

THERE ARE NO ANGELS

If you want to show good and evil, you have to reach for the latter. Katarzyna Bonda in conversation with Karolina Sulej



photo by Bartosz Bobkowski

You were crowned queen of Polish crime novels, but ten years ago you lived an entirely different life. Everything changed after a car accident.

I ran over and killed a man. I had been driving around the country for 12 years, doing many interviews, and all of those trips were uneventful. Back then, though, I was tired and distraught. My father had died only 11 days before the accident. I thought that

going straight back to work was the best way to deal with this loss. I left Warsaw at dawn. I was going to Tarnów to write an article about prison guards suffering from PTSD. I was driving too fast, but I'd never been a reckless driver. Stress must have clouded my mind. I hit the brakes a fraction too late.

I still remember that man's shoes. The force of the impact knocked them off of his feet. He was born on the same day of the

month as me. I was 28, he was 80. It felt like I had just killed myself. I couldn't cope with that thought. I didn't know what to do next. I received a suspended sentence.

I underwent treatment, saw a psychiatrist, and swallowed antidepressants. I stopped working because I couldn't function as a normal human being should. I barely got out of bed. And suddenly it hit me. I didn't want to go back to my old life. I didn't know how to. I needed a new one.

And what did you do?

When you are in a situation like that, you realize that you don't have total control over anything. I've always wanted to be a writer, but I'm a super-lazy expert at playing it safe. I was valued at work and I loved it, I even behaved like a spoiled brat. And when I was left with nothing, except a void and a feeling of guilt, I just sat at my desk and started to write.

Why crime fiction?

I had to write about extremities; critical situations. Life versus death. In a way writing was a means to an end – creating a new life. But there were other reasons, of course. You can call me crazy, but I do believe that we are constantly tempting fate. We're pulling this delicate string and waiting to hear a sound.

When did you start to tempt your fate?

When I moved to *Express Wieczorny* newspaper, I wrote articles about local matters. My desk was next to that of Andrzej Gass, a phenomenal journalist, who wrote amazing reports from the courtroom and knew everybody at court. One day he got sick, and someone had to replace him. There were no volunteers, because working as a court correspondent is the worst nightmare of every journalist. It's boring, no-one wants to talk and you have trouble understanding the proceedings. And my boss said, "Bonda, you'll go."

Was it really boring?

I did not understand a thing. I didn't even know where to go. I asked prosecutors for advice, but they gave me the cold shoulder, because I used the "wrong terms". But it was far from boring. In fact it was a very interesting time for court correspondents – organized crime, the mafia, crimes of passion. Nowadays this type of journalism is almost extinct. Reporters come to court only to hear the sentencing.

My first article was about Wojtek Król's murder. After that I covered the trials of other high-profile murders and mafia bosses – "Pershing", "Wańka", and "Rympałek". At the beginning I didn't know what to do with eye-witness accounts, they simply did not add up, then I met prosecutor Jerzy Mierzewski. We talked in the court's snack-bar. I am not sure why he decided to help me, but he did. He explained everything to me very slowly, using simple terms. He still helps me with my novels. Thanks to him, I saw the bigger picture. After that I wrote a little piece about a court expert.

Did your editors like it?

Of course not, they gave me hell, and said that it was too long and imprecise. Gass liked it, though. He said that it reminded him of a short film. I started working with him, and he showed me how to read the files. I realized that a trial was like a play staged in parts. When you want hard data you look inside the files, but it also pays to ask families of the victim and the defendant. I remember a day when I waited outside the house of a woman, who persuaded her fiancé to kill her child. I met Barbara Pietkiewicz from *Polityka* there. She was my journalistic guru. We interviewed the family together. She later asked me to send her my articles. When she read them, she said that I should write crime novels instead. That I expanded the story too much. Well, I was not pleased. I still wanted to be a journalist, and besides I was not ready to write fiction. I moved to *Newsweek*, then to

Wprost. Most of the time I covered cases related to crime.

Did you ever want to write about the man that you ran over?

I wanted to know everything about him, but his family walled me off. My lawyer suggested that I shouldn't impose myself.

It was the first time that you sat in the courtroom as a participant and not an observer.

Yes, and it felt wrong to sit in the defendant's chair. When I was writing about crime cases I used to sit almost everywhere but there. I wasn't arrested. I was released pending trial.

