

ANYONE COULD BE A MONSTER

What does a crime novel have to do with psychology? What do we not know about criminals and ourselves? **Katarzyna Bonda** and **Katarzyna Droga** talk about family secrets, fear and crime. And as they are both from Podlasie in northeastern Poland, they also discuss emotional blocks, and the power of countryside girls.



photo: Rafał Masłow

What does a crime story have to do with psychology?

A crime story is a psychological novel. That's just how it is. The whole plot chain, the path we follow, is the answer to the question "whodunit?". And then the solution to this riddle would be an answer to the question "what for?". The reader does not care if the perpetrator was a ticket inspector, editor or CEO. It's the motive that matters. What is the motive? Something that someone deeply desired, but did not receive, so he or she decides to take it by force. 100% psychology there. What I find particularly interesting does not pertain to blood or injuries, as these are mere consequences. It is the reason for the crime that really matters. One example might be mothers that murder their own children and then hide them in jars or barrels. They are called monsters, but their behaviour stems from the fact that they are unable to separate themselves from the murdered child, they still want to have it close by, for them the story is not yet over. People don't know this. We talk about the brutality of a particular person, but this person's actions testify to their fear in the chaos of action. If you look past the tabloidized frame and mere cruelty, you will see the bigger picture. The perpetrator lives in permanent fear; it is an emotion he or she understands best, one that escalates in the moment of the crime. Peace is unattainable as long as one does not forgive him/herself.

A psychologist in the investigation, criminal profiling, are these new to criminology?

What Conan Doyle refers to as 'deduction' is, in fact, nothing other than a psychological approach to the motive. It's a criminological analysis, but also a type of profiling. My main protagonist is

also a profiler because I've always found the classical structure of a crime story and the detective going from person to person really boring, while the profiling method is fascinating, it really breaks down individual motivations. A profiler analyses the space and the relationships between the victim and the perpetrator. The victim is a book to be read: the body, the manner of inflicting injuries, but also the victim's life are important here. The perpetrator is always lurking in the shadow of the victim's life. Even if they didn't know each other, even if it was just a chance passer-by who had the misfortune of coming across a predator in human skin, he chose this person for a reason. The profiler has to conduct this analysis. When I'm following the profiler's train of thought, I can show my characters from different perspectives. The whole book becomes one large profile – a psychological analysis of different people. And it really shows that all of us have a light and dark side of the force. I don't want to seem like I'm showing pity for the perpetrators, but most of them really aren't monsters in the style of Lord Vader, but confused individuals who – like wild animals – react with aggression because they were hurt at some point in their lives.

So the violence that someone has experienced leads them to explode at some point and commit a crime?

Unless we're dealing with psychopaths, yes. I am interested in ordinary people, like you or I, that are able to commit a crime. This makes for a much more interesting story, both for the author and for the reader, because it could be your neighbour or someone close to you. It could be Kajetan Poznański [who murdered a woman to eat her, Hannibal Lecter-style – translator's note] borrowing a book from a library... my book for example! It could be a grocery store vendor. Anyone

could be a monster. That is much more fascinating than some shady character, lurking in the fog or behind a gate to hunt down victims. I believe no one is entirely evil. When I was working on *Polskie morderczynie* [Polish murderesses], I read documents that showed that even the worst of them were not all that monstrous. Hannibal Lecter from *Silence of the Lambs* is a fictitious product of the American film industry. Polish crimes are completely different. More homespun. As we are a homogenous society and everyone resembles one another, in most cases it's poverty, pathology, alcohol and harm experienced in childhood. And that's all, that's the trigger! And then you hear: "Such well-respected individuals and crime – how could it have happened?" It just takes that single second... There is a theory that at the moment a crime is committed there is this single second when the perpetrator can withdraw from the attack – and, more often than not, this happens. And yet, brutal acts of crime are sometimes committed. This proves that something had happened, that the perpetrator's matrix had been disrupted at some point and they enter into this relationship. Because crime is the most intimate relationship there is. The perpetrator had been a victim him or herself, and understands their own victim's underpinnings. Body language allows the perpetrator to identify the victim. A crime story is always a workout for the mind, a kind of a game. Do you think people really want to know 'whodunit' and how long the blade of the knife was?

So, what do they want?

They want to read about themselves. I believe it's working through their own stories, getting comfortable with their own not-so-great traits. Not everyone is a criminal, but we all lie and have little sins on our mind. What is the purpose of a villain in a book, if not to tame our small demons? There is a reason for people telling each other and listening to these stories. Even if you are reading a love story, you are encountering archetypes. Everyone has

enemies, friends and allies in their life, people they admire or find irritating. This is our space, where we root for some individuals and at the same time wish for others to be punished. *Okularnik* [The white Mercedes] is 800 pages long and still people read it. Why do you think that is? It's not about the crime story, but about the fact that you can look at yourself as if looking into a mirror, taming your fear on the one hand and receiving a boost of energy, hope and strength on the other.

