

KATARZYNA BONDA: ALL IT TAKES IS TO BE THE BEST

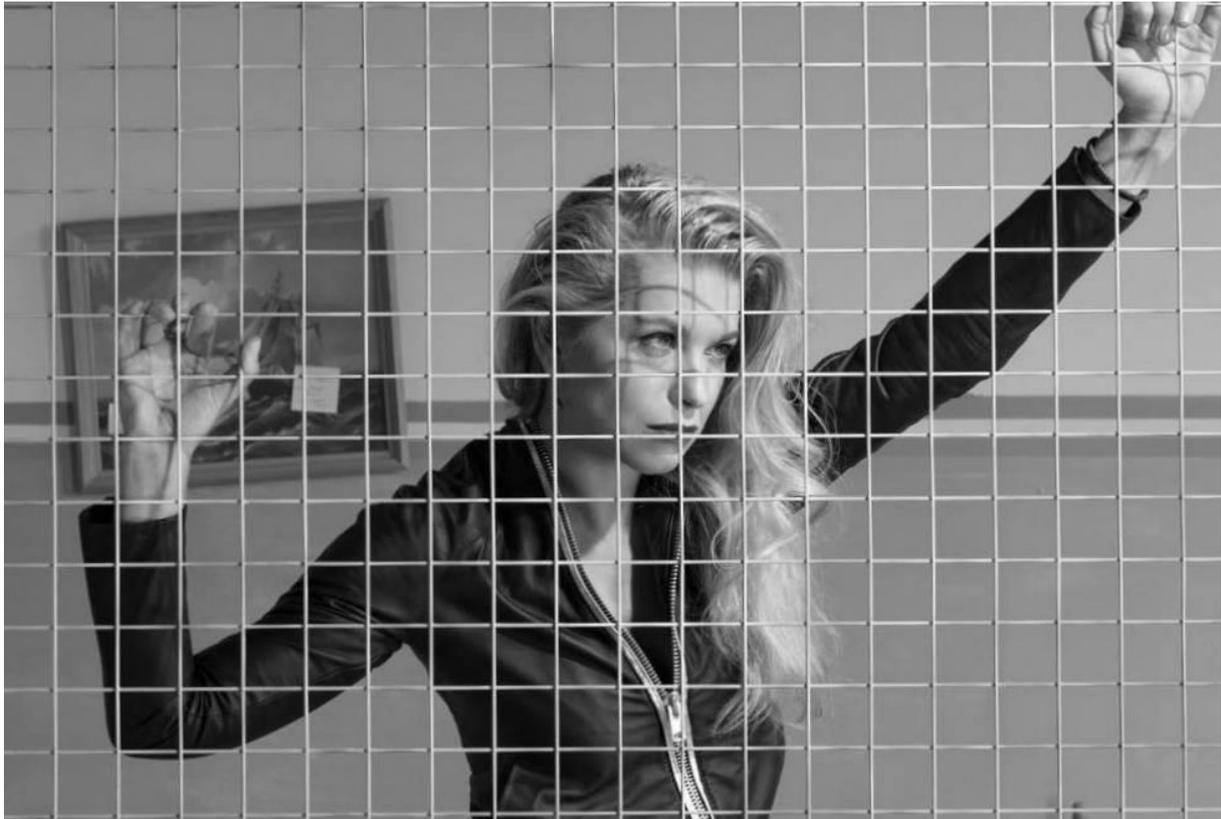
Don't let yourself be fooled her cute blond looks. Katarzyna Bonda is someone who won't shy from sitting face-to-face with anyone, even a murderer. The once provincial girl is now a famous writer – yet she's never been ashamed of her hometown, Hajnówka, because it has given her strength. She merely laughs when she's referred to as "the Queen of Polish crime fiction". Personally she would rather compare her work to shovelling coal.

TEXT: Magda Jaros PHOTOS: Tamara Pieńko



Katarzyna Bonda notices my surprise. We meet at 2 p.m. and she looks as though she were on her way to the opera. She smiles and explains her outfit: she's just had an interview on the TV.

Okularnik (The White Mercedes), the second of her four-part criminal series, starring female criminal profiler Sasza Załuska, is about to go on sale, so the author says she's right in the midst of the "promotional mincer". It's necessary because she did something most people who dream of writing never dare to do: quit her well-paid job as a journalist and chose to write crime fiction which, 15 years ago, was regarded as a 'lesser' kind of literature. So how much determination does it take to make such a choice? How much courage? Or how much naivety?



How do you get started when you write?

