

YOU DON'T *INVENT* A CRIME STORY

A conversation with writer and documentary scriptwriter **Katarzyna Bonda** about the work of criminal profilers, Polish murderesses and being infected by crime.



Photo: Leszek Zych

JUSTYNA SOBOLEWSKA: How do police officers react when you approach them to do research for your books?

KATARZYNA BONDA: As soon as I enter the room I get judged and labelled: “Some blonde is here, go see what she wants”. The only thing I can do is fire my knowledge at them. I’m currently writing a book where scent will be a very important element. I had a meeting with scent identification specialists in a criminology lab. They knew who I was, they’d read my books, but the moment I arrived I was faced with mistrust: What do you want? What for? Why here? And besides, how can one explain something that took years to learn to that blonde girl standing there in a single day? I have to do a lot of juggling, and use all my strengths – after all, I

don’t have long blonde hair for nothing. Even if I get it wrong, they go easy on me. On the other hand though, I need solid facts. They see I can get my head around it, but I don’t pretend to be an expert.

In your latest book, *Florystka* (The Florist), you get the feeling that everything’s been thoroughly investigated before being written down.

I get laughed at for being so obsessively thorough. In my opinion, though, it shows when a writer merely skims the surface. For example, in the lab they showed me the so-called scent line-ups, but I had to see for myself what a scent box looks like, that it’s basically a jar. And, when I demanded to see the labels they used, they eventually gave me

the jar and did a trial experiment with me, checking all of my fictional suspects. I spent an entire day there.

You've written two non-fiction books, one of which is a portrait of Polish murderesses. Why did you choose this particular subject?

I've always had it in me, I even wrote my MA thesis about them. I couldn't understand where it comes from, how it's possible to do something like that. I returned to this subject after an accident that totally turned my life around. I was driving to do a piece about stress among prison staff. I was really tired, I had been working nights in *Newsweek* at the time. On the Friday I'd asked my boss to find a replacement for me, but there was no-one else to do it. Holiday season. I've always driven too fast, ignoring road signs, and nothing's ever happened. I rarely got fined, I was regarded as a really good driver – I drove like a man, not like a blonde girl. On that day, as I was approaching Tarnów, I didn't see a man until it was too late. I hit him on a pedestrian crossing, he died in hospital. He was 80 years old, I was 29. I later found out that we were born on the same day. This was a critical moment, I never went back to being the person I used to be. I didn't realise the sense of guilt at the time. I was convicted, the newspaper got me a lawyer, I hadn't been drinking, I pleaded guilty. And then I broke down, I spent two years in therapy. I just felt like a killer. After some time I began to realise that I'd been making these mistakes all along, that I'd had alarming situations before, but they never stopped me from driving so fast. I tried to contact that man's family, but they didn't want to talk to me. I wrote my first book, *Sprawa Niny Frank* (The Case of Nina Frank), and I began to wonder what I ought to do next. I decided to talk to the murderesses. At the time I hadn't yet realised that it was all about me, I thought they were the evil ones, the beasts, so I prepared for battle.

Maybe you wanted to see whether they suffer from a sense of guilt and how they deal with it?

Yes, this book was born out of my trauma, but I didn't see it then. I kept lying to myself at the time, I kept trying to whitewash my own mind, convince myself that I was different, that I wasn't one of them. I had been doing the same thing they did – they tried to seduce me and present themselves in better light. And I kept telling myself that I just wanted to write the book. I didn't reveal any personal information to them, because this would have changed their attitude. The characteristic thing about female murders is that the crime cuts these women's lives in half – they cannot escape it. I used to see Monika Szymańska, who killed Tomek Jaworski [a high school graduate brutally tortured and murdered by a gang she headed – translator's note], as the devil incarnate. Then, I saw her as a human being. This book was cathartic for me.

It turns out that your consciousness can be entirely false, that you can totally shut yourself off from the truth.

The extent to which we're able to build ourselves an alternative world is fascinating. I don't believe that this only concerns the short moment of committing the crime. What conditioned these women began much, much earlier. Most of them experienced a lack of something, a certain kind of deprivation in their childhood. Małgorzata, a doctor, is a good example here. Her mother had used her to spy on her father, who had a lover. Later, as an adult, she decided to murder her own lover's wife, she strangled her with a belt. She worked in the emergency ambulance service, she saved people's lives on a daily basis. When you look at her, what you see first is a deviant. But if you go deeper, you'll see that this error existed within her family. Several years later this woman met a man who was married and couldn't leave his wife. So she

had to eliminate her. It's a matrix of sorts. She spent all her life striving to repair this error. Each of these stories contains a similar element.

