

SIX METRES UNDER THE DOG

Łukasz Orbitowski started out as a horror fiction writer, but each subsequent book took him further and further away from the world of sci-fi conventions. His 2013 novel *Szczęśliwa ziemia* (Happy Land) was nominated for the Nike Literary Award. His most recent book, *Inna dusza* (The Soul of Another), is based on the files of a case of double homicide.

Before **Katarzyna Bonda** began to write bestselling crime fiction, she worked as a journalist and courtroom reporter. She has just published another novel from the series starring profiler Sasza Załuska. However, the plot of *Okularnik* (The White Mercedes) also touches upon the post-war history of the Polish-Belarusian border, challenging the myth of the “Doomed Soldiers.”

We sat these two together and asked them one question: why do you need real crimes?



Photo by Michał Mutor

Ł.O.: Do you know how to get rid of a body?

K.B.: Lye is the best. Or a drain declogger. But you have to remember about the teeth. They're not going to decompose, like offal: liver, kidneys... The latter contain too much water, so it's better to bury them. Ideally at six metres.

Ł.O.: Six metres? You'd need shoring in the hole.

K.B.: But only this depth guarantees that wild animals won't dig out the body and the earth won't eventually throw it out. Plus you have to have a dog on top.

Ł.O.: Sure. If you bury a dead animal on top of the victim, when a police dog catches the

trail, it'll dig up the animal first and that'll be it.

K.B.: This motif has been employed in crime stories. Someone sees an unknown man bury a dog in the forest, and you don't know yet that it's not really about the dog.

Ł.O.: But if you were to kill me, how would you go about it?

K.B.: It wouldn't be easy – it's really not easy to die at the hands of an amateur. You're a big chap, I wouldn't manage to do away with you or even dispose of the body on my own.

Ł.O.: Yeah, it's hard to kill a person. *The Soul of Another* had to include two descriptions of murders. Each eventually took me ten pages. Not because I wanted to torment the victims

and readers, mind you. When I researched the matter, I learned that if you're not equipped with specialist knowledge, if you're merely a gifted amateur, murder is a ruddy nightmare. Up to an hour of hard work.

K.B.: Apart from that, you'd need a good instrument of crime, and most murders are committed in a fit of passion, using whatever's at hand. The most gruesome killings, with victims butchered by teenagers who stab them fifty times, are not the result of any particular savagery. There was this well-known case in Warsaw when a couple of teenage thugs killed a woman – I was at their trial when I still worked as a journalist. They didn't have a single knife that'd be sharp. They'd try them out on the victim one by one. Until they finally killed her.

Douglas and Ressler, FBI agents and profilers, did some research on the most famous American killers and established that the relationship between the killer and their victim is stronger than sex. Irrespective of whether the killer is a psychopath, whether we're dealing with domestic violence or murder of the husband, it's always the same. Even psychopaths have to deal with recurrent, haunting memories.

Ł.O.: But – and I'm scared at the very thought – the act of killing has to give you a real high. There is no greater power one can exert on another human being than when taking their life.

K.B.: That's why some find crimes addictive. When murderers commit further killings, what drives them is not money, love or sex, but power, control and the need to dominate.

Ł.O.: Does the killer's sex matter here?

K.B.: Women are more terrifying. Possibly because they find it so much harder to cross the line that leads towards crime. When they're already on the other side, they don't think about conscience or punishment – they tend to reach for the knife and eliminate the perpetrator of their humiliation. The

interesting thing is that they've imagined this scene, played it out in their minds so often that one stab is enough. They act like pros.

Ł.O.: How do you know all that?

K.B.: I even wrote a book about them: *Polskie morderczynie* (Polish Murderesses). The knowledge I acquired in the process came in handy in my other novels. In the series on Sasza Załuska, my protagonist, a profiler, has an academic approach to killers.

Ł.O.: I guess you've got a similar approach to your crime novels. It was the opposite with me. My publisher commissioned me to write a crime story. I got a list of cases to choose from, I had to pick one and write a "true crime" book. I kept rejecting one murderer after another when I finally stumbled upon a bloke from Bydgoszcz who killed two people: his cousin and neighbour. I picked him for one reason: I was at a complete loss as to why he killed these people. What is more, when I read his case files and saw the pictures of his victims, it became clear that I'd never fully understand him. Of course, I could have resorted to psychoanalytical tricks. After all, the easiest thing would be to say that his parents didn't love him, he was bullied at school, and he began to fulfil his need to dominate by killing. But I didn't want to use this solution, it seemed too obvious.

K.B.: And this is why your book stands out: the point of crime fiction is to solve the puzzle, whereas you're dealing with the mystery that we all come across sooner or later as we try to fathom the killer's motives. Both of us need a secret. I only work with criminal cases I don't understand. Otherwise I'd end up with a journalistic text rather than literature.

