately resolution of the crimes with great skill.

John says

It's winter on the banks of the Po and the river is flooding. Two elderly brothers, the Tonnas, are murdered in quick succession by a massive blow to the head; the body of one of them, a bargee, is moored to the riverbed near a monument to the partisans who were slaughtered there by the fascists during the war, and so isn't found until the flood waters have largely retreated. Then thick mists descend, further impeding the investigation of Commissario Soneri. But, more even than by the mists, he's hampered by the reluctance of a riverside community of old men, bitterly divided by a lifetime of conflicting ideologies and distrustful of outsiders, to reveal the truth about what they know.

For some reason I made pretty heavy weather of this book. The writing is filled with beautiful imagery, and that kept me going, but at the same time the text had an overall stodginess that meant I couldn't sustain interest for long periods. There isn't much of a mystery here, and Soneri's method of detection seems to be less a matter of ratiocination than of having pointless conversations here and there with the various relevant characters, conversations that he tends to break off in the middle, just when you're beginning to think they might be getting somewhere. I did feel something of the power of the flooded river, and the way that the Po governs the lives of those in its vicinity -- cliched though the remark may seem, the river's perhaps the book's most interesting character -- but, other than that, this was a tale that, I think, could have been very satisfactorily wrapped up in a short story.

Lau Lo says

Autant le dire tout de suite, ce roman rejoint mon top 10 des romans « coup de cœur » de cette année 2017.

Je vais commencer par l'histoire. Tout commence par cette crue. Elle est angoissante, l'ambiance est sombre, froide, pesante. L'auteur nous happe instantanément dans les remous de ce fleuve puissant. On assiste au « voyage » de cette péniche jusqu'à ce qu'elle échoue et qu'on découvre que son « capitaine » a disparu.

Quand Soneri entre en scène, le ton change et s'adoucit. Soneri nous paraît un homme posé, doux et tout en retenue. C'est un peu l'effet que l'auteur m'a fait d'ailleurs, quand je l'ai rencontré il y a quelques mois au Festival de Toulouse Polars du Sud. Soneri est pourtant un personnage fort, plein d'intuitions, déterminé mais qui reste toujours dans la bienséance, même lorsqu'il interroge ces riverains par toujours causants.

Le scenario de ce roman est très prenant et nous parle aussi d'un passé peu glorieux de l'Italie et de ses chemises noires. L'Italie qui s'est tournée vers le fascisme et dans laquelle les communistes ont été traqués. Valerio Varesi nous explique ainsi que le passé perdure et que le temps n'érode pas toujours les sentiments ou la souffrance.

L'action se déroule sur le même rythme que la crue et la décrue du fleuve. Energique au départ, puis le calme revient, pimenté parfois par l'intervention de la compagne de Soneri, Angela. Enfin vient la décrue qui révèlera les secrets de ces habitants du bord du Pô, dissipant la brume qui dissimule les faits et méfaits qui ont jalonné leur histoire sur plusieurs générations.

« Il faut distinguer l'expérience de la mémoire. On a l'illusion que l'on se souvient parce qu'il semble que tout est toujours identique, comme le fleuve qui n'a de cesse de couler entre une crue et une période d'étiage. Mais en fait on recommence chaque fois de zéro. Les souvenirs valent pour deux ou trois générations, puis ils disparaissent et d'autres les remplacent. Après cinquante ans, on revient à la case départ. »

« Aujourd'hui on ne manque de rien et les gens ont oublié les temps durs. En période d'abondance, tout le monde se déteste parce que prévaut l'égoïsme, seul fondement de notre monde à présent. Quand la misère reviendra, nous serons à nouveau unis. »

Ce sont un auteur et un roman qu'il faut absolument découvrir. Alors ? vous embarquez pour une croisière sur le Pô ?

Arlie Anderson says

This book had a great beginning but I found the rest of the book a little slow at times. However the plot was good and I learned some new things about Italy in WWII.

Barbara says

A very Italian flavoured mystery. Few people answer questions with straight answers, metaphors and allusions abound, the pace is leisurely - except when it stops entirely to talk about food. I enjoyed it greatly.

