

THE QUEEN OF CRIME FICTION IS A GIRL FROM HAJNÓWKA

TEXT Jacek Tomczuk PHOTO Filip Ćwik

She always looks serious and unapproachable in photographs. "Unruly, unpredictable and dangerous" is the catchphrase of meetings with the author, which always attract a swarm of readers. Yet this is just one half of the truth about the most popular Polish female crime writer.

I keep wondering whether this is not all just a dream. This modest, shy small-town girl still occasionally resounds in me. "I've had seven lean years, and I know what poverty is" says Katarzyna Bonda, when we meet to talk about her latest book, *Lampiony* [Lanterns]. "I've not become big-headed, I still live in the same two-room apartment. I just bought new bookshelves. OK, I'm hungry. Shall we order sushi?"

IN LOVE WITH ŁÓDŹ

Plot, draft, drama concept, plan, treatment... A conversation with Katarzyna Bonda on the art of writing crime stories is full of professional jargon. Not a word about the writer's inspiration, mission or role. These topics are far too intimate for her.

"I do not call myself an artist because I do not create. I'm an artisan. I can't abandon the job just because of a bad mood or my daughter's tantrum," she explains. "My plots are constructed in such a precise way that I can play with them as if they were puzzles."

When writing, she collects all the relevant information. She must go and see

the places where she will lay the bodies, she talks to people to add detail to a fictional creation. She needs to anchor her protagonists in real time and space. When writing *Tylko martwi nie kłamią* [Only the dead don't lie], she dug deep into the history of Katowice. In order to finish *Girl at Midnight*, the best-selling book that brought her fame, she would travel to the Tricity area of Gdańsk, Gdynia and Sopot. *Lanterns* was intended to be a story about the Subcarpathian region. "I wanted to rest after *Okularnik* [The white Mercedes], where I described what Romuald Rajs, codenamed 'Bury', and his unit had done to the Belarussians. I didn't want to become Poland's historical therapist. I thought I would pen an adventure story of fire and arson", she recollects.

She was almost done when she came to Łódź for an author's meeting. "The city sucked me in", laughs Katarzyna Bonda. She was welcomed to the city with little black flakes falling on her head. "A glue factory had burnt down, I learned from my taxi driver. A moment later, I saw a giant burnt-out tenement house, and when the cabbie encouraged me to see another one that had burnt the night before, I started wondering what was going on and felt like this was like one of my stories unfolding right in front of me."

She called her publisher the next day. Change of plans: the city of textile workers won with Tarnów and Rzeszów in the Subcarpathians.

She would commute from Warsaw to Łódź frequently, but never for longer than a week. "After seven days I adapt and stop noticing details", she says.



She was shown around communist residential neighbourhoods by a hip hop crew. Someone snuck her into the TV tower, and someone else showed her the luxurious lofts of Scheibler's factory. She visited a gas station where people tend to buy more alcohol than fuel. She smoked cigarettes with football hooligans under a balcony presenting trophies they had stolen from fans of the opposing team. "I was enamoured to the point of almost buying a flat in Łódź", laughs Bonda today. "Łódź is like a diva that had once been famous, beautiful and stylish, but has since seen life's hardships. She has a black eye, wrinkles, and is wearing shabby furs, yet she still maintains her noble features, courage and pride. I have seen no other city with as many empty liquor bottles lying around and with such hard-drinking residents. I'm at the bus stop with a lady looking like she had walked off the pages of a fashion magazine and a man with a tie, who is chugging on the bottle of alcohol he keeps in the pocket of his elegant coat. In Łódź, nothing is hidden. If someone doesn't like you, they will simply hit or insult you. But no one will ever leave you high and dry. Nowhere else did I have so many friendly guides to show me around; people would donate their time, taking time away from work to help me understand the city.

She was so engrossed in gathering information that she only began to write after a warning from her publisher. *Lanterns* is a 600-page story about a city that suffered an economic crisis and rises again. In it talented profiler, Sasza Załuska, needs to find a serial arsonist. "This city is so mesmerizing and multidimensional that I could afford myself the luxury of creating extraordinary villains. So many different types of crime are thrown into this book for this reason: classic murder, a fire that consumes people's lives, a bomb attack, rape, fraud..." she reveals.

A COURT TRIAL AS AN ADVENTURE FILM

Before becoming a best-selling author, Bonda would write about real-life victims, police officers and prosecutors.

"I had always wanted to be a journalist and lead an eventful life", she says, recounting her childhood dream, "Writing books was not part of the plan at the time."

She started working at the Warsaw newspaper *Ekspres Wieczorny*, writing about local stories, until one day the head of her department needed someone to write from inside the courtroom. "Everyone tried to avoid him, because court reporting is the most difficult journalistic task. No one wants to talk to you, and it's hard to follow a case in the midst of all the proceedings. 'Bonda, you'll be the one to do it', I was told", she remembers.

She understood nothing. Young and naïve, she did not even know her way around the courthouse. Lawyers looked down on her, because she was not familiar with the jargon. "In the court canteen I chanced upon a famous prosecutor who specialized in organized crime and started to chat to him. I don't know why, but he decided to help me. He helped me realize that a trial is like theatre, divided into episodes, with the hard data in the files. Since then, reading files and documents has been a hobby of mine", she says.

Her superiors did not always appreciate her articles. "In my writing, dry courthouse reports read like adventure films. Time and again I would be told I write crime stories rather than reports. At the time, I did not take it as a compliment" she would later mention in interviews.

Later she would work for *Newsweek*. During one of her trips to write an article, she hit and killed a pedestrian. Today, she has no desire to discuss this event.