Ł.O.: But another problem arose as I was reading the dry case files: I understood that the story of my character was in fact dreadfully mundane. I had to quickly adjust my initial idea: instead of pretending to deliver a detailed description of a true story,

I started writing a novel loosely based on the files. By transforming the reality, I tried to make it even more complex – so as to confuse any attempt at explaining my protagonist. He’s a lad from a good family, he gets everything a child should, including care and love, and yet he grows up to become a killer.

K.B.: Because real crime cases are mundane. This is why, even though reality may sometimes be more interesting than fiction, it’s harder to write in the true crime genre. The truth rarely follows dramatic scenarios. Even the catalogue of crime motives is limited to a mere seven: revenge, robbery, harm and resentment, the sexual motive, paedophiles, arsonists, madmen. That’s all.

Ł.O.: This is why the allure of Polish noir often involves building an illusion of sorts. Take Marek Krajewski, for example: he always has to include some dead woman with cut off arms and scarabs sewn in her stomach. “Music box crime” is what I like to call it. Small, intricate, beautiful and thought-out. Reality is hardly like that. Nor are there any real-life Hannibal Lecters.

K.B.: I’m not keen on the macabre, I don’t like aestheticizing crime. Naturally, I get letters from people who think I’m turned on by “beautiful death.” If truth be told, it bores me. When I read about such “music box crimes,” as you called them, I lose track of the plot straight away. Jack the Ripper, who so “beautifully” cut up his victims, stimulated popular imagination 120 years ago, because he was elusive. And he was elusive, because forensics was still at a nascent stage. In this day and age, he’d be uncovered in a day.

Nowadays making ornaments out of intestines or employing other bizarre effects, such as wrapping a woman with a string and placing a torch in her mouth, is so cliched and plastic that it doesn’t work anymore. Crime stories use other means to scare us, showing that even an ordinary person can cross the line between life and death. When you approach the killer in this fashion, even if you

understand their motive and thoroughly parse the case itself, you’re still at a loss as to why they had to kill. Everyone has their own network of motivations which may become looped and conflicted enough to lead to crime.

Ł.O.: And in actual fact, the murderer often turns out to be some dumbbell who’s totally out of it. In that sense, the reality of the crime resists the writer. How do you write a novel when your protagonist is not just incomprehensible, but also quite unfit to be portrayed in either a “taming of evil” kind of story or a “nihilistic tour de force”? In effect, purely by the way, I seem to have expressed some sort of dislike for series such as *Dexter* or *Sons of Anarchy*, where we have a bunch of cool killers who garner the viewers’ sympathy despite the thick layer of blood on their hands. I watch these things myself, even find them somewhat enjoyable, but I wanted to go against the trend and write it how it really is: that the killer is a nobody.

K.B.: You could afford to do that.

Ł.O.: And you couldn’t? The genre referred to as “crime fiction” is bursting at the seams. Who’d dare to delineate its limits?

K.B.: We’re forced to overstep them. Everything’s been said already, so we have to go beyond that, take risks. Say there’s a protagonist with whom you should stick until the end of the book, but you kill him off already in act two. Yet despite all that, crime stories are essentially still about the same thing: taking your readers to hell, but with a two-way ticket. During this journey, the reader has to feel constant tension – from the first sentence until the last. Dramatic tension is your ABC...

Ł.O.: ...that I’ve not even tried to learn. And I’m not that sure whether it’s really indispensable. You don’t read Chandler to find out who the killer is. Take his famous monologue from *The Long Goodbye* – several pages on blondes. Does it build tension?

K.B.: Classic crime writers were not really into murder or dead bodies. Like you, they were interested in the puzzle. I focus on how to solve it – and that requires precision, which is not easy, as I’m a terribly messy person. So before I sit down to write, I obsessively draft a detailed plan of the novel. It takes months. Once you sit down to write, the story takes you for a ride, you lose touch with reality completely, so you should at least know where to land.

Ł.O.: I got this sense of security from the details. In order to recount the world of my killer, I had to recall 1990s Poland – its colours, smells, gadgets and tastes – but also get to know the ins and outs of Bydgoszcz, where *The Soul of Another* is set. On top of that, I had to enter the life of a French Foreign Legion soldier and learn the ropes of artisan cake production. In that situation, it turns out that the writer doesn’t really have to know a lot – he just has to know the right people. I asked a friend whether he had anyone from the Foreign Legion for me, and he did. We met, and I had material for half a chapter. I needed an artisan cake maker – I got four straight away. As they were talking to me, I could see when their eyes shone, what they were most keen on in the profession. I guess had I needed an anatomical pathologist, I’d have found them too.

K.B.: But that does not mean one can write a crime story without ever having been to a mortuary to observe an autopsy. When you want to hide a body, sure, you have to know how to do it. You have to know how many metres there are to run, how many stairs to climb if you’re describing someone’s flight. These things may not even enter the plot, but you can’t structure a scene properly without being able to freely move around the world you’re describing.