Andrew says

This first novel featuring Commissario Soneri & his colleagues & nymphomaniac lover, Angela is quite exceptional in such a crowded field as Italian detective fiction. The quality of the plotting & the style of Varesi's writing is only matched, in my opinion, by Michael Dibdin in his Aurelio Zen novels (alas, no more to come!). Donna Leon's Commissario Brunetti, alas - bland, sexless paterfamilias - pales in comparison.

Varesi sets his characters firmly, if foggily, in the central Italian back-water that is the Po flood-plain; not in a tourist-trap like Tuscany, or a jewel in Italy's crown like Venice, but in a real place with real people! There is barely a sympathetic character to sugar the plot's bitter pill!

The novel reeks with the damp & watery mists of Italy's longest river, along whose banks & tributaries vivid incidents have taken place for centuries. Italy is a very old country behind its designer shades, fur-coats & leather boots, & Soneri's investigation of growing complexity mirrors the almost intangible pull of past events on present actions. This region of Italy isn't as much by-passed by visitors as completely ignored! I was reminded, in parts, of Bertolucci's '1900' with its vivid dramatisation of war-time Emilia-Romagna, & Italy's painful post-war legacy of violence & betrayal amongst neighbours. The recent past is never faraway in Italy...even after the economic miracle of the 1950s * 60s, which pulled the Italian peasant class kicking & screaming in their new-found prosperity into the modern world. Fiat 500s for all!

In this engrossing & ultimately moving investigation, Soneri reveals himself to the reader as he reveals the truth of the baffling circumstances of a double-murder with its blood-ties to some horrific incidents in the internecine struggles of violently-opposed factions during Italy's own 'Year Zero'.

This is fine writing, never formulaic, never trite or reaching for comic caricature; Varesi has created a 'hero' who is less than heroic but more than a cipher. Soneri has a melancholic side, nostalgic & sensitive to the eddies & currents of the great river which flows through the novel like a malevolent pike, its teeth sharp, its appetite keen. The Po has never been such a devilish force as in 'River of Shadows'.

I will read the next episodes of Commissario Soneri with relish; full of flavour but nourishing too. Buon appetito a te!

Sian Wadey says

I had great problems connecting with this book. It took me forever to read and normally I whip through murder mysteries with no problem but it wasn't the case for this one.

The pace was ridiculously slow, maybe it's the relaxed Italian culture, but it dragged along. The book couldn't hold my attention either, I would find my mind drifting off and thinking about other things only to

find I hadn't taken in any of the story.

The main character, I think his name was Soneri, was generally likeable. He seemed like a nice man, although his relationship with his girlfriend got on my nerves. They seemed to spend most of their time together trying to find risqué places to sleep together, including someone's flat and the barge belonging to the missing Tonna. I know it's not real but it comes across as really unprofessional and I like my policemen to do things properly.

One thing that also got on my wick (sorry for ranting, I'm in one of those moods!) was how much they went on and on about food. I know Italians are passionate about what they eat but every time someone sat down at a dinner table I would get a detailed recipe.

Overall, this was a bit of a disappointment. At the end it was just a relief to finish and I'm not sure I completely understood who was the murderer or why. I think I'll stick to my Scandinavian reads. I always seem to enjoy them more.

Molly says

The book is set in the plains of the River Po in the area of Parma during a bitter (or a normal?) winter and it is the first investigation of Commissario Soneri. The two Tonna brothers disappear in close succession: one actually goes missing, the other falls out of a window.

In a land where the wounds of the second world war are still fresh for many and the fights between fascists and partisans seem to have transcended the generations involved, it is reasonable to suppose that these grudges are open.

Commissario Soneri is not local but comes from not very far away, and he can grasp the subtle political nuances soon. I found his girlfriend's character a bit two-dimensional as well as irritating: she seemed to just complain about his lack of attention but she is the one who doesn't want commitment, and I found her closer to the representation of a certain male fantasy than a real woman. She doesn't however have a great role in the book, which is incredibly atmospheric – possibly because I was reading about fog while the weather wasn't so good here, but I really felt taken into those places.

The novel is set in modern times but the associations with the 1940s are frequent and strong. The book is as much about the modern investigation as it is about the different lives of these people in a disrupted context as was a war and its aftermath.