I need to be dressed properly! I put on my old fleece jacket and comfortable trousers, and some special slippers, warm socks, a woolly hat, a scarf and some mittens. I must be warm, as I tend to finish my books at the end of autumn or in winter. I start with an idea and then I do extensive research on the subject. It takes two or three years to gather this 'critical mass' of information.

Writing the book is the shortest part. And anyway, the sooner I get it over with, the better. I've noticed it's becoming harder and harder for me physically. Last time I sat down to write I got such a cramp in my calf that I fell down the moment I stood up from

the chair behind my desk. I didn't notice the pain even though it must have started earlier. When I'm writing, I'm out of touch with reality, as though I was in some kind of trance.

What is gathering the 'critical mass' about?

I need to learn as much as possible about the problem I'm dealing with. When I was writing *Florystka* (The Florist), I went to a morgue. I'll never forget what I saw there, and the strange crunch you hear when bodies are removed from the refrigerator. The smell of formaldehyde, the white tiles, the sickening fluorescent light... I wouldn't

like to do it again. The same applies to meeting the man who puts make-up on the corpses, so they'll look better in the coffins.

At the moment I'm working on my next book – *Lampiony* (Lanterns). Fire plays a major part in the plot. I've had a meeting with some firemen, who let me join their training routine.

You call the fire chief and say: “I’m Kasia Bonda, I want to extinguish a fire”?

Pretty much. The firemen took me to a room filled with smoke and told me to carry a ‘body’ out of it. I got to use a thermographic camera, I uncoiled water hoses, I wore awkward safety gear, a mask and enormous boots. These are things you can't describe unless you've really experienced them.

You said writing doesn’t take you much time, but you must get stuck sometimes?

All the time. For instance, I might give myself four days to finish a certain piece of text, and then from the moment I start until the evening I just can't come up with anything. I write something and then delete it. I need time to gain momentum. But before all this happens I clean my flat, I wash the windows, which always means I'm in the middle of a serious crisis. I would never do this normally because I don't care that much about my place being tidy. But it only looks like a waste of time, because while doing this I sort things out in my head.

When the writing actually starts to happen, I don't leave the house. I know it's not going to take long, so I write down how many scenes I need to create each day. That is unless something unpredictable happens, like when I was writing *The White Mercedes*: I was so tired one of my eyeballs started to twitch uncontrollably; I had to go to the A&E.

How did you come up with the main character of your last two novels, Sasza Załuska? They are the ones that have made you so well known.

I've always wanted a woman to be the protagonist in my novels. But the original profiler whose work I wanted the plot to be based on could never have been a woman. 15 years ago hardly anyone in Poland had heard of such a profession. I didn't want to give up on my idea though, so I decided the protagonist was going to be a man. That's how the books featuring Hubert Meyer were born. After that my plan had been to stop writing criminal novels. I kept thinking about an adventure thriller based on a true story. A girl discovered that the man she loved had killed four people. He was going to be from Kazakhstan. I worked on it for three years, but then I had to give up.

You “had to”?

As part of my research for the book I contacted an organization defending human rights. They recommended some cases to me. There are terrible things happening in Kazakhstan. I was stupid at first; I kept liking the organization's Facebook posts. That's how the Kazakh open-source intelligence tracked me down. They used the internet to infect my computer with spyware that destroyed the hard disc. Then some man called me on the phone. He said he got my number from a person I trusted. I agreed to meet him at a café.

When I got there, nobody was waiting for me. Then suddenly I got a call: “You're sitting at such and such place, at this time you got into your car...” My legs turned to jelly. I contacted a friend who works at the Polish Ministry of Internal Affairs and asked him what this could be about. He explained that, if the book sells well, it will be translated into other languages, so I will disgrace Kazakhstan and then... But if I drop the project nothing will happen to me. This was a real blow.

It's like being pregnant and unable to give birth. The pain is terrible. I went to my publisher, I wanted to return the money they had paid me in advance. They refused it and

asked me instead for another book. It took me one day to write a synopsis, where I described Sasza for the first time. I knew exactly who she was going to be, because she resembles the main character in this unfinished thriller somehow.

And how much of Sasza is in you?

She smokes like I do, and she has a strong personality. It actually pissed me off that while writing I gave Sasza my worst traits. I wanted to make her nicer. Make her different from me; I thought she shouldn't guffaw or use bad words, like I do.

But when I wrote about her in this way it somehow felt wrong. So I decided I needed to expose myself. Then, in *The White Mercedes* I risked even more, describing the history of my family.

In the afterword I read it was the hardest book for you. What was so painful about it?