And what do you think about Kajetan Poznański, is he mentally ill?

I do not know the details of the case, but it is fascinating, as his actions were extremely stupid. Driving the corpse around in a taxi, the idea to take it into his apartment – this is all completely absurd and proves... a lack of experience as far as a criminal career is concerned. As for the soundness of his mind, that matter is highly debatable. There are cases where different commissions reach different conclusions, as was the case of the woman I based the protagonist of *Florystka* [The florist] on – she was found not guilty twice before finally being proven guilty. She was examined by three different commissions, who observed her emotional and mental space. The woman manipulated them all, playing crazy, as she preferred to be placed in a hospital rather than prison. Yet, one of her letters I used in my book is about an imaginary garden in which she meets her dead child. I will not reveal any more, but I returned to this case many years later. The flower vendor was in prison at the mental health ward, under the care of a psychiatrist and it wasn't clear whether she should be exorcised or treated by a psychiatrist. She never admitted her crime, but she also never forgave herself. She would punish her own body, trying to cut off her eyelids, mutilating herself... Things perpetrators do with their bodies stem from their feelings of guilt, because experimenting with your body, mind and emotions leaves its trace. You cannot commit a crime and not be affected by it...

But you can always start your life anew, at any moment. This is the theme of the current issue of *SENS* magazine.

I firmly believe that change is the only constant in our lives. I call it “shedding the skin”. When you decide you have to change something, it means your old skin no longer fits you and you need to shed it. Yet I’m against improvised “hey-ho just do it, be brave” actions. Some people need 15 years for this, others – like myself – 15 minutes, and I come in like a wrecking ball. I know that every once in a while home improvement is necessary; you need to get rid of a wall of two, because otherwise the space limits you. And if we mean well for ourselves, we must change the space and find new goals every so often. It’s like with your dreams – when one comes true, you realize you want something else. With me, everything is constantly changing. This holds true also for my apartment; if we met in a year’s time, I might be living somewhere completely different. I’ve always been a bit like a spinning top, as though I could not fit into the set frames. But I’ve been raised in such a way as to always know what I want to achieve, and I try to raise my own daughter in a similar spirit. So that she knows she can do anything, and she gets to make her own decisions and choose for herself.

But we don’t have influence over everything... For example, your car accident was a matter of chance.

Let’s not demonise this event, it wasn’t just pure chance, although if you had asked me about it when it happened I might have said so, feeling resentment for why this had happened to me. And additionally there is this ‘date of birth’ magic: the 80-year-old man I hit was born on the same day as me! In fact we are always assuming things. And my aim was to integrate myself with the reality I deal with in my writing. The accident contributed to this. There is nothing I can do other than write. Journalism did not work for me...

So you quit!

Actually, I didn’t! For almost two years I lived in this toxic workspace that devoured me from the inside. The accident shook me up – so much so, that there was no more time to waste. Over the next few years I had to seek emotional treatment. Most of the journalists would ask if I took up writing to vent my emotions and thus cleanse myself. Nonsense! I was in treatment for a very long time, first under the supervision of a psychiatrist, then for a long time I had a therapist and... I truly enjoy therapy! I like talking to myself, while the therapist says nothing other than suggesting certain leads. These are very important in cases of things you did not plan to do, as you are not a bad person, but still they happen and you feel guilty. Guilt is the worst feeling. You have to go through it, there is no way to expedite the process, just the same as with mourning. Now I’m even able to speak out about it.

Have you forgiven yourself?

I think so, but you can never be 100% sure, it’s not like mathematics. It is very likely that I write these kind of books having been on both sides. I was both the victim and the perpetrator, because the perpetrator is also a victim – a victim of chance... I have already been a journalist, screenwriter, now I’m a writer. I found my place and I feel comfortable, all my idiosyncrasies and posturing fit into this. Everyone considers me an extrovert, I enter...

And you rock the show?

Yes! But that’s just one side of me that I developed through my experience as a journalist. Because my favourite thing to do is to sit in my den and write...

Were you any different when you were leaving Hajnówka? Did you feel inferior?

Moving out of Hajnówka was my first step in the right direction. If I had been born in Warsaw, perhaps I would not have felt the need to tell stories and I would have been someone completely different. But things being as they are, I’m pushing forward. I

remember one of my fiancés once told me that I'm so valiant because I come from Hajnówka, a tiny town at the edge of the world. Up until I published *The White Mercedes*, most people had no clue where this town was... When I went away, I had no sense of style. One day my handsome fiancé took a garbage bag and started throwing away my clothes. Half the contents of my wardrobe. This led to a huge quarrel. I was not the type to have someone throw half of my clothes away – when I wanted to have red I hair I dyed it red. But now I think that he was right.

