

SO, YOU WANT TO WRITE BOOKS? GET READY FOR 10 YEARS OF POVERTY

Katarzyna Bonda talks about her switch from journalism to writing, and the beginnings of her protagonist, the criminal profiler.



Photo: VIVA

You started out as a journalist, so you had to earn the trust within the hermetic environments of police officers, criminologists, and lawyers. How did you do that?

Initially I did not have the courage to write books. Journalism was a compromise between my dream and my capabilities. Journalism empowered me. I began at *Express Wieczorny*, an iconic evening newspaper. I was reporting from the courts and from there I got into the crime section. Covering the courts is trickier because lawyers, solicitors and judges are much harder to navigate around. Police officers are wonderful people, who want to share their knowledge, but also feel that no one appreciates them. I set myself to act professionally, because this male-dominated environment doesn't give much thought to young blonde girls. This is only natural. These men were dealing with serious stuff, so it's no wonder they were sceptical of a girl like me.

At the beginning I couldn't get anything right. I couldn't get any information out of them. This is also when I learned to smoke, at age 25. Getting them to trust me meant I had to accept their rules. After giving me a piece of intel they would check up on me, seeing if I'd dug any deeper and reported truthfully. It is a quick way to see if someone is serious, or is only chasing after scandal. I also began studying about it myself. When these people see that you don't know the difference between a defendant and a convict, you don't know criminal law, don't know what a post-mortem involves, you can be easily manipulated. You can't be scared. If someone is scared, he or she shouldn't do it. And once you've decided to do it you can't be scared.

Scared of what? The cases?

The cases are infectious, but with time you build up an immunity to it. The police officers also become immune and are able to make jokes out of really terrifying things. It is too easy to be labelled a hack, someone who you don't trust and so won't tell anything to. I never went out for drinks with them, or got close enough for any boundaries to be crossed. Today we all have a professional relationship. I never used the fact that I'm blond to take a police officer out for drinks and ply him with vodka to get a scoop.

You mentioned becoming immune. Can you pinpoint the exact moment it happened for you?

You get used to bad news quickly. Two or three cases and that's it. The crime scene photos are the worst. This is when you see what it looks like for the experts. I couldn't do it. My work is based on a convention. I use my imagination and this seems to protect me. Even when listening to court testimonies I listened differently, I'm looking for a story. I search for an archetype. Is this a story of revenge, love, anger, or greed, hiding certain emotions? This is what I was looking for, so I would only quickly flip through those gruesome photos. When I read interviews with authors who get a kick out of those photos, and want to see an actual body and take part in the post-mortem, I find them sick. You don't need much to trigger your imagination. Usually it's a tiny fragment. If you want to know what a dissected human body looks like, it's enough to switch on your imagination when making a steak.

The case that was a turning point, in terms of relieving me of my sensitivity, was the

murder of Tomek Jaworski [a 19-year-old brutally abducted and murdered in 1997 as he was celebrating high school graduation with a group of friends in a small grove in one of Warsaw's neighbourhoods - translator's note]. One of the perpetrators was Monika Szymańska, who was the mastermind of the killing. It was an archetypical fight of good vs. evil. Tomek was the good. The perpetrators, including Szymańska, represented the evil. Once you dig into their past, you can find the sources of their pathological behaviour. I didn't understand it at the time. It seemed like a fairy-tale for adults - *Twin Peaks*. How is it, if you believe in God, that he lets these things happen? Tomek did nothing wrong. He died only because he was an honourable person. But first he was tortured at Szymańska's apartment in the Bródno district. I know exactly which apartment block it is, and I get the shivers every time I pass it by. I don't fixate on the images we know from movies, but on the psychology, the source of the problem, the thin red line that, once crossed, makes you evil.

Isn't it playing with evil?

When I enter a story, I look for the good. Initially the conflict and the elements of the crime set the dramatic stakes. If I continued to get so worked up over it I'd end up in a mental institution. You have to find your footing, your bright side and hold on to it.

When I search for stories for my books, I focus on the unusual ones, ones that are somewhat off key, an error. We seem to have all the elements, but there is this thing that makes the story come to life. I drag that thing out and start digging at it. I am not interested in the number of stab wounds inflicted by the killer. It's boring. People think that a gruesome murder is one where the perpetrator inflicted 47 wounds, clobbered someone to death with

a bat, a knife, or an axe, and used all possible implements. The crime scene looks a mess, everything is covered in blood, it's hideous. From the detective or profiler's point of view such a scene may indicate a lack of experience on the part of the killer, fear and emotional chaos, as well as their lack of preparation. This means it is not a monster we're dealing with, but with someone lost, who reacted to a conflict one way, rather than the other.