The White Mercedes is set in my hometown, Hajnówka. There was supposed to be some crime story and the history of the area in the background. And this history is full of after-war cleansing and hatred between neighbours. I locked myself up at the Institute of National Remembrance in Białystok for three weeks and studied the files. I already knew the background was going to be extensive and detailed.

Then I found out that my grandmother, Kasia, who I had always been told was killed by a German tank, in fact died in the slaughter of an Orthodox village. She was seven months pregnant and 29 years old.

She was killed by the 'Doomed Soldiers'. The communist 'people's government' were happy with it, for what else could they do with the Belarusians who didn't want to leave for the Soviet Union? My parents had been lying to me for years. Why? To protect me. The pogroms in Hajnówka were a complete taboo.

I understood that the death of my grandmother had an impact of my life. My mother became an orphan when she was still a child, and this shaped her life. I was named after a woman who died tragically. I am the way I am because I carry these psychological memories.

How did your mother react? The fact that you discovered the truth must have been particularly hard for her.

She doesn't want to talk about it, probably so she doesn't fall to pieces. I will give her *The White Mercedes* and wait.

How much do you know about your background?

Both my parents are Orthodox and have Belarusian roots, but they always told me I was Polish. I went to a Belarusian high school, but that was only because it had a volleyball team. I didn't speak any Belarusian, and four years later I wrote my final exam about Jakub Kořas, the Belarusian national poet.

I didn't like how he kept moaning about *kropiva* (stinging nettles), about how Belarusian people had worn primitive phloem [a type of tree bark – translator's note] shoes, and how Russians and Poles had oppressed them. I couldn't understand why Belarusians had been so passive, why hadn't they tried to organize a single uprising? Back then I would go for the throat of anyone that called me a Belarusian. Now I know I am one. This upset the way I think about myself. No way, aren't I supposed to belong to the nation of losers?!

Did it change something in you?

I've decided I will find out more about my roots a bit later. I want to do it my way, do proper genealogical research. Right now I am in a bit of a daze.

And do you know anything about Belarusian cuisine? Do you celebrate Orthodox holidays?

When you live in Hajnówka, everything is intertwined: Polish and Belarusian tradition. But I didn't care about all that, I've always wanted to cut ties with the place I come from. I knew I was going to leave for Warsaw.

How did your parents feel about that?

My father hoped I would get married, have children and be a housewife. He was a lathe operator and had very traditional views. My mother supported me. She had also left the village she was from, she wanted to study. That's why my grandfather disinherited her. But she was able to get by, she earned money sewing clothes. She got a degree in chemistry from Warsaw University.

Mum has always told me: you don't have to know how to cook, you must have brains. She worked at a laboratory in the timber mill. She wanted something more for me. I sent applications to the faculties of Polish Literature, Law and Journalism. I got accepted to all of them but I chose journalism because it felt like an adventure. However, studies were a disappointment: I just had to memorize the dates *Kurier Polski* was published and didn't get to write a word of my own. So when I was offered an internship at *Express Wieczorny* daily, I decided to study extramurally.

Did you feel like a provincial girl?

I was a provincial girl! God, I dressed awfully. I didn't take long to realise how trashy my clothes were and how terrible my shoes looked. Later, once I started making money, I went through a phase typical for provincial girls – I became a snob. I would only buy expensive designer clothes. Now I don't give a s*** about what I wear.

I've regained a balance now, but I still sometimes act like a small town girl, occasionally asking nosy questions. I don't feel there's anything wrong with it, after all I

come from a community where everyone feels they have the right to do it.

My strength, the fact that I get called an 'aggressive, cheeky woman', also comes from my background. But these kinds of traits are very useful when you want to be a good journalist. They certainly helped me. In *Express* I soon started to do serious stuff: I reported on crime stories, I was a court correspondent.

Quite a challenge.

Oh yes, I was only 20. My first case was the murder of Wojtek Król, a student from Warsaw, who was killed in 1996. I sat down in the courtroom and I felt something special. The person testifying was a scent identification specialist. I didn't understand anything, so I wrote it down word by word. When the court was in recess I went for a smoke.

Then I was approached by the prosecutor Jerzy Mierzewski, who was the lead investigator into the murder of General Marek Papała [a former police chief shot in 1998; one of the most serious unsolved crimes since Poland's transition to democracy in 1989 – translator's note]. He said he'd been watching me in the courtroom and that he hadn't seen a journalist so interested in a trial in a long while. I admitted I hadn't understood a word, so he sat down with me and started explaining. Everything became clear.

