

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE CORPSE, IT'S ABOUT THE ATMOSPHERE

Before she sits down to write, Katarzyna Bonda likes to get a feel for the city where the plot will take place. She learns about its dark sides, observes the people who live there, collects comprehensive information and tunes into the atmosphere of the place. Finally she takes it all and creates a best-selling crime novel. Interview by Dariusz Pawłowski

Katarzyna Bonda is currently the most popular Polish female writer of crime novels. Her books regularly rank high on the bestseller lists. And she has no desire to step down from the top any time soon...



Photo: Piotr Wachnik,
Damian Deja

When I got my hands on your newest book *Okularnik* [The white Mercedes], its sheer size intimidated me at first – it's over 800 pages long! But when I actually started reading it, it took hold of me in a really natural, non-pushy way, and I devoured it all in just a few evenings. I know that you create a detailed plan for each novel, but to what extent does a story like this start, at some point, to carry the author away with its own momentum?

The first reaction is a healthy one, the second is nice for me to hear. It is exactly why I create such detailed plans and why I work on them so obsessively – when about one third of the plot is already done, then the story starts to move forward on its own. That's why you need a fixed point of reference. When I hear that somebody wrote a book in three or four months, I want to laugh, because I needed at least four months to write the plan for *The White Mercedes*.

The plan is the hardest part, because crime novels have so many elements and if you move one of them, you have to rearrange everything else as well. When I'm writing, I still work on improving the plan, as I meet with various consultants and experts from different fields, and I incorporate their comments into the story. Afterwards, I rewrite the plan again, because the first will have been a very detailed one in which I have lists of actions for each individual scene. I shorten it and I squeeze the entire dramatic essence out of it, so that you, as a reader, can feel that the whole thing is very readable, that the suspense is not forced, and that every twist really turns the situation around completely. All subplots must come together seamlessly; it's very important. In a way, it's like going on a journey. You think you are all packed, you have all the necessities; a mess kit, a tent, a sleeping bag, a wind breaker

and shoes for all weather. And then, when you're on the road, it turns out that you don't need some of these things and you should have brought something different, and you'll now have to try and get it from somewhere else. Writing books is, after all, a slightly mysterious activity. There are so many elements in it that nobody can fully predict the end result. And then yes, at some point, the novel takes over and starts to direct the writer...

What happens to the plan then?

When I was writing *The White Mercedes*, I found myself cutting it into pieces and constantly moving the elements around. This is because I want to raise the bar for myself and my readers every time. I honestly believe that readers enjoy it, that they don't want to eat hamburgers all the time; they want a surprise. Some writers begin to believe their publishers when they tell them: "You have your dramatic structure; stick to it, it sells well". I think it's a mistake and a dead end. At the same time, this approach is a major challenge for me, because I have to detach myself from my stories and forget about my previous books. I can only sit down to write a new book if there has been a complete reset beforehand. Even if there is the same main character in several books, just as in my most recent novels, the character develops and changes, and as a result everything is different, and the new book is completely different as well. I think that writers should face challenges. The reader will appreciate that. And pay for the book.

So here we come to the topic of money...

Of course, money is important, when the books sell well I can live off of writing. But money cannot be the goal. It is a result, but I have never written just for the money. I truly believe that when money becomes the most important thing, literature becomes a problem. Nowadays, in the same bookshop, you can find crime novels that can easily hold their own against excellent examples of *belles-lettres*, and alongside them are books that are clearly just slapdash jobs. Readers will of course read them, because they will even read the label on a ketchup bottle: they can read, they are intelligent and interested in everything. Simply out of respect for my readers I don't want to give them sloppy work. And the developments I make are my nod to the readers, and a sign of my respect towards them. Just don't think it means my next book will be even longer...

That's a relief...

....All my fellow crime-novelists joke that this is what is going to happen... *Okularnik [The White Mercedes]* is so long, because I broke the rules of the genre even more than usual and I put a historical story within a crime novel. And I did it deliberately, not just because I felt like it, but because I decided that this part of the plot cannot be removed. Obviously if something cannot be removed from the story it is essential to it. I have this rule that states that structure is always the basis for the plot. And structure is all about the correct placement of the elements. On the other hand, the correct arrangement of elements is all about the fact that if you remove one brick from the house the whole structure collapses. That's why the book is long and why all these elements are in it. My next book will be very action-heavy, there will be a lot of explosions and all the boys will be happy. So it will be completely different once again.