In your books the protagonists are lost, troubled by personal traumas, which often affect their professional lives.

My assumption is that without that crack in the surface there is nothing to write about. When we look up writers' biographies, we always find a critical moment where the writing process started, where they chose the story as a form of expression. If somebody is complete and happy, he or she is the perfect audience. Art comes either from an excess or a lack. The same goes for protagonists. There are some who are not cracked, but they only make cameo appearances. The leading ones need a space to act.

I write popular fiction, which is supposed to offer entertainment, but at the same time, I want my readers to experience the emotions without having to experience the actual trauma. The reader does not need to be an alcoholic, have a child with a murderer, or undergo an abortion, but all readers have their own secrets they do not want to share with others. When reading a crime story, though focusing on solving the mystery, we can experience both our good and bad emotions. I truly believe that. This is the kind of work I happen to do. If I wanted to write about characters with no flaws, I would have written romance novels.

One such protagonist is a criminal profiler. Earlier you also wrote a non-fiction book about this profession. Was Bogdan Lach [one of the first Polish profilers - translator's note] the inspiration for your character?

Of course. I wasn't a fan of the genre. The mystery and finding the solution are boring. When you write crime novels, you need to think in terms of a series. You recreate the same events because this genre enforces its conventions. I didn't feel that I could create the kind of protagonist that had already existed, a detective for example. I wouldn't be writing crime novels, if I hadn't met Bogdan Lach.

How did you meet?

I was still a journalist then. I was working on a cover story for *Newsweek* about unsolved crimes. I would always collect far too much source material. I would go to all the places. One of the cases really captured my curiosity. The victim was a classic beauty; she worked in a store and was supposed to be going on a language course in Norway. She was also a volunteer firefighter. The killer came to her store on a bike, grabbed a bread knife from the counter, killed her and fled. The police couldn't find the killer for a long time. When I was working on that case I talked to everyone in the town, and I walked around it and thought: what's going on here? How did he manage to escape? Much later I read in the local newspaper that the killer was 23 years old and had committed other crimes. I had to know who he was and how they had caught him. The local police chief said this: "A guy in a black coat came to the precinct, took the files overnight and the next day brought me a sheet with the perp's characteristics on it. I knew where to go from there". I asked who the guy

in the coat was. Back then no one knew who a profiler was. This was confidential information. There was only one person who did this sort of job. I managed to convince the officer to tell me where this mysterious man worked. This is when I learned that it was Bogdan Lach. I took some time off from my job and went to Katowice. I waited and waited in front of this massive, hideous police building. I managed to get a 30 minute conversation. Later I wrote my first text on criminal profilers for *Newsweek*. Bogdan didn't look like the handsome Dexter Morgan type, but a good, professional, calm and well-behaved police officer. He is also a Polish highlander, and a male chauvinist to boot (laughs).

Not a very good start?

Bogdan was obviously very busy because he is always busy. To make matters worse, he didn't like me either. Here is this blonde dreadlocked girl, wearing converse sneakers and a hoodie who wants to talk criminology. The beginning was a tough battle of wits, with my professionalism at stake. The reading materials, all in English, were so complicated I couldn't understand anything.

In the book about profiling you mention the impact of the natural environment - apparently profiling in English-speaking countries differs from the one here.

I would read through passages several times to get the meaning, but their significance eluded me. If you take an academic book about profiling you'll see how complicated it is. I would learn as much as I could because, without preparation, I would be kicked out of the door immediately, that would have been the end. All the effort paid off though, once I

had proven that I can distinguish between a defendant and a convict...

And know the offside rule...

Bogdan started to open up and tell me more. He was also having a hard time finding acceptance for his working methods among fellow police officers. We'd established a connection and I tried to convince him that his job should no longer be a secret. We got permission from his boss to write about it. After that other profilers began to speak more openly about their work. They had been worried that, if they reveal what they know, the criminals will learn about it and become harder to catch. But, while committing a crime, the perpetrator doesn't think about the ways in which it will be investigated. In time, Bogdan himself suggested I write a book. He had a huge archive and was a fountain of information.

So what does the job of a profiler look like?