At that fatal moment I was sober. I exceeded the speed limit by 25 km/h. I hadn't broken any traffic laws before, I had never even had a parking ticket. The judge took that into account. I was a model citizen, and it was an accident. Trials can be purifying. Before the sentencing, you have a chance to say "the last word".

And what did you say?

That I was sorry. But as I was saying that, it felt wrong. I think I said that it was impossible to apologize; that I had no excuse. It was not a "good" speech.

My lawyer scolded me for not defending myself at all costs. I should have cried and begged for forgiveness.

I couldn't cry, at least not in public, and I don't like cheap theatrics. Many defendants act that way to fake remorse. I thought that I didn't deserve compassion. In a way I wanted to be punished for what I did. I talked about my guilt, my conscience, and I asked for a fair judgment, because I wanted to repent. I knew that I would regret it for the rest of my life. It was not a truism.

I was lucky. Fate, again. Theatrics were beneath me, but if the judge had expected tears, I could have ended up in jail. Psychiatric evaluation helped – it confirmed that I was suffering from depression and

PTSD. That's not always enough to receive a suspended sentence, though.

And how did you react when you heard the sentence?

I went numb. I couldn't believe my ears. Like there was this glass in front of me, separating me from the others. I was an observer and participant at the same time. You feel exactly the same when you write a story. I truly believe that every writer experienced such a crucial and defining moment. Otherwise we would have chosen a different way to express ourselves. You can't write good fiction without bad experiences. It does not have to be a life and death situation. Infidelity is enough for some.

I was in shock for a long while. I lost my driving license. I needed to pass the exams again, but I put it off. I was afraid to sit behind the wheel again. The police took my fingerprints.

A sentence cuts your life in two. You recover with time, but the scar remains. People with similar experiences write to me to sometimes share with me. We form a peculiar group – those guilty of causing accidents. I will write about it someday, when I'm ready. So far, I did it only indirectly. If you are a normal human being, not a psychopath without conscience, guilt eats you alive like a cancer. I don't think about it all the time, but it keeps returning in my characters, their motives. It stays deep inside of me. Maybe it will never leave.

Is that what started your writing? Guilt?

We all know this feeling. I spoke with one of my colleagues not so long ago, and he said that he was not sure if he wanted to write crime novels as it "infects" the mind. Evil comes back to haunt us, he said. It doesn't work with me like that, doesn't bother me at all. I know it and my body knows it. It's a familiar subject. Writing helped me recover from the initial shock. When I was doing research for my book on female killers

("Polish Murderesses"), I got pregnant. And I wondered if it was proof that a universal balance really exists. Something bad and something beautiful happen almost at the same time. Is it fair? Is the world we live in fair? Am I worthy to have a child? With pregnancy, however, came calm. It was the only bright thing in my life, and I wore it like armour during the tough conversations I had with these murderesses.

Society sees killers as beasts. I've killed a man. Am I a beast too? What are they? Who am I? My friends said, "Kaśka, you are a one tough cookie. Stop crying like a baby, and get back to work. Be a brave girl again." I could have listened to them, I guess, but I thought there was no going back. Emotionally, I distanced myself from the media. I looked for something more than just information, as it became raw material. Turning my life upside down wasn't the hardest decision I've made. Not changing it back was.

Why?

The first years of my writing career were beset with constant failures. I was barely scraping by. Today my books are praised for their "novel-like" form, but back then I was being accused of poisoning the genre. I sold all my fancy bags, shoes, coats; everything with value. I got calls from debt collectors and electricity suppliers. Sitting in that empty flat, though, made me free. Purified.

So your writing worked like therapy?

What interests me are errors, flaws, and critical moments in life. I move from darkness into the light. The cause of our actions, the decisive moment and the conclusions we make afterwards are the cords, the axes, of our lives. Everyone can do a bad thing. There are no beasts. There are no angels. It is ridiculous to believe they exist. It is too comforting for my taste. A man is a wolf to another man. We like to push this thought aside, when in fact, we should be watching each other closely all the time. Even a

psychopath can wear the face of Madonna. That's the lesson crime fiction gives us. Not spying on other people, but understanding human nature. If you want to show good and evil, you have to reach for the latter.

How do you research a book?