A CHEEKY WOMAN

One thing was clear to Bonda – she did not want to continue working in journalism. “I was left with my daughter and a mortgage on my apartment. I wrote one book after another, received decent reviews and award nominations, I sold television rights, but even after the royalties came in, I did not have enough money to pay my electricity bill”, she remembers. “I had to sell almost everything I owned: bags, shoes and coats that I had bought during better times. I took my furniture to a junk shop. Debt collectors would call me constantly. I told myself it’s my last chance, and if it doesn’t work, I’m going back to journalism”.

It worked, but not everyone was happy with this new celebrity crime fiction author. She has been accused of being pushy and a master of PR. Her books were seen as classics, and not true crime fiction. Fellow crime novelist Marcin Wroński, who writes historical ‘whodunit’ stories, called her “an aggressive, cheeky woman”.

“Initially it hurt, but then I thought: maybe this is not a bad way to describe a female pop literature author”, says Bonda. “I’d much rather be a warrior than some crybaby sitting in a corner. I had author’s meetings with just a few fans in attendance. I prefer to have an audience of at least 300. It’s interesting how I’ve earned this reputation only because I’ve been able to say: ‘Yes, I wrote a good book, scored a better contract with my new publisher, and sent an auditor to my former publisher, thanks to whom I was able to reclaim some of the money I was owed’. Is it really such a disgrace for an author to demand decent compensation?”

There are legends about how much she earns. “I did not expect to be able to write books for a living”, she admits.

There is an anecdote about Bonda and fellow writer Krzysztof Varga making the rounds in literary circles. When asked if she had really earned a 1.4 million Polish

złoty in royalties over the past year, she replied: “No. More.” without batting an eyelid and then gave Varga a sly grin. While other crime novelists see Raymond Chandler’s noir fiction as archetypal, she has her own theory for the contemporary “fairy tale for adults”.

“A crime novel is a wonderful way to present human weaknesses, impulses and dreams”, she explains. “It also allows for a moral that the readers should glean for themselves – you just have to give them the opportunity to do so. What are *Oedipus*, *Macbeth* and *Crime and Punishment* if not crime stories at their core? In these books, it is not important who did it, but how and why the crime happened. And that’s what interests me the most in this genre.”

For years Bonda and her partner, Mariusz Czubaj, were the hottest couple in Polish literature. “Unfortunately, that’s all in the past now”, she says, “It was a beautiful relationship, but not an easy one. Two narcissistic characters, each of us focused on our self. And then one of us achieves tremendous success... There is this saying; a friend in need is a friend indeed, but that’s only a half-truth. Success is the most difficult, and our relationship did not survive it”.

Bonda jokes that a female writer doesn’t make the best relationship material. “A writer writes all day and walks around in her jogging bottoms, with no make-up, just a cup of tea or cigarette in hand. She is a despot. We talk about female writers who are machine-like in their creative frenzy. Furious when she suffers from writer’s block, she is prone to depression for the smallest reason. An arrogant know-it-all, she has an opinion on everything. Furthermore, her high self-esteem does not allow her to pretend to be sweet and silly”.

Bonda gets worked up. “Most authors have wives who organize their lives so they can have the peace and quiet they need to create. She is the organizer, he the creator. A female writer must do both. Additionally I am a mother, which – just like writing – takes

up lots of time. I am notoriously late getting to school, because writing until 5 a.m. makes it difficult to wake up in the morning. These failings are acceptable in a man, but in a woman they turn her into an egoist and sociopath”.

A BELARUSSIAN IN EXILE

“Every time I visited my mom, I would agree to hold a meeting in the local library or cultural centre”, says Bonda of visits to her hometown of Hajnówka. “Once a female reader stood up and asked me if I’m ashamed of the fact I’m from Hajnówka, because all my novels are set in other locations than there. She pointed out that even Wikipedia does not mention my place of birth. ‘All right then’, I replied, ‘I’ll write a book for you, but let me warn you, it will be a bloody one, filled with corpses and villains’. The audience was ecstatic and then the same lady got up and asked: ‘But the villains won’t be from here?’”

This encouraged the author to write her most famous novel *The White Mercedes*, which she dedicated to her grandmother.

“I’ve always been told that my grandmother, whose name I was given, was killed by the Germans”, says Bonda. While looking for information about her birthplace, she discovered the truth: her grandmother was murdered along with other Orthodox villagers by Polish partisans hiding after World War II; the latter are now referred to as the ‘doomed soldiers’.

“My mother refused to talk about it”, remembers Bonda. “She was 73 years old and this was a complete taboo topic for her. She pleaded with me: ‘You will write about it and leave, while I will stay. Leave it, do not write about it’. I told her that I had spent 19 years of my life there and never heard anyone speak about it openly; why can I not talk about the facts?”

Not all of the residents in Hajnówka were happy with Bonda’s courage in uncovering the town’s history. Right-wing

websites called her “the bimbo who tries to make the doomed soldiers odious”. She received anonymous letters from Hajnówka that would say such things as: “The skeletons are out of the closet. Don’t come back here”. But her meetings were also attended by grateful readers, who thanked her for revealing the truth behind the murder of Belarussian cart drivers by Bury’s unit in 1946.

While writing *The White Mercedes* she also discovered her own roots. “My grandparents spoke to me in the local vernacular, I attended high school with Belarussian language classes, but my parents raised me as a Pole. We never discussed this in our family”.

Since her birth town has become well-known, men have started to tell her she has the looks of a Russian. “That’s how limited Poles’ knowledge of minorities is. Russian, Belarussian, Ukrainian – same difference”, laughs Bonda.

Does her heritage impact her in any way today? “I hate the folksy tunes, but I do enjoy going to Orthodox church”, she admits. “Well, let’s wrap things up, my daughter is waiting at the neighbours’. The sushi’s on me. After all, you know how much I earn”.