Does this style of writing result in a personal approach to your characters? Do you feel pain when something happens to your characters or you have to remove something from their stories?

You get used to it. Nowadays I think that being able to cut things out is an essential part of the job. Hack writers have the biggest problem with cutting stuff out. With my first books, I did feel something akin to pain when I had to do this, but it's only proof that you are an inexperienced writer. It's like with journalism; you know yourself what really builds the story and what is just ornamental. I try to write without ornaments, I remind myself of what Umberto Eco once said: beauty has no purpose. Things that have no purpose are not functional, they are not building blocks of any contemporary or historic, or even criminal, plot designed to lead the reader towards solving the mystery. They have to be eliminated. Honesty is the second most fundamental thing. When I stir things up, I go all the way. I avoid presenting things that come to the surface in a simple, black-and-white way; I show all shades of things, their entire complex nature.

In the case of *The White Mercedes* you revealed something personal...

Indeed, this book *is* personal. I discovered that this story concerns me personally, while doing the research for it. I was deeply moved when I found out my national identity. But I mostly felt betrayed – how could somebody take this knowledge away from me? This is why I couldn't detach myself completely from the story. I have the impression that readers can feel this, and are moved by the extended flashback concerning the pogrom. I think this

passage would be different if I wasn't an heir to this 'historical consciousness'. I decided back then that I needed to break my own rule of distancing myself emotionally from my topics. This is my normal rule because I don't write literary books, I write genre novels that are supposed to be, first and foremost, entertainment. I don't want to transpose my life, family and children into my work. However this time around I did it differently, and decided to turn this into an asset of my novel. The publisher asked me more than once whether I wanted to reveal it, because this is not just a plot set in my home town, where my mother lives, but I also say a lot about myself. But what else could I do? Hide under the table? If the message of my book is that it's high time to start talking about the things we've been silent about, that we need to dig deeper and this will help us to understand what's happening around us, then I have to start from myself.

It felt to me that the personal and historical plot of the novel was not about coming to terms with history, but about natural, human anger with the fact that humans could do such things to other humans, and that we have been silent about this for so long...

Yes. There's polarisation when it comes to this topic. It boils down to the fact that many believe that the Polish hero, Romuald Rajs 'Bury', and in general terms the 'doomed soldiers', are all bad. It irritated me, because I know that truth is usually somewhere in the middle. Even more than this – without going back to the genesis, without analysing who 'Bury' was, what happened to him, that his brother was taken away from him and that it was done by Belarusians, that they were the evil ones at that point – it is hard to make

unequivocal statements. The same is true in reverse – we need to take a look at what 'Bury' did, the crimes he committed. I am firmly against painting everything and everyone with the same brush – it's a tendency which should be stigmatised. There was anger, but also fear. It was a difficult moment for me when I discovered this story, when I visited the Institute of National Remembrance and saw what is held there. I felt that I have to use it, that it will enhance the plot. The most important things are between the lines, so this will lend more weight to the book. But to be honest, I did have some fears. I am simply a writer of crime novels – who am I to talk about such things...? I might be accused of desecration... Still, I decided to do it. Let the air out of the balloon and search for the truth. I believe that crime novels should deal with serious issues; I don't agree with the idea that these two should not mix. After what Scandinavian and British authors have done for the genre the barriers are not so simple anymore. This approach allows us to reach young people with serious topics, and provide them with some food for thought. After all, you don't believe they read all these boring files and official documents, do you? They start reading my novels because they want some thrill and suspense, and thus history is moved into the sphere of entertainment. But why shouldn't entertainment be real, intelligent and eye-opening? They want exactly that. There is a lot of negativity in Poland about young people – people say that young people don't read anything, they are not interested in anything, etc. It's not true. There's real hunger for knowledge. It only has to be supplied to them in an interesting way. And from different perspectives.

Were there any people among those who knew what you wanted to write about who

advised you against writing about this topic?