I always start with facts and real-life stories. Take *Florystka* (The Florist), my third novel, for instance. The idea came while I was researching a book on female killers. Rummaging through court files, I stumbled upon letters sent by a woman to her psychiatrist. She wrote about a garden in which she had met with her son. He was brutally murdered. Working on a novel from scratch, I look for one thing in particular. I don't care who killed, I don't care about the motives. All I care about is the "core" of the story. And at that moment, I knew *Florystka* would tell the tale of a mother who can't cope with the death of her child.

So you look for the theme first. What next?

I work on the drama of the story. I write a detailed draft, about 40 pages long, scene by scene. Gradually I shorten it to one or two pages. This "backbone" helps me stay focused on the plot. I work on one or two scenes a day. When I finish with a frame, I add locations, background. Each place has its own energy and influences a story in a different way. For *Florystka* I needed a smaller, but not provincial, town, with good public transport and lots of green areas. So I chose Białystok. I did it for practical reasons as well. I could drive there and make a return trip to Warsaw in one day.

Cemeteries play a vital part in this book. I checked maps to see how much distance my characters had to cover. I always mark interesting spots on the map; where my characters live, where to put the body, and so on.

I walked the streets of Białystok to and fro, looking for inspiration. Some policemen showed me a place where people go to hang

themselves. You can tell how desperate they were just by measuring the distance from the front gate of the park. They explained to me how to cut the rope, and how many people you need to do it properly.

My biggest thanks, though, go to a pair of teenagers. They were hitchhikers, and I picked them up on the road to a rock festival in Jarocin. They told me a lot about the city. We wandered together around an old sewage treatment plant and nearby marshes that ended up in the story. I totally wrecked my favourite shoes, wading in mud and filth. But I used it all. And the only thing they asked for was a crate of beer and some crime novels.

Your latest novel – *Girl at Midnight* – takes place at the Polish seaside.

The main character is a mobster from Stogi, a district of Gdańsk. I drove there in the early spring, when the place is wet, ugly, and devoid of tourists. Some of my friends live in Gdańsk, so I asked them for help. Dagny Kurdwanowska put on her running shoes to measure time, going from one place to another, because I needed to know how long an escape scene would last.

Aren't you tired with this constant research? Is it not easier to make things up? We are talking about writing fiction, after all.

In the draft of *Girl at Midnight* I've only sketched a scene of collecting a scent sample. And it was a crucial scene for the whole story, because the scent was the only lead. You use a special scent box to do it. I send that sketchy draft to people working in a crime lab, and they told me it was all rubbish. So I swallowed my pride and went to Lublin to talk to the best scent identification specialists in the country. They showed me a real scent box, took a sample from me, and had the dog recognize it. I told them about the story and they made it believable right there and then.

You always show a different field of knowledge in your books, a knowledge that is important for the whole story – scent identification, floristics, forensic medicine.

I learn something new with each book. I consulted four specialists when I wrote an autopsy scene. Each one had a different opinion. It helped, because I could use it in the story – in an argument between two police officers, for example. Every writer can come up with a story of a scorned lover, but a layman will never think like a pro and won't know how to act like one. He has to hear it first. Talking face to face gives you tons of material – facial movements, gestures, nervous tics.

I don't want to focus my research on the internet. Lots of people do that all the time. I want to interview someone unique. I want to give my readers premium content. One of a kind merchandise.

You choose profilers – first Hubert Meyer, then Sasza Załuska – as protagonists in your novels. Why? What exactly does a profiler do?

This profession was born in the United States. At the beginning, profilers helped to identify criminals (and more specifically their racial backgrounds). They really shine, though, when it comes to serial killers. Profilers ask themselves: "Why? How did it happen?" And only then: "Who did it?" In Poland, profilers are uniformed police officers with their place in the hierarchy. But their job is the same: they look for clues within a crime scene. Wounds on the victim's body, the place, where the body was found. They can recreate the last hours of victim's life, and then suggest where he or she crossed paths with the killer. Collected data may point to many things – the killer's age, sex, education, where they live, what car they use, and so on. Basically, a profiler compresses tons of files into several pages describing key characteristics of a killer.

You do likewise with your drafts, but start from a different point.