The protagonist of your stories is criminal profiler Hubert Meyer, whose real-life model is profiler and forensic psychologist Bogdan Lach. You later wrote a book with him on profiling murderers. How did you find him?

I was writing a piece for a magazine, and I went to Rawicz, where the entire town was being DNA tested. A young woman had been stabbed to death in a grocery store, and they couldn't find who did it, so they were doing these DNA tests, but to no avail. I wrote the article, and after a while I found a brief press note that the perpetrator had been found, and he turned out to be a serial killer. I called the police chief and asked how they managed to find him. He told me that some guy in a black coat came there, took the files to read them overnight, and when the police chief looked at his notes in the morning, he knew who to look for. The killer owned up – and not just to that one case. The police chief didn't even know the word 'profiler', he kept talking about some 'provider'. This was in 2004. Now everyone knows who that guy was. I asked the chief to give me the phone number for this 'provider'.

You were familiar with this profession because of American movies?

When I came to see Bogdan Lach, I had fragmentary knowledge from films and other English-language sources. In Poland, even today, many people view profiling with an air of scepticism. When our book came out, there were many voices arguing that this wasn't a scientific discipline, but pure guesswork and clairvoyance. I keep fending off such attacks, because the deeper I entered this discipline, the more analytical it seemed. All elements have to come together like the pieces of a jigsaw. Profilers employ

psychology, but they need knowledge from many other disciplines: criminology, victimology, law; they have to know how to talk to a pathologist. We don't realise, for example, to what extent bridges or electrical lines influence the perception of space. Take the Vistula, for example. If the killer wants to dispose of the body, he'll probably not do so near where he lives, but on the other side of the river – he'll feel safer, because it's not his area. There was a case with a granny who would put elderly ladies to sleep using benzodiazepines. The police spent a long time looking for her, in vain. Only after a profiler stepped in did they establish her age and sex, and the fact that she commuted to Warsaw on a suburban train. He delineated her buffer zone (the safe area where she lived) and her operating zone. A profile is an expert opinion, several pages long, where police officers get psychological information in a nutshell, plus victimological knowledge about the dead person and, most importantly, personality traits of the killer. Age, sex, sexual orientation, profession, and potential residence area.

How does a profiler know all that?

This is data gathered at the crime scene, data about the victim – there's always a link between the victim and the murderer. A killer won't pick a person he can't control. The grandma also picked selected persons: ladies she met at church or at promotional events, she'd gain their trust, they invited her home, and then – sometimes during the second or third visit – she'd take out her 'juice'. A profiler first and foremost analyses the place, the injuries, but also analyses the victims, because the victims and the killer are a match. When I was coming back to Warsaw after my first meeting with Bogdan, I already knew that he'd be the protagonist in my crime fiction book.

And how did he react? How did he feel about being the protagonist?

In the book he's entirely different than in real life. I don't like my protagonist, he pisses me off, but I'd also conduct the investigation in a precisely the same manner. I was afraid to show the book to Bogdan. I was sure he'd give me a dressing-down, because he would always say that a profiler has to lead an orderly life, because his profession is truly infectious. In my book, though, Hubert Meyer is the opposite of 'orderly'. Still, Bogdan liked him enough to propose that we write a non-fiction book together. This book, *Zbrodnia niedoskonała* (An Imperfect Crime), was more difficult for me than *Polskie morderczynie* (Polish Murderesses).

How so?

It was difficult to enter that deep into all the cases we discussed. British profilers enter into the mind of the killer. I didn't do that, but it was infectious anyway. I felt good on the surface, but I started to experience subconscious fears. My daughter was two and a half. One night I was sitting at my computer when I suddenly realised that I'd left my mobile in the car. I began to wonder whether I should go out and shut the door behind me, because if anyone were to kill me, then people might not find my baby in time –

or whether I should leave it open, because then they'd find her faster, but then again someone could enter and hurt her. I began to treat everyone as a potential killer. The publisher proposed that I write a sequel, but I didn't want to. I'd satisfied my curiosity.

Didn't you want to become a profiler yourself?

No, it's quite enough to write about it. Women make great profilers, but they're few and far between. Our emotional sphere is much more delicate, we find it more difficult to cleanse our minds. Profiling requires the ability to analyse, combine elements, perceive various interpersonal relations and motivations – and women are good at that. The problem is that this job entails visiting crime scenes, post-mortems, analysing the wounds inflicted (that's a profiler's ABC), and this is hardcore. But I like to write about it, to theorise about profiling. My colleagues sometimes accuse me of writing crime novels that resemble fairy tales, because I structure situations so that the balance ends up being positive. But that's what crime fiction is for: to provide catharsis. It's better if people read about terrible things than if they experience them in real life.