

I REVOLUTIONISED CRIME LITERATURE, AND PEOPLE BOUGHT IT

Crime author Katarzyna Bonda interviewed by Arkadiusz Panasiuk

You have a brilliant last name, but you are more interested in the police force than in secret agents, although some of the latter also appear in your books.

The name is real. It's my dad's – a typical name from the Borderlands [Kresy – eastern part of interwar Poland, today forming part of Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine – translator's note]. However, thanks to the famous spy, it rings a bell all over the world and everybody associates it with just one thing. I sometimes joke that with such a name the only line of work you can choose is the fight for truth. Because this is what crime novels are about – not the dead guy, nor who the killer is. Or at least my books are like that. As for police officers, they only interest me because of the type of stories I tell. In order to write crime novels, I need to be interested in the work of all relevant forces – in the justice system, the prosecution system and the intelligence service. Those things cannot be treated separately. However, I will strongly protest against the opinion that I'm this girl who wanted to be a policewoman, never made it and now writes books about it. Similarly, I'm not fascinated by the other side of the law – murderers, deviants and perverts. I use them because if you want to talk about good, you have to first show what evil is.

You started as a journalist. You visited courtrooms, met people working in the justice system, studied court files.

Journalism was just a half measure and a conscious choice. I am pragmatic – one needs to have a degree. Today I already have several. I was admitted to law school and to Polish language studies, but journalism was very prestigious back then, and I thought it would bring me closer to my goal – I wanted to write

books. But you can't become a writer at the age of 18. No matter how well you feel the language, its melody and rhythm, writing requires experience. You gather experience during your life, and gradually your eye sharpens. Before you become a storyteller, you need to live a little. Your stories should be wise and beautiful, even if it's just a crime novel. Anyway, nowadays you can fit much more in there than what was possible in older police novels. This genre has evolved a lot, and this process is still ongoing. That's inevitable, considering how democratic it is, and that it allows the reader to experience Aristotelian *katharsis*, whereas for the writer it's merely an intellectual exercise.

A few years later you experienced a major turning point – a man died under the wheels of your car. You go to court, you receive a sentence.

I hit and killed a man. I'd been driving for twelve years in pursuit of stories, and nothing had ever happened. But that time I was exhausted and distraught. I was struggling with my emotions: instead of grieving my father's death, I went straight back to work. It seemed like the best solution back then. The accident happened eleven days after his death. I left Warsaw before dawn in a hurry – I was going to Tarnów to do research on prison wardens suffering from PTSD. It's true, I did drive too fast. But I'd never been careless while driving. However, stress must have impaired my concentration. I was obsessing over the task at hand. I hit the brakes too late. I just remember that man's shoes. They fell off his feet.

His relatives didn't want to talk to you.

I didn't know how to carry on living. He was born the same day as I was. I felt as though I'd

killed myself. I wasn't able to cope with it. I received a suspended sentence. I was in therapy for a long time after that. I took psychotropic medication and had psychiatric counselling. I stopped working. I wasn't able to function normally – I hardly got out of bed. It was then that I felt I didn't want, and couldn't go back to, my old life. I needed a new one.

It seems that your writing is a means of working through the psychological trauma caused by the accident.

In writing, there's no room for therapy. You have to complete it first, and only then can you start writing. At least that was my case. I never regarded writing as a form of treatment. Dealing with death in a literary form did help me cope with my own trauma, though. I had to dig in this dark matter; I had the courage to submerge in it. Crime had interested me for many years – my master's thesis was about murderesses – but it was only my own borderline experience that made me dive deep into the darkness. However, I'm not into spooks, demons, ghosts and all that horror *entourage*. Horror is very vague, whereas crime is very specific. However, I do know that I'm drawn to mistakes, flaws and critical moments. Even in the deepest darkness I try to find the way to light. Cause, deciding moment and conclusion – this is the axis of our life. Each and every one of us can commit a bad deed.

Has writing about murderesses helped you cope? After all, your story pales in comparison with theirs.

I'd been working as a court correspondent since 1998. Four women accused of murder were on trial at the same time. Back then it was shocking to the public. Also, media reports from court were a novelty. For example, the authoritative daily *Rzeczpospolita*, just after the sentence had been published, showed a photograph of Monika Szymańska. It was supposed to serve as some sort of additional punishment. She was presented as a beast and as a menace to society. Nowadays, in the era of media tabloidisation, this kind of news is nothing out of the ordinary and we've become

immune to it. Observing these processes has been a cultural and emotional shock to me.

I was bent on understanding what exactly drove these women to kill. I read all the case files. I also noticed how quick the media and public opinion were to pass judgement, usually knowing next to nothing about the offenders and the circumstances of their crimes. People started suggesting that I should write a book about it, but I wasn't ready yet. It seemed understandable to me that Szymańska, who came from a dysfunctional environment, was capable of murder, but what about Rozumecka or Kamińska? They grew up in so-called good families, after all. I just couldn't comprehend it. I revisited these cases eight years later and described them in *Polskie morderczynie* (Polish Murderesses). My aim was to understand the mechanism of transitioning to the dark side, the processes that lead to it, the motives.

