

## CRIME IS NOTHING SPECIAL

TEXT Anita Czapryn PHOTOS Zuzanna Pol, Michał Niwicz

“We’re all good to begin with. Only later do we get moulded: by other people, by our environment, by whether we’re successful at something or not. All that exerts a certain influence. We all have our triggers”.

Crime author **Katarzyna Bonda** in conversation with **Anita Czapryn**



**All of your protagonists are traumatised somehow, they carry a certain amount of baggage that determines their behaviour.**

I guess this has to do with everything I've been through, with various – also traumatic – events from my life. But, you know, in the end it all boils down to sensitivity.

**You've always wanted to be a writer, but decided to hone your skills as a journalist first. I guess this can't serve as a universal piece of advice, since not all journalists go on to write books, particularly popular crime stories.**

I wouldn't call myself neurotic or nervy, but a lot of things get to me – and this was also the case when I worked as a journalist. I would always gather too much material, I know you do too. This was how it all started. At some point I figured out that this was an asset: to be so curious about the world and other people. If you have the sensitivity, openness and a fresh outlook on what you do, you just have to write a book at some point. That's the only medium that provides an outlet for everything you have inside. My first book, *Sprawa Niny Frank* (The Case of Nina Frank) came out of me as if by itself. Maybe it wasn't the best, but it happened because there was an excess of something and I had to find an outlet for it. It wasn't an entirely conscious process. I didn't choose the crime fiction genre because I used to read such books. Quite the contrary – I never did. But I knew that this genre came with a muzzle of sorts, with its specific set of strict guidelines, and that I'd be able to cope with it. You have to be realistic.

**Your whole life turned around after an accident in which a man died.**

The accident was a critical point. I talk about it, but I no longer read online comments. I did it once and I never intend to repeat the experience. I was dubbed a murderer, a nasty woman who not only killed a man, but had the cheek to actually say it. I was in two

minds whether to talk about it or not – but it happened, it's the truth. My father had died and I kept my nose to the grindstone. I thought work was a good way of going through grief, which of course it wasn't. I should have taken time off and stayed at home. I was driving to Tarnów to do a piece about PTSD affecting prison guards. I left Warsaw at 4 a.m., I was running late, but I was nearing the place I was supposed to do the interview. I'd been driving out on various assignments for 12 years and nothing had ever happened. I was aware that I was driving too fast, and all of my guilt was based on that. I never planned to hurt anyone, but I was driving too fast. I pressed the brakes too late. There was a sudden hit, followed by silence and disbelief. The world stopped. I was choking with terror. I knew something terrible had just happened. You just know it, even though the entire thing had only lasted around 10 seconds. I just remember the shoes falling off his feet. He wasn't killed on the spot, he was taken to hospital. I tried to reach out to his family and offer some help, but when he died no-one wanted to talk to me. I didn't know how to go on living. That man was born on the same day as I was. I felt as if I'd killed myself. I was in therapy for a long time after that. I took psychotropic medication, I had psychiatric counselling, and I had various check-ups done. I just couldn't deal with it. For a long time after that I was scared to get in the car; when I cross the street, I'm afraid someone might hit me. I don't have a clear criminal record – I got a suspended sentence, my driving licence has to be regularly renewed, and I have to undergo medical check-ups. I drive carefully now. I've done a lot to deal with my sense of guilt. You can't allow yourself to remain in that state. This is what lay at the root of my book *Polskie morderczynie* (Polish Murderesses).

**Polish Murderesses came out in 2008. The book subsequently sold out and is now**

**being re-released. How might you explain why people would want to read about things like that?**

The book has gained cult status in certain circles, which I found quite surprising. It's a completely alternative read. You either have to be a complete lunatic or have my kind of baggage to want to approach such a project. On the other hand, though, no one had written such a psychological study in Poland before. In the UK, a PhD student of Professor David Canter – the world-famous British profiler – is currently conducting her research based, among others things, on my interviews with these killers. It turned out that my interviews are a research method, and it's scientifically called 'offenders' life narratives'. All elements of psychology as we know it are meaningful, but a new method of analysing individual cases based on the offenders' lives is now gaining popularity. It helps solve crimes, profilers use it to help police officers find criminals. So my book and all my materials travelled to the UK – I'm a meticulous person, so they came in a huge box full of files, recordings, photographs, etc. As an author I've also visited probably every faculty of criminology, psychology, rehabilitation, law, plus various meetings and seminars. I don't understand the phenomenon of this book, because the only thing I set out to do was to look these women in the eye and hear their stories. I didn't want to judge or analyse them.

**It was meant to be a story about beasts and monsters, and yet it turned out to be about victims. Did you never assume it would turn out that way?**

I first wrote about Polish murderesses as a court correspondent when I started working as a journalist. I even got an award for my courtroom articles. Even back then I knew a lot about these women and everyone kept telling me to write a book. At the time though I felt too small for it. I was wise enough not to tackle that kind of task, I wanted to spend

some more time as a journalist. But there's a Chinese curse that goes "May all your dreams come true". The first book after the accident was *The Case of Nina Frank. Polish Murderesses* was a conscious project. I didn't associate it with my accident or the past. It was simply a good time to tackle the subject. Still, had it not been for the combination of all these elements, the book probably wouldn't have seen the light of day. It was one of the most difficult books I've ever written. When I began working on it, I wanted to face these 'beasts'. I felt I was capable of understanding them if I stayed in the background. What I set out to do was to stand eye-to-eye with evil. What I failed to foresee was that they might not meet my expectations. I found them interesting. I had caused an accident, someone died because of me, but I hadn't meant for it to happen, whereas they consciously did something evil. What was it all about? I was looking for the difference between them and me. Most people never experience anything like this in their life.