In *Girl at Midnight*, I first wrote the scent collection scene off the top of my head. I showed it to experts and they ran me down. So I went to Lublin to see the best scent

identification specialists in the country. They gave me a real scent box, collected my scent and had the dog recognize it. It was a specific fragment of knowledge I needed for my plot. Knowledge, not data, because information alone is not enough. I need to work with mechanisms, emotions and details I can weave into the novel. When you lose your distance and try to squeeze all the exciting information you collected into the book, no wonder the plot doesn’t stick together.

Ł.O.: The motivations can be different, though. Take this: when you want to ensure as realistic a portrayal as possible, readers feel that they’re treated with respect, that the author did everything in their power to paint this unknown world with maximum accuracy and minimum distance. But something else was vital for me here. I made the assumption that *The Soul of Another* would be completely devoid of myself as the author. I used to be a terribly egotistical writer. I got divorced, so I wrote a book about break-up. I had a crisis after I turned 30, so I wrote about it, even putting some Cretan mythology into the mix. But finally I told myself to call it quits and stop messing about with my own emotions, since revealing them to the world is actually pretty pathetic. Take a look at the world. Go out to the people and learn from them.

K.B.: I can also imagine that an author may be looking for a way to enter deeper into the darkness, and that’s why they go to a mortuary or take part in a post-mortem. Until then, this whole business of death, dead bodies and crime may be so far removed from them that they have to somehow hurt themselves to even be able to write crime fiction. I can buy this type of motivation. But not messing about with dead bodies just for the sake of messing about. You, for instance, took only what you needed for the plot from the Foreign Legion soldier’s story. You didn’t write it to indulge the boy in you or to play war.

Ł.O.: I didn't want to play at all. *The Soul of Another* has a true story at its core. I decided I could work with it on the condition that I'd be able to say something meaningful and valuable in the process, rather than just boost my ego and bank statement. The worst thing that could happen would be an accusation of trying to prey on other people's tragedy – the kind of accusation one can only refute with the quality and depth of one's writing.

K.B.: My crime fiction, on the other hand, is pure entertainment, so I have all the tools to write in a way that doesn't hurt anyone.

Ł.O.: Is it really "pure entertainment," though?

K.B.: I work in show-business, I'm not ashamed to admit it. I don't have highbrow ambitions; I try to make the language of my novels smooth for the reader.

Ł.O.: So how do you get National Radical Camp people at your author's meetings? Are they also looking for entertainment?

K.B.: Entertainment doesn't have to be ludicrous. This is why *The White Mercedes* goes back to my native town of Hajnówka. I try to recount some of the past of this world that has in the meantime been completely supplanted. This fragment of the plot dates back to the same moment of history that was so amazingly described by Magda Grzebałkowska in 1945. *Wojna i pokój* (1945. War and Peace). Only the location and protagonists are different: Poles and Belarusians, their twisted wartime fates, and Romuald "Bury" Rajs's men, now referred to as the "Doomed Soldiers," who were nothing but bandits that murdered Belarusians. "It scabbed, don't pick at it," I heard time and again. But I had to pick at this wound. I regarded it as my mission, given that my books are read by both high school students and pensioners.

So now I get National Radical Camp people at promotional meetings for *The White Mercedes*. I recently invited them to sit in the first row. They're not as arrogant when

sitting face to face with you, so instead of shouting and booing, they asked me one question: why I dared to tarnish the memory of "Doomed Soldiers." And I didn't set out to tarnish it, just to ask some uncomfortable and important questions. I also had one question for them: if they read the book at all. They said they didn't have time. Later, after the meeting, we spent quite a while talking.

Ł.O.: And what would you have done if your meeting was attended by the mother of a murder victim you described in the book?

K.B.: I've already said that I write crime novels, crime fiction. I once found a file on a woman who, after the death of her child, would escape to a garden where she would see him again. This was the starting point of *Florystka* (The Florist): a mother who cannot come to terms with the death of her child. It's like the multidimensional cascade of hair seen by a young journalist named Gabriel Garcia Marquez as it poured out of a two-hundred-years-old tomb during its demolition. He built an entire novel, *Love in the Times of Cholera*, around this one image.

Ł.O.: It doesn't pay to take from reality whatever oozes with the stench of media frenzy. It's better to work in clean air. All the more so, as you could repeat ad nauseam that you're not dealing with, say, some high-profile infanticide case for applause or cash, but no-one would believe you. I know I wouldn't.

K.B.: That's why I don't like books that turn criminals into heroes, while the author is reduced to merely holding the voice recorder.

But the worst thing is using facts to instigate a private vendetta and pretending it's all fiction. The author has the right to transform and interpret reality – even if it hurts – but literature should not be used to settle private problems. A bottle and two glasses on a table are better suited for that purpose.