Do you understand it now?

It's not about the murder itself, but the whole series of circumstances and events that may lead to a decision – because it always is a decision, although the process takes several stages – to kill a person. I had an accident, it wasn't premeditated, and that's different. I do have a conscience, though, and the guilt doesn't go away. It's still there and always will be. This is probably why I understand my characters so well, be it in fiction or non-fiction. Happy people don't commit crimes. A crime comes from fear, weakness and frustration. These negative emotions often start at home and are later "cultivated" for many years. Due to negative experience such as childhood trauma, murderers are disconnected from certain emotions and therefore incapable of creating normal relationships. Murder, being a sort of interpersonal relationship, sometimes serves as a substitute for these inaccessible emotions. A terrible connection forms between the perpetrator and the victim – a most intimate one, stronger than love or sex. In many cases, the crime makes up for emotional deficiencies – in an extreme way.

Is Sasza Załuska, the profiler from *The Four*

Elements series, your alter ego?

That would be too easy. I build all of my characters from scratch, and I am each and every one of them. I am Sasza just as much as I am Elephant and the priest and even Waldemar Gabryś from *Girl at Midnight*. This is a creative process, not a mathematical equation. Sasza is based not only on the Amazon archetype, but also on a real person – a profiler from the Institute in Huddersfield, Great Britain. I met her, and we talked a lot. It is only sometimes that Załuska talks like me or reacts to conflict or failure like I would. People see me in her because I too am brave and speak my mind. I try to do what I do as best as I can. That's the principle – there's nothing else. In writing, there's no room for hackwork, routine and peace. You push the stone of Sisyphus all the way up on your own. Sasza does that too, only her profession is different.

And not too easy.

Her job is much harder than mine, I assure you. But the readers feel this integration, the emotions that connect the writer with the character. They feel these emotions and decide whether what they read feels real and speaks to their hearts. If people say that Sasza is Bonda, I take it as a compliment. It means that I've managed to build a credible character. A writer lets every character pass through his or her soul, and even though I do not use my biography, it's impossible to run from myself. Emotionally, Sasza is all me, from one or two years ago. It took me ten years to be able to write such a character. I was afraid to do it earlier on, I didn't feel ready to lift this literary weight. I don't like autobiographical exhibitionism. You need to understand when your life story is helpful in creating characters and when it is just crying your eyes out to the readers about your problems. I created Sasza because it irritated me that Polish popular literature lacked a full-blooded, independent female professional who struggles with her life, job and relationships. When I started out, the heroines – even in crime fiction – would bake cakes and rely on their intuition. Only later did I realise that I could feed my heroine with my

own biography and personality.

In *Girl at Midnight*, you penetrate the darker side of the Tricity [the area of Gdańsk, Gdynia and Sopot – translator's note]. I'm impressed with your topographic meticulousness – the atmosphere, the places, streets and names are perfectly true to life. And I'm not complimenting you just for the sake of our conversation. I studied there, so I know that you're not deceiving me as a reader.

I write both fiction and non-fiction. I used to be a journalist for many years, and I flirted with television and cinema. All these jobs may seem very different, but in fact they're all about storytelling. I believe that such rotation is good for you. I can't rule out the possibility that I'll write another non-fiction book between *Earth* and *Fire* (the next parts of *The Four Elements of Sasza Załuska* – ed.). What really matters to me is magical storytelling, a credible plot and structure – you'll find all these key elements, no matter what you read, be it *Polish Murderesses* or *Girl at Midnight*. This is why once you “fall for Bonda” you read everything. I invite you into my world, and I show you around it.

Do you do meticulous research?

As a writer, I'm a voyeur – I observe, I watch, I collect things that interest me. Sometimes I have to put on my rain boots and go to the swamps. Not because I like adventures – I hate adventures, just like I hate surprises – but because I need to experience certain situations in order to be able to construct the plot.

Do you turn to experts for help?

First of all, though I now write crime novels, just like every girl, I used to play house with dolls, so there was a time when I wasn't interested in “boys' stuff”. Therefore, I have to ask questions, in order to avoid being ridiculed for writing something I have no idea about.

Secondly, I like to tell stories that have never been told, so before I start describing something I need to do my research. If I continued working on what's inside me, if I

kept on saying how hard it is to be an artist, because I feel more and understand more, I would focus on these emotions and show off my linguistic virtuosity. But I don't write like that. Such literature disgusts me – only a handful of writers can pull it off, and I salute them. For me, writing is a craft. My stories are set in the present and are completely detached from me as a person – I'm just the storyteller, I stand on the sidelines and I see what I see. If I want to broaden the view and allow the reader to see the world from a new, unknown perspective, I need to experience some things first hand. I don't believe in writing crime novels with the help of uncle Google.