At the end. I have to know all the details, and most importantly, who is the killer. Then I cover those facts with a veil of mystery. From time to time I let readers peak behind the curtains. Only in my first novel – *Sprawa Niny Frank* (The Case of Nina Frank) – the killer jumps out the blue.

You based your profiler on a real person, a detective from Katowice named Bogdan Lach.

I've also poured some American and British profilers into the mix: Douglas, Ressler, Britton, Turvey... But you're right, there is a lot of Bogdan in my profiler. We even wrote a book together on the profession, *Zbrodnia niedoskonała* (An Imperfect Crime).

For the character of Sasza Załuska I "used" a British profiler from the International Research Centre in Investigative Psychology based in Huddersfield. She visited me once – she wanted to ask me some questions about *Polish Murderesses*. Her boss, David Canter, coined term "investigative psychology" and did a lot to promote profiling in the UK. I created Sasza because I was angry with the genre. I wanted to show a full-blooded, independent female detective struggling with work and life in general. In most crime novels female protagonists bake cakes and have this incredible intuition. Sasza was a tribute to Polish policewomen, who must prove every single day that they have a right to do their job. A policeman has the authority, period. A woman, especially a policewoman, is simply regarded as less competent.

Are your good looks a hindrance in your line of work? You must have seen an article at Booklips with a list of the most beautiful Polish female writers. You came second. What were your thoughts?

I still don't know why I came a lousy second.

You don't see such rankings as sexist?

Why should I? I am pretty, I always was. It's not a problem for me. To be honest, I am glad that I still have my good looks. I don't feel offended. I found it funny when some of the female authors voiced their outrage. After all, our work is not judged by our looks. But we all have a right to comment on public figures.

Don't you think that you'd have more problems at work, had you been less pretty?

My good looks help, definitely. At the beginning, I was able to book interviews with experts because they wanted to talk with a "fit blonde". I used it to my advantage. They did not treat me seriously, and were confused, shocked even, when they realized how much I knew.

So your pretty face never caused you any problems?

I always believed in myself. Some regarded my confidence and good looks as a sign of arrogance. My readers were afraid to talk to me because they did not expect me to be this ordinary, normal girl.

On a morning show, you were once asked why a pretty blonde like you takes interest in such ghastliness. Why indeed?

I hear this question most often. It implies that there must be something wrong with me. Some people think I'm a perverse witch, going mad about serial killers. This contrast between my looks and my work excites them. But I am not surprised. Boys are allowed to fight, wander off, shoot arrows, skin their knees, read detective novels, watch westerns. A girl who talks about police work and investigations is a freak. Right?

How did your mother raise you?

To behave like a proper lady should. I wasn't a tomboy, but a stubborn, nosy, determined and bossy girl. I was raised in Hajnówka near Białystok. My mom worked as a chemist and

my father was a lathe-operator. I think that my background forged my spirit. That is why I don't care when someone calls me arrogant or cocky. If I didn't have this drive for success, I would have stayed in my home town, where most of the girls marry their first love at the age of 20 and get pregnant right away.

When I was in second grade in high school, I just told my parents that I was going to be a journalist. They assumed I would get over it. They didn't understand my decision and, to be honest, were a little bit afraid of it. It was my parents, though, who taught me that I could achieve anything I wanted. They knew how important it is to be confident and self-assured in today's world. I owe a great debt to my mom. She knew when to put her foot down. My character's second name is Załuska, because this is my mother's maiden name.

When I was depressed after the accident, my mother came to look after me. She gave me *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and one story from her own life. She ran from home when she was 17 because her parents wanted her to marry a wealthy farmer. She looked at her sandals and immediately knew she needed to run as fast as she could. She made it; graduated from college and got married at 38. She told me all that at my bedside. It helped me stand on my own two feet again.

You often stress that you care about a good ending to a story.

Not necessarily a happy one, though, not a "they lived happily ever after". I simply think that a classical tale has to end properly – the balance between good and evil has to be restored. The corpse is just a device. I am more interested in my characters, who, faced with tragedy, gradually pick themselves up. Just like me.

How do you take criticism of your work?

Not too well, to be honest. It upsets me and throws me off balance. It hurts the most when a remark is said incidentally; not straight to my face. I am too touchy, I know that. That is why I constantly raise the bar and look for mistakes in my own work. After I published my first book, I attended a creative writing course. Today I teach creative writing in a school I co-founded.