It's infectious. You spend hours looking through crime scene photos. Analysing the scene of the crime is the first step. You analyse how the wounds were inflicted. This helps to establish the height, gender, social status, profession or the number of perpetrators quite accurately. These are key pieces of information for detectives. The profile is meant to narrow down the number of suspects, but not to find a particular one. Even if the perpetrator refuses to confess, a profiler may convince him do so.

After the first meeting with Bogdan a concept for a story started to appear in my mind. Much later on I began to write a novel, between writing newspaper articles. I came close to professional burnout. I was writing a book, but I didn't want to publish it. I was

writing for emotional therapy, to stay sane and to try to keep my dignity. Then came a car accident, in which I killed a pedestrian. I didn't want to go back to journalism. I was depressed. I went to get treatment. During one of these sessions, whilst I was completely buried in my guilt, seeing no way out, the therapist suggested I go back to writing my book. I thought that it made no sense. I didn't even want to open it. But I also wanted to come to my next session being able to say that I had tried to go back to writing the book, and I hated it, so I could continue to wallow peacefully in my depression. I began to read what I'd written and for a moment I forgot about the pain. I started to edit, almost mechanically. I got into it. I finished the book and sent it to the publisher.

The book that saved Katarzyna Bonda?

I don't know what would have happened if not for the book. I can't do anything else. I have no other work experience. I was never a waitress, and when I once got hired to pick strawberries they kicked me out because I was too slow. I can't work in a store because I am not so good at counting. I couldn't go back to journalism either. Once you've written one book, it seems you can't stop.

In the meantime you got a lot of recognition, and with it the accompanying perks?

It was easy from there. Suddenly the world wants you. When you write you can create a reality that doesn't actually exist. This gives me a sense of power that I seem to love. This was all mine. Though I have to admit that it is tough work. I hate it, the typing of it, but then I love the moment it's done.

Is it addictive?

It is an addiction. That's right. At the beginning you think that it's shit, that nothing will come of it. Only in the third act does one begin to see that it makes sense. The writing of it is also one of the most intimate of activities. No one can do it for you. The border between a writer and a talentless hack is fluid. Only time helps you get a perspective on the text. A book should be written and then laid aside. For our own emotional health, you need to be sure that the book is now external to you.

I work with a huge number of expert consultants. I am obsessed with getting the criminology right. I send these fragments to my experts and hide under the bed until they respond. There are so many errors that I'm afraid to peak my head out from under the duvet. I sit in a corner hating not just the book, but myself as well. And again I end up alone with the fear that I cannot go to work in a store, pick strawberries or clean. You have to survive it somehow. I also get a lot of feedback from my editors, but this is welcome. It helps to pacify the inner narcissist and egocentric of any writer. You have to stay humble towards the world and your text. Then all you fear is the criticism of the readers. You want to be widely read. If I wanted to have a small audience instead of writing popular novels, I would just invite people like you here and talk to them for hours on end until they fall asleep. I wouldn't be doing what I am doing if I didn't want it to reach as many people as possible.

You are also under pressure to succeed. After all, you are called the "queen of Polish crime." To what extent does this motivate or dishearten you?

I am really motivated by it as there is nothing more pleasant than having crowds attend your

meet-the-author events. This is the only way I can meet my reader. A writer is in a far worse position than a filmmaker. We don't see our readers. I don't see them; I am alone. A book is the most intimate of art objects, since it is as if I was whispering into the ear of each individual reader. I am also a hostage of my own success. Readers do not compliment me on my dedication to detail or the realism of my stories. Often instead people come up to me and point out my mistakes. Starting from something big, but always including some minor errors. Recently a man wrote to me: "Dear Katarzyna, I appreciated how you described the reality of an alcoholic. I was convinced that you must be an alcoholic too... But at one point I realized that you can't be, because you said that a small vodka bottle contains 0.25 and not 0.20 l of liquid". I have great respect for my readers. The moment a book is published, it belongs to them.

Do you have any advice to those who would like to start in this business? It is worth it?

If you have any other skills, then think it over twice. Also, get ready for 10 years of poverty. Don't quit your day job thinking that from now on you are a writer. You might never become successful. It is both a lottery and a marathon. Also, the moment you finish a book the whole world is against you. Everything else will be more important, urgent or make more sense. It is a job for the Don Quixotes, at least at the beginning. This is why I suggest you check if you have the knack for it as soon as you can. Give your samples to authors and listen to what they have to say, but also listen to other readers. Do not stop at your friends, family members or spouses, because they love you and they don't want to hurt you.

The author was interviewed by Weronika Piórkowska and Rafał Bielski.