Yes. My mum was one such person. But there were others. Already at the research stage, when I asked around about 'Bury', I encountered some unpleasant reactions. Everything was more or less okay so long as I didn't reveal my identity as a descendant of a woman killed in the pogroms. After that people's attitude would change, because they assumed my perspective was different. Some expected I would be dangerous, others expected me to create a monument in their name. Before it went to print I sent my book to the people I had spoken to, and what's interesting is that some of them did not respond. Others that did respond proposed far-reaching changes that could defend their claims. I noticed that they were often unable to separate the plot, the literary fiction, from reality. They asked why such horrible things happen in their area. I'm sorry, but I write crime novels, not romance novels, so they should have expected characters would drop like flies, a lot of action and some evil people. The more evil people there are, the better the crime novel.

How useful is your experience in journalism for discovering and determining contexts and creating stories?

At first, it was a hindrance. These are two very different activities. As a journalist, you have to make shortcuts, because that's what newspapers want. So you have to make certain generalisations, use stereotypes from time to time, so that the reader understands your point, put the most interesting thing in the lead or in a separate section. In a book, the most important thing is the ace hidden up your sleeve. You don't put it first, you tease it out -

the book is supposed to seduce. It's built on emotions and meant to provoke emotional reactions. An article is supposed to be truthful, and based on the facts. You can only write about the things you know. But on the other hand, a book is written with heart. I also believe that journalists 'live' numerous lives, because they meet many more people than any regular person. To be good at this job you need to be able to talk to prisoners, ministers, kings and cleaners. A writer puts him or herself on the other side. When I go out of the house I try to dress in a smart, appropriate way. But I've spent seven-eighths of my life in... you don't even want to know what I wear. I'm locked away at home, in a tracksuit and a horrible fleece jacket I got from some police officers in Piła. I wear a cap, because I smoke, so I air my apartment out all the time. And this also results in many physical problems, if only because writers spend all day sitting down. Additionally, you have to cut yourself off from reality to write, so whenever I finish a book, there's a complete mess around me. I don't eat much, because it's a waste of time, and I spend all the time with my book. Should I go on?

A complete transformation. Can it get any worse?

The transition from journalist to writer was difficult. But because I'm a very down-to-earth person, and analytical thinking is a hobby of mine, I decided to learn the skill. I started with screenwriting at the Film School in Łódź, because there weren't many places in Poland at that time to learn how to tell stories. We still have this romantic approach to writing which talks a lot about inspiration and the intervention of muses. Afterwards, I left to study abroad and I was taught things I knew theoretically, but they were ordered in a very precise way for me. This is where my

obsession with consultants, plans and using real stories as starting points began. I sent a copy of *The White Mercedes* to 34 experts from different fields. All of them read the entire book. I received feedback from all 34 – all of it so awful that I wanted to just sit and cry in a corner. But you have to swallow your pride and rewrite everything. Nowadays I know that humbleness and humility are the two most important things. Humility and honesty in relation to the topic, the subject matter, and the love of my readers, which is amazing. Nowadays, I use my journalistic skills for research, for compiling documentation, collecting and selecting data, establishing rapport with people, and for finding the best expert in a given filed in the country when I need one. It should also be remembered that journalists have a lot of practice writing... We know how to stick to a routine, and I decided that every year I will publish one volume of this quartet. I'm currently working on the fourth, which doesn't mean that the third one is finished, after all, *The White Mercedes* was also 'ready' before I had to rewrite it again. Many people will never become writers, because they have no discipline. What's more, I can work everywhere – I don't need any rituals, silence and such. I learnt all of this from journalism.

After reading your book *Florystka* [The florist], I can boast about knowing a lot about this profession.

I always wanted to have some element of knowledge in my books, because that's what I like to read myself. I would have found no pleasure in writing a simple detective story. I believe that if someone pays 45 złoty for my book, they must get something that grabs them completely. Knowledge of something new is one of the elements of this, so I put it in my

novels. There used to be jokes about this, because not everybody works like this, as it's just ghastly. Not worthy of a writer - according to some. Recently, for example, I took a hike in waders through some swamps. Theoretically, I didn't need it for anything. I can't reveal what I discovered there, because it will appear in the next books – I can only say that I wouldn't have come up with such a thing if I hadn't gone on that hike. Such details are often useful for finding the solution to a mystery. At first, *The Florist* was written for a character who was a pianist, and she later turned into a harpist. I changed this element because I discovered a certain detail, and if I hadn't the solution to the mystery would be different. You can't find it through Google. You have to get to know it, see it. That's why you find a lot of information in my books. It took me a while to get really good at this. In my second novel *Tylko martwi nie kłamię* [Only the dead don't lie], which is basically a love letter to Katowice because I was so enamoured with the city and its industrial architecture, I didn't manage to put all the knowledge I'd acquired into the book in an intelligent way.