**What did you find most surprising when talking to them?**

The fact that even those who came from good homes and were intelligent carried a certain, truly Machiavellian, error. It did not concern their physical side. There was no domestic violence, but for example, a deception of some kind that had happened at some point in the past and had affected their entire lives. Or a certain negative relationship between the parents, even though at first sight they seemed like a model family. These girls would reach a high intellectual level, graduate from university, but the error remained. It became their trigger. Not all of the killers I spoke to were described in the book. My criteria were very restrictive: they had to agree to be photographed, I could change their surname if they wanted to, but they had to authorise the text and agree to talk to me free of charge. As you may guess the clever, cunning and more intelligent ones

either didn't want to participate in the project from the outset, or pulled out when the book was ready because they demanded compensation.

**Did you follow the story of the murder of Madzia from Sosnowiec and her mother? [A 6-month-old girl killed by her mother, who at first pretended the child had been kidnapped – translator's note]**

Only recently. When *Polish Murderesses* came out I got a lot of offers to appear on TV to comment on various cases, but I didn't have the strength. I'm not a psychologist, I just wrote a book. The case of Madzia's mother is different, although I did see certain similarities with my protagonists. For example the coldness, which makes them seem separate from what they did. It's typical for killers – such separation is meant to protect them. People tend to see it as the worst kind of evil, but this coldness is in fact rooted in shame, it's present in all my protagonists. Madzia's mother committed infanticide, so that's an entirely different type of crime altogether. You won't find it in my book. We're talking about a completely different psychology of the offender. But I'm sure that she has highly developed communication skills and can manipulate her surroundings. In her case, we're also dealing with the desire to be appreciated, famous even, which is the most terrifying part. Yet what outrages me the most is that the media facilitate that.

**Let's go back to your first book, *The Case of Nina Frank*. This is when we first got to know a police profiler, a profession that had never appeared in Polish crime fiction before. You used forensic psychologist Bogdan Lach from the Katowice police as a model. How much of a real-life profiler is there in your protagonist, Hubert Meyer?**

Only some of his professional experience: the fact he's a profiler, that he works in Katowice

and that he had worked in prisons before becoming a psychologist on the force. That's it. It's a typical example of how much I borrow from reality. I take some tangible elements, some facts, and the rest is processed. When I invented Hubert Meyer, I had no idea how to create a criminal protagonist. I was writing about a guy I could be attracted to. He was supposed to be a man who, of course, has his good and bad sides, but he is generally screwed up, and eludes simple judgment. He doesn't always behave like a gentleman, and keeps changing shape, which is what I still find so fascinating. He's got trouble dealing with his emotional sphere, but he's a perfectionist when it comes to work and day-to-day actions. This makes him my male alter ego. A crime fiction work needs a detective with a flaw, this is classic stuff. I personally think that such a flaw has never done any protagonist any harm.

**How did Bogdan Lach react to your protagonist?**

I showed him the book after it was published. I was afraid. Bogdan is a very demanding, well-behaved and orderly person, he definitely doesn't do all the things I ascribed to my protagonist and other characters in my books. He's crystal clear, which would make him utterly dull in a plot, and the book would be quite unreadable. Still, I was afraid I'd get a dressing-down, yet funnily enough he rather took to Hubert Meyer (laughs).

**Did the idea for your new book, the one you're working on at the moment, also come from life?**

That's always the case. That's the element that sparks my imagination. There are stories that can be described in newspapers, but when you write a book, when you structure the entire psychological space, you can go a few steps further, see what could happen, create a dramatic arc of events to tell a universal story. This one will also be based

on a real-life case. Once upon a time there was a certain woman, and a certain man; they meet, and she decides to save him. As usual, I'm interested in people.

**Again we'll be dealing with a female who has her secrets and is stronger than the man, and with a man who's screwed up in life?**

Of course (laughs). My protagonists are always emotionally broken in a way. It's the only way to provide the reader with a truly cathartic experience.

**In crime novels, even the most perfect crime always comes to light and the perpetrator is punished. This isn't always the case in life. Do you think a perfect crime exists?**

A crime novel is like a fairy-tale for adults – the perpetrator has to be caught; there can be no other way. Yet the best crime novels are those with an open ending. They show that evil is still out there. One example of such an ending is the film *Chinatown*. The detective solves the puzzle, but he cannot undo the evil committed. This is also the case in life. But I don't think a perfect crime exists. Even if some killers get off scot-free, they will pay for it anyway. With their later life.

**Do you believe that people are essentially good, but that each and every one of us is capable of committing a crime?**

We're all good to begin with. Only later do we get moulded: by other people, by the environment, by whether we're successful at something or not. All that exerts a certain influence. Crime is nothing special. We all have our triggers.

