

# GRAB BAG

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## BOOKMONGER

### A tale of heroism from the 'Forgotten Front'

They are there — we blink — and then they're gone. That seems to be happening all too frequently these days as the number of survivors of the Great Depression and World War II dwindle, and so many of their stories of deprivation and resilience vanish with their passing.

But when Bozeman author Mark Sullivan stumbled across the remarkable story of Pino Lella more than a decade ago, and learned that Lella was still alive, he flew to Italy to capture firsthand the details of Lella's experiences in Italy during World War II.

After a series of interviews with Lella, and extensive research into war archives in both Europe and the United States, Sullivan has written "Beneath a Scarlet Sky," a novelized version of Lella's story of survival on what has been called one of World War II's "Forgotten Fronts."

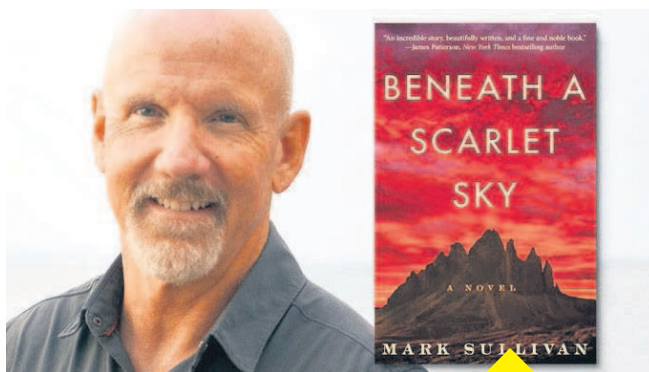
At 17, Lella was fixated primarily on friends, music and an unattainable older

woman named Anna. But when his family home in Nazi-occupied Milan was destroyed during an Allied bombing raid, his parents sent him to an alpine camp run by a Catholic priest. They may have thought they were sending him away from danger, but Father Re had other designs for Lella.

The Vatican had recently issued secret instructions to all Italian Catholics to offer refuge to Jews and anyone else being persecuted by the Nazis. Since Father Re's camp was in the Italian Alps, and close to the Swiss border, the priest decided to have Lella lead Jewish refugees across the mountains to safety in neutral Switzerland.

Throughout the winter of 1943-44, the quickly maturing teen braved blizzards, avalanches, cutthroat smugglers and ruthless Nazis to lead small bands of asylum seekers to sanctuary.

The next spring, he was summoned back to town by his parents, who were worried that with his 18th



**"Beneath a Scarlet Sky"**  
By Mark Sullivan  
Lake Union Publishing  
520 pp  
\$14.99

birthday approaching he would be drafted into the Italian service and sent to the Russian front, certain to become "cannon fodder." Instead, with the war winding down, his family advised him to join the German Army, where they knew a contact who could assign him to a unit that was dedicated to construction, not fighting.

Lella resisted the idea of being associated with the Germans in any way, but ultimately acquiesced. In what turned out to be a bizarre series of events, he caught the eye of the German general overseeing Nazi operations

in Italy, and became his driver. In that position, Lella was able to feed valuable intelligence back to the partisan resistance. Furthermore, when Lella took the German general to visit his mistress, the woman's maid turned out to be Anna, Lella's unrequited love interest from the year before.

Against a backdrop of anarchy, brutality and revenge, Lella navigated the road to

manhood, choosing "the greater good," as Father Re would call it, while suffering deep personal loss.

"Beneath a Scarlet Sky" combines heroism and harrowing action with brooding perspectives on morality. This hefty book is a thor-

oughly riveting read.

*The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at [bkmonger@nwnlink.com](mailto:bkmonger@nwnlink.com)*

### Crossword Answer

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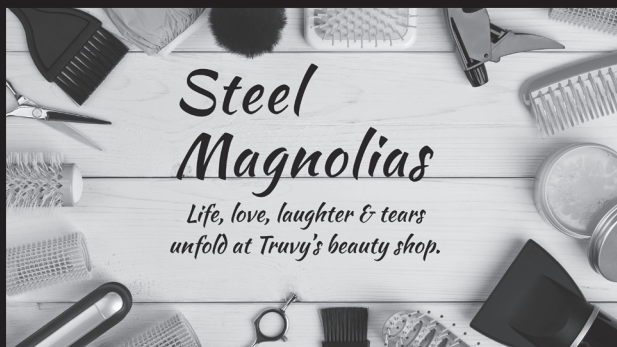
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