You once said that writers shouldn't "jerk off", when their books receive praise and bestseller status. *Girl at Midnight* is a bestseller, and you brag about it on Facebook.

I was wrong, I admit that. Being on a bestseller list is a proof of a job well done. I have every right to brag about it. The times when an author sits in a corner and just pounds on a typewriter are long gone. You need to take part in the promotion of your works. If you wrote a great book, shout about it at the top of your lungs. I am not talking about making a scene, but standing up for your own work.

Besides, in order to write anything, you have to be an introvert, a part-time freak. But after that you have to change into a peddler. Many authors don't know how to fight for what they deserve. They don't understand that a finished book is a product, no different than a cell phone, tights, or yoghurt. And so is Katarzyna Bonda. I try to explain it to my colleagues. You have to watch over your royalties, read the fine print on the contracts, sit on the marketing merry-go-round. A 1 percent bump in royalties will cover your expenses for a whole month. If you are not up for the task, hire an agent or a lawyer. Better financial conditions give you more time to write. If I had to write after hours, I would need six years to finish one book. I don't care when people accuse me of "aggressive marketing".

I've talked about it with my colleagues many times. I am not appalled when a writer

advertises peanuts. Why is there no ruckus when an actor advertises coffee or an actress advertises an anti-wrinkle cream? I am more than happy to advertise something. I am just a girl from the block, I am not trying to be some father figure, unlike some of my colleagues. I am a normal person writing for normal folks. I am glad that my work pays for my bills. It calms many fears.

Like what?

I was always afraid that one day I would fall for a wealthy man. I hate the idea of being totally dependent on another person. Wealth does not impress me. I want a man who knows how to treat me when I turn into a little girl again. I don't buy this romantic bullshit. Hearts, flowers, and white horses are nonsense. I like concrete things. When a man says – "I love you" – I get suspicious. Yes, I used to say it too, but I always added that I was not sure what it truly meant. I don't believe in abstract ideas.

You clean, cook and look after your man?

I will never be an ideal housewife. When my partner says – "Hey, do you smell that? Our neighbours made an apple pie" – I ask him if he wants to eat out. I don't want to look after my man, or our home. It takes a lot of precious time. Time needed to write books. Writing rules my world, not potatoes boiling in a pot.

You never clean the house?

Sometimes, rather compulsively. I once repainted the entire flat white, because I needed to get *Girl at Midnight* out of my head. I just woke up in the morning and drove straight to buy paint. It helped.

So a female writer is not an ideal candidate for a partner.

A female writer writes all day. She wears a sweat suit, doesn't put on make-up, drinks tea, and smokes cigarettes. She is a despot. I am talking about pro writers who work all

the time. They get mad, they struggle with writer's block. They are prone to foul moods. It takes just one trivial comment to undermine their confidence. At the same time they are big-headed, uppity, and think very highly of themselves. They don't like to be cast in a sweet bimbo role. Not in the slightest.

Female writers should receive medals for what they do. Most authors have wives who manage their lives when they are struggling with the pains of the creative process. They look out for them when they write. A female author does both. I am a mother as well and it is a full-time job. I always drop my kid late for school because I write until the break of dawn and have problems getting up on time. A man is entitled to such flaws of character. A woman who does that is egoistic, bossy and sociopathic by default.

Does your partner understand you?

He does. He writes crime novels as well. There, I finally said it. I didn't mention it before because I didn't want to be accused of taking advantage of the fact. I respect him as an author, but I can be myself when he is around. A strong, independent, and defiant woman. It does not bother him at all. He does not see himself as an eunuch castrated by a she-wolf (my ex's words, not mine). He thinks my prowess is charming. My success does not bother him because he is an accomplished writer as well. We both play in the major league. We even compete for the same literary prize. Yes, we both say that we don't care, but in truth we compete with each other. I am happy for him but I like to win. I am an honest person. A man needs to have balls of brass to endure a woman's success.

Do you have much in common?

He is organized and elegant. I like to say what's on my mind, point-blank. I think that we learn a lot from each other because we have different hobbies. He gives me novels,

asks me to read them, waits for my opinion, and then yawns. We have this deal about movies. I take him to see *Dallas Buyers Club*, but in return I have to watch *Jack Strong*.