So how is it done?

As for mixing fact with fiction, I can't explain how I do it. I just mastered this ability somehow. I start with reality and bounce off into the realm of fantasy. Then it's up to the reader to judge the result. I want my readers to have fun and believe that those things could happen. Because it doesn't matter whether they *really* happened. On the one hand, writing is like an algorithm, a precise science with its own set of rules, but the process itself borders on the metaphysical. When I work, I like to use both hemispheres of my brain. It's crucial that we should know when and how to go about it. Personally, I'm a doubter, a sceptic and a grumbler who laughs a lot but is always distrustful. Maybe this is why I chose crime and not romance.

But how exactly does Bonda write?

I have an analytical approach. Most of my work consists of thinking, gathering data, analysing. It's a bit like profiling. I like it when my readers learn new things from my books. I created the series about Sasza many years ago, in my head, and I let it mature. It was incubating, because the market wasn't ready for such a heroine. A woman with a troubled past, a recovering alcoholic and a single mother, on top of all that. When I finally gathered my courage, I gave my publisher an 18-page-long plan containing summaries of all the parts, profiles of the characters and an explanation of the role of the

four elements in the series. They told me they'd never worked with an author who knew his/her craft and heroine so well and had an idea what the following parts would be about.

Did this flatter your vanity?

It made me blush, because, contrary to what you might expect, I'm incredibly self-critical. Writing a crime novel is like building a house. First you have to dig a hole in the ground (come up with an idea), then lay the foundation (draw up a plan), and then build up the walls (write a scene-by-scene synopsis). As for interior design (narrative, language, style), I leave it for last. Once you've built a few houses, the next ones come easier, because you already know the order of your tasks. As a result, my novels are worked out to the smallest detail – and it's worth it. *Girl at Midnight* has been selling incredibly fast, thousands of copies in just a few months, which means I can compete with foreign authors, and not just Polish ones. The book has gained cult status not because it's a crime novel, but because it doesn't obey the rules set by Chandler or Christie. I revolutionised crime literature, and people bought it – and I'm proud of it. I have no doubt that all the work I put in this series at its conceptual stage was worth the effort. Today I notice many Bonda copycats. Could there be a greater compliment for a genre writer?

Towards the end of *Girl at Midnight*, Sasza travels to the Białystok Region and finds an important witness in Teremiski in the Białowieża Forest.

I come from Hajnówka and graduated high school there, but I was born in Białystok – which makes this book twice as difficult for me. I had to destroy my idealised childhood memories, my view of our family home, my *бацькаўшчына* ("homeland"). You'll find this Eastern vibe in almost all of my books – I'm proud to be from the East of Poland. This has made me different, interesting and original. Only preschoolers want to be the same as everybody else. Later, you learn to appreciate your exotic side. Besides, if you leave a small town, somehow rise to the top and travel the

world, you realise that, in fact, everything is relative, that the world is small and that it's made of people, not places.

Your place of birth does count, though, and if people tell me that I don't try to impress them, that I don't pretend to be an authority and that I'm so warm and nice, it's because I'll always be a small-town girl next door. I have no problem with that, no hang-ups.

Podlachia plays an important role in your next book from *The Four Elements* series. We'll have the Red Mafia, Belarussians, Nazi hooligans and flashbacks to the post-war years...

I don't want to reveal too much. Coming up next is *Earth*, with skulls, reconstructions, projections, ground-penetrating radars and geographic profiling. Also, Sasza will have to confront the truth about her history. After *Air*, *Earth* will emerge, cold and dispassionate, symbolising that history. I don't want to give any spoilers, to make sure that the readers can enjoy discovering Sasza's adventures. This part will be darker and gloomier. There'll be files from the Institute of National Remembrance and a true wartime story. The book will be written in more economical language. The element of earth will also call for a personal story line. Sasza will stand on her own two feet and want to be loved again. And that's it for now.

Your life partner is a crime writer too. Isn't he envious of your popularity?

We're both A-listers. We made our debuts roughly at the same time, and for years we've followed our own paths. I am with him not just because I respect him as a professional. He's also a decent, reliable guy. If he suddenly became jealous, we'd have to break up. You can't live with such a pain in the ass. We have nothing else, just literature. We talk about it all the time, we exchange our views. Besides, he's a professor of cultural anthropology and has been very successful as an intellectual, so I'm no match for him. Such people don't care about breakfast television – it's his own choice that he doesn't appear on such shows. Writing is my

source of income, and I want to reach as many readers as possible. I want to be close to them – and that's why I accept invitations to TV shows and give interviews to ladies' magazines. Let's be clear: I don't need popularity as such. I need my books to reach everyone.