Both of us come from the same region of Podlasie, and yet we write books, and now we are sitting in the heart of Warsaw and talking about your success.

I owe everything I have to my openness to others. I was always interested in conversation, I was humble towards those who wanted to show me something, open a new space. I never limit myself to my own opinions – excluding principal values like honour or dignity, that's something else. But my family home gave me this horrible sense of style I had to overcome, as well as a shyness I struggled with for a long time. I have profited from both, as I transformed these vices into assets, it's something you learn. But some things you cannot make up for, such as attending school with someone famous. I never had that kind of support. You must have the expertise to manage to overcome these sorts of obstacles and I am proud to have done so. But remember, I could have failed if I was not myself but someone weaker.

Do you think that our ancestors build up our strength?

I believe in psychological memory. One of the methods I went through in my therapy was a genogram. I understood why I'm always so belligerent, as if I was a wound up spring. All the women on my mother's side were valiant. And when I succumbed to this strength I had in me, and stopped being ashamed of it, success started pouring in. I lived in poverty

for over a decade, but still continued to write. Today everyone sees me as a best-selling author, but it has not always been this way. I had emotional blocks I had created for myself.

Perhaps you carry the anger, revolt and unfulfilled life of your grandmother Katarzyna? You are her namesake.

I'll tell you something else – my grandmother was 29 years old and pregnant when she died. I had Nina quite late, I was 30. I was terrified of becoming pregnant. It wasn't about not liking children, I was subconsciously afraid of being pregnant. It was only once I pieced together the story of my grandmother that I fully realized why. I became pregnant at the age of 29, the same age as she had been. She died in January, my daughter was born on January 22. Things that happen in life make you realize that there is a greater plan you aren't able to fully comprehend. We don't have influence over everything. Fate throws opportunities at us that we pass up. For me, the worst crime people commit on themselves is negligence. It's better to make a mistake than to waste an opportunity. Do you know how many mistakes I've made in my life? Tons. It's not like we live in a land of pink unicorns. Most of our life consists of problems we must face up to. If you do not rebel, after a while you become a piece of driftwood: you lose contact with your own stomach, you lose your own rhythm. Like a heart, which pumps, contracts and relaxes – we should live in a similar manner... This was something I had to learn.

You discovered the story of the pogrom behind your grandmother's death at the end of your work on *The White Mercedes*. How did this affect you?

When I chanced upon the case of the pogrom, I was crushed. I thought this was an act of God. But first of all, I was pissed off! Why? Because this ruined the whole plot of my book! I was not thinking about grandma and family sentiments. I was furious, because *The White Mercedes* was practically finished and

I was planning just one more documental inquiry. From the outset I kept encountering information about the murders committed by "Bury". I had no clue about them so I visited the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) and read the files. And then I understood. I remember the sweltering heat and myself sitting on the stairs of Białystok's train station, wondering what to do. Chills were running down my spine and I was petrified. I knew I couldn't just walk away from this, it was my personal obligation as well as that of a writer and historian. How to do it though, how? I started visiting villages and people who were willing to talk, not everyone was. This one story made it to IPN, but in fact there were many more, a whole lot more. I thought I had opened Pandora's box, the fucking *White Mercedes* would never finish and – worst of all – the story wouldn't fit into the plot. This was supposed to be a crime story. I write crime novels! Yet there is no swamp you cannot get out of! I sat down, reworked the plan, and called up my publisher to tell them

the book would be six months late. My workdays were so intense my eyes refused to cooperate. When I finished, I hated the book. I did not think that I had uncovered a piece of a family mystery, I only thought that this story must be preserved. And that I would return to it.

What moment of life are you in right now?

I'm in the middle of a novel!

Can you reveal anything about it to our readers?

The book is set in Łódź. The fire element will appear in the form of a crazy arsonist. This will be my most adventurous novel, featuring fire reports, graphology and other criminology tools. The story will concern the city. *Girl at Midnight* featured mafia, *The White Mercedes* – doomed soldiers, while this will be a strictly contemporary story, zero retrospectives, flash editing. A story about an amazing city that I will set on fire...



KATARZYNA BONDA is a journalist, reporter, screenwriter, and author of novels. She has written popular crime fiction as well as documentary books, and is currently working on the third part of her tetralogy, *Lampiony* [Lanterns]. The previous volumes are *Girl at Midnight* and *The White Mercedes*, named 2015 Empik Bestseller in the Polish literature category. Bonda comes from Hajnówka and has an 8-year-old daughter Nina. Her surname is not a pseudonym.