Do you talk about your books?

All the time. We check our leads, suggest new motives, laugh about holes in a plot. It helps if you work analytically and that's exactly how you write crime novels. He is the first reader of my work. He writes shorter novels, so when he sees the draft, he wants to throw out at least half of it right at the start. He loves me, though, and tries to be gentle. I say – "Stop fucking around and tell me straight, what is wrong here. Treat me like a stranger for a while." It's not a very nice experience, but priceless nonetheless.

We use those conversations in our books. There is a story in *Girl at Midnight* about meat (growing number of larvae in victim's body to establish the time of death). My partner used it in one of his books as well. Observant readers found the similarities very quickly. Lately we started to work on new novels, and we both wrote scenes taking place on a shooting range. Yes, we use different techniques, we tell the story in our unique way, but I can't say I liked the fact. I can be very jealous of a good story or an interesting piece of information. OK, I'll admit that I was furious. But we checked each other's drafts and it turned out that the similarities ended with the shooting range. Both scenes perform different functions and are told in a different way. This mental osmosis can be dangerous at times.

How did you two meet?

We did not like each other because we both wrote novels with a similar cast of characters. I was first but it was he who received a prestigious award. I immediately saw him as my rival and worst enemy. When we finally met, it wasn't love at first sight, although we both felt some kind of bond. He was funny and charming, but I wasn't

interested. Everything changed when I wrote *Girl at Midnight*. I fell in love when he wrote me a song that became a key element of a story. I didn't think that he would pull it off. After all, he wrote crime novels, not poetry.

"A girl at midnight, blissful smile on her lips, and those bright eyes. I know she'll return, and I'll host her again, before we all sail away into eternity".

I was awestruck, KO'ed. I told him right away that writing good books is fine but writing good songs on top of that is simply outrageous.

In *Girl at Midnight* you describe Sasza like this: "Deep down she felt inferior, damaged and weak but she'd never admit it in public. And she'd never be with someone just because that was the right thing to do. Now and then she longed for a break, a respite from at least one of her parental obligations. But that was not possible, at least not now. She stood on guard like a good soldier should."

That was my life, before I met my partner. I could have changed; tailored myself to expectations, but I didn't want to. Just like Sasza. The worst kind of men are those that pity you and try to cure you. Pity was the last thing I needed after I finished a relationship with the father of my child. I blamed myself, thought that I was a freak and would never find the right guy. I didn't meet any woman so dedicated to her work like I was. Loneliness can be hell sometimes. I used to wonder about starting a new relationship for the sake of my daughter, or for financial reasons. I barely scraped by. But today I am glad that I didn't give up. I focused on my daughter, just like Sasza did.

Does your daughter, Nina, understand what you do? That you need peace and quiet in order to work?

When I'm writing, she goes to her grandma's – either to my mum, who lives near the

Belarusian border, or her “other grandma” in Warsaw, who started out as our babysitter – and has a good time. She does not have to get up early and “grannies” keep her occupied. I come visit her once a week. When I finish the book, and recover from conjunctivitis and sore throat – smoking really damages your health – I try to make it up to the whole family.

It usually takes me about five months to write a book. I can’t disappear from Nina’s life for a period that long completely, so I drive her to school. I write from 8 am until 4 pm. Having a kid is great for discipline and mental hygiene, because it absorbs your attention and keeps you focused on the good parts of your life.

I get a feeling that Nina likes what I do. When I was arguing with a shop assistant at a grocery store, she said with a serious face: “Lady, you better watch out. My mom is the queen of crime novels.” Like I was some character from a fairy tale. It was touching.

Nina is everything to me. I treat her as a grown-up, not a child. We always talk about anything, even about me splitting up with her dad. I truly believe in the power of truth – both in fiction, and in real life.

Are Polish readers ready for good, mature crime novels?

I don’t know why but we long for American crime, despite having lots of interesting stories to tell. The history of Poland was always told in a monumental fashion. Polish writers should chip at those statues, look under them, poke them with sticks. In other words, break the taboo. By doing this, we will advertise ourselves abroad. Foreigners usually think that Poland is some exotic land somewhere between Germany and Russia. We should use that to our advantage! We should make a brand like they did in Scandinavia. Let’s show them crimes they haven’t seen yet.



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