Like many Italian novels, this is not an all-action type of book: there is a lot said about people and history rather than gunfights (well, there are no gunfights at all actually). I read this book in English, and the technical navigational terms have hindered my reading a bit, being a non-native speaker, but my impression is that this aspect wouldn't have been different had I read the Italian version.

I did like the book, but perhaps something atypical or unexpected, either in the plot or in the characters, would have really enriched my reading. I do, however, very much like the setting, both geographical and historical: I liked the links with historical events of that particular time, and I think Varesi's characterisation of the two factions (fascists and communists/partisans) was spot on and extremely interesting. This is to me a fascinating time of Italian history and a brilliant time to explore in a crime novel.

Kathleen Jones says

This novel is set on the foggy plain of the Po, and the river is rising after intense rain - the wide, placid summer river becoming a winter monster of churning currents and relentless spread. In the darkness, a barge casts off from its mooring mysteriously on the flood tide and no one knows if the owner, Tonna, is on board. At the same time there's an apparent suicide leap from the window of a local hospital.

Commissario Soneri is called in to investigate. He finds himself unraveling a nightmare that involves conflicts between Communist and Fascist that date back to the atrocities of World War 2, but which still divide parts of Italy today. How can the Commissario know who is telling the truth, while avoiding the distractions of local food and wine and his barrister girlfriend, Angela, who likes high-risk sexual encounters in public places? There is a slightly comic undertow to the darkness of the main plot.

The book is beautifully written, the characters and the location vivid and real, and the dialogue pitch-perfect. I'm not sure that I completely understand the fine details of the plot yet, but the complex political nature of Italian daily life is one hundred per cent true to what I see around me.

Top quality crime fiction.

Demerara says

A good honest mystery set in the Po valley during a flood, this is full of vivid characters and a nice plot.

Karen says

My pencilled list of things to expect from Italian Crime Fiction isn't particularly long or even all that surprising. A certain, shall we say obsession, with food; an eccentric, slightly grumpy, protagonist who spends a lot of time in his own head and seems to be quite happy there; and the occasional unexpected interpersonal relationship. That's a tick in boxes for RIVER OF SHADOWS then. Set on the banks of the River Po in Parma during a long cold, wet winter where the best everyone can hope for is that the river freezes to limit the reaches of the flooding, a barge captain goes missing on a night when everyone is distracted by the rising water levels.

That night the bargeman's brother falls from a window in a local hospital, a death that looks like suicide, but is quickly shown to be murder. Set in the current day, the roots of the fate of both brothers weaves its way into the society of boatmen and river dwellers and back to their time as fascist militia members in WWII. Whilst there's a slightly subdued feeling to the story telling in this book, there's something beautifully atmospheric, introspective, and complex building. Commissario Soneri contributes a lot to all of those aspects, a wonderfully individualistic character with a particular personal style, he's a thinker and an observer, rather than an action man. Unless you're talking about his rather unusual relationship with a girlfriend who is commitment phobic and fond of eclectic sexual encounters. A girlfriend who could be some men's idea of the perfect woman - all sex and no complications - it's Soneri that seems to long for more. I really liked this Commissario, and not just because he's my favourite sort of detective - a bit grumpy, a bit eccentric, a loner by circumstance rather than preference. I liked that he questioned everything and everybody, including himself. I liked his cynicism, his sense of irony.

There was something very believable about the way that the past directly impacted on everyone. There's something very evocative about the way that the communist / fascist differences in particular continued to affect present day lives and perceptions. That idea of the past and the future winding in and out is repeated in the way that the life of the people ebbed and flowed along with the river that dominated how and where they lived.

RIVER OF SHADOWS really is exactly my sort of book - characters, a society and a landscape each with their own positive and negative aspects. Considered, introspective and thoughtful analysis of all of those elements, and a direct line between the past and the present.

Now if you're sitting comfortably, a bit of housekeeping. RIVER OF SHADOWS is the fourth book in the overall Soneri series, and the first one available in translation. A second has been translated - THE DARK VALLEY - which I understand is the 6th book in the series. As teeth grindingly annoying as that is, if you love slower, atmospheric translated crime fiction, then this is seriously good option.

<http://www.austcrimefiction.org/review/River%20of%20Shadows.html>...