How does writing crime novels influence the way you perceive places? If you're so enthused about their dark sides....

This is one of my private obsessions, and I have many of them. We think we are a completely homogeneous society. In reality, different Polish cities and regions couldn't be more different. They differ when it comes to the landscapes, atmosphere, people, habits, facial expressions, food... everything. This is why I have to go to such places when I prepare a book – I need to get to know the street on which my victims will be found; I have to uncover the hidden parts. I have to feel at home there. Still, it's always good to double-

check yourself. When I went to Tricity (Gdańsk, Gdynia, Sopot – translator's note) many times and finally wrote *Girl at Midnight*, I thought I had checked everything, so I sent the book to a girl from Gdańsk who had helped me get to know the city, and it turned out that one of the streets my character used to escape through, and he had needed to do it within a specific time, was monitored by municipal guards. I broke into a cold sweat; I narrowly avoided a complete fiasco. A friend of mine had to run along an alternative route for me to find a solution. Maybe it doesn't matter to some people. But do you know how much local people respect me for that?

So your hometown of Hajnówka should have been easier to describe?

It was even worse. I grew up there, I had my own memories, but the town looks completely different now. I was emotionally involved, I had too many friends, so I had to rent a room in a hotel, instead of going to stay at my mum's, in order to feel like a stranger. I had to look for the dark side, because every crime story needs darkness. And each city has one. I look for energy and underlying patterns in every city and town. To such an extent that I visit the same place in a given city or town at different times of night and day to see how it looks and how people behave there. The good thing is that I don't use all of this. Maybe 3% of it goes into the book. But when I start writing, all these images, smells and the whole atmosphere come alive in my head and it is easier for me to get into the novel.

Do you read anything else?

Of course. I read a lot of classics, for the sake of my mental health, and because I'm a writer of the genre I also read all the crime novels that

are published. First of all, I keep tabs on the competition, to check that they're not getting ahead of me. Secondly I learn, because I can see all the construction joints. It is easier to see mistakes in someone else's work, because one tends to be very emotional about one's own work; your writing is like your child. I also read to simply be a reader. And to develop myself, because I think that this is the duty of a writer – to develop him or herself for their readers. To be able to offer multiple layers in their novels. I, of course, work in popular literature, so it has to be understandable for as many people as possible. But it also has to allow the reader to see between the lines if they want. Next year, my books will be translated into many languages. I have this dream of somebody in Germany, Australia, England or the US picking up my book and thinking: so this is what Poles are like, like the ones in Tricity, and then picking another one and thinking: oh, no, they are different after all. It's precisely what the Scandinavians did. After all, many of us now get most of our knowledge about Sweden, Norway and Finland from crime novels.

Will it always be crime? Is the genre you put yourself in unchangeable?

No....! I can't guarantee anything. I have projects planned until 2021, because I'm organised like this, but it could all shift completely. I got into writing crime novels very naturally, and this form of writing suits me very well, so even if it will be a different kind of story, I cannot guarantee there will be no corpses. It should nevertheless be remembered that crime novels are changing nowadays – they're no longer crime stories in the traditional sense. It's no longer just an entertaining puzzle, a crossword for you to solve to obtain the name and surname of the murderer; its scope has expanded. This is why

I don't say that I write crime stories, but crime novels. The emphasis should be on the novel part. The universal character of the story, as well as social and psychological issues – that's what's most important for me. I have to admit that the corpse is not important for me. The detective must solve the mystery, but this is just the frame for the painting. The painting itself is about something else. I think that this is the source of my success – nowadays people want genre combinations like this, mash-ups which can give them everything in a single book. These are the times we live in and I'm not ashamed of this.



Photo: Piotr Wachnik, Damian Deja