I went back to the office, I wrote the report and a little while later the editor-in-chief told me to come see him immediately. He gave me a real dressing-down, telling me that was not how I was supposed to write. And then Andrzej Gass, an excellent legal journalist, for whom I was deputising, returned to work. He read my shitty text, took me under his wing and taught me everything. On his advice I bought my first skirt suit. It was awful! I also bought various legal codes and learnt legal jargon. I met

prosecutors and attorneys. I did everything I could to make them take me seriously.

And your appearance of a petite blonde probably didn't help...

I wouldn't be so sure. Several years later I asked prosecutor Mierzejewski why he'd come up to me back then in the court. He

said: "Because you're pretty." At the beginning many of the attorneys did not tell me to get lost, simply because I was young and attractive.

My professionalism started to count only later. I got a readers' award. People liked the way I was writing.



You stopped being self-conscious?

I had everything: looks, money, men, a career. I believed I was fantastic, but today I realize I was a spoilt brat. And then came one moment, when my whole life split into 'before' and 'after'. I caused an accident, a person died. This has had an impact on my whole life. On everything.

Can you tell us how the accident happened?

My father had died eleven days before. But I hadn't had a chance to mourn. I was working myself to the bone at the time. I had just sent in another major text, I had slept just three hours, but some big scoop came up and, with

everybody at the office on holiday, my boss said: "You have to write about it." I agreed to go to Tarnów and prepare an article about some prison guards. The photographer and I were late. I was driving, I stepped on it...

Today I know that the accident happened at a moment they call the 'end effect'. I was a few hundred meters away from our destination. I hit a man, the police came, then the ambulance, I watched them take him away. Afterwards I often wondered how is it possible for fate to find you. I got a suspended sentence, but it doesn't make you feel any less guilty.

How does such a thing change you? How do you go on living?

I was very depressed, there were moments when I wasn't able to get out of bed, to eat. Sometimes I wanted to die. What helped me was therapy, medication and my family. I couldn't count on my friends. But not because they judged me. People don't like to deal with someone who is in so much despair. I was left alone. The worst thing was all the phone calls from my colleagues at the breakfast TV programmes, asking me if I could come and talk about the accident. It was like a deep well, falling lower and lower, down to the very bottom.

What about work?

I took the decision to quit journalism. I'd already had my notice ready for a year. I felt I kept writing the same text over and over again, that it all had to fit into a certain structure. When I was saying goodbye to my colleagues, they asked me what I was going to do now. I said, "I might finish my book". I was writing a crime novel, just to try and not go crazy. I actually finished it and it got published as *The Case of Nina Frank*. Then I came up with the idea of writing a book about Polish murderesses.

Was it some kind of therapy for you?

Back then I didn't think of it that way, but maybe I was fooling myself? I knew it was going to be difficult and energy consuming, but this was what I wanted. I got engrossed in the stories of women convicted for the most serious crimes. I met many of them several times. I also remember that, while talking to them, I suddenly felt I wanted to have a family. I thought that my self-absorption, being such a workaholic, had brought about that tragic accident. So I started a relationship with a photographer, the one I had gone to Tarnów with. I guessed he was the only person able to understand me. That's what I thought. But I was wrong. When I got pregnant things started to get

complicated. He demanded that I quit writing my book, but I didn't want to stop. We had to split up. But this relationship gave me Nina. Everything in my life has changed thanks to her.

So you were alone again, with an unfinished book and a little baby. How did you earn a living, how did you cope with the situation?

I could only count on the help of 'grandma' Janina, or Jasia, because my mother lived far away. Janina Purzycka came to us as a nanny when Nina was a few months old. She's still with us, part of the family. First I had some money that I'd inherited from my father. It didn't last long. Then I got some cash from my mum, I borrowed from people and I sold the things I had in my house.

Once I sold, on Allegro [an online auction site – translator's note], a Burberry purse, a keepsake from my 'designer' times. I lived off the money from that for a month. In the end I didn't have much left: a table, a chair, a bed. I didn't touch anything from Nina's room though.

You never considered taking up another job?

I was hell bent on becoming a professional writer, and I made it. But when someone asks how it feels to be the queen of Polish crime fiction, it makes me want to laugh. It was a 15-year, laborious process of becoming who I am today.

What kind of mum are you? It's difficult to imagine you in this role...

Those who know me say that when I'm with Nina, even my voice changes. But sometimes I can be a bit of a tyrant. My daughter is in the second grade of elementary school, and sometimes she will come home and say she doesn't understand something... How can she not understand?!

I want Nina to learn to think independently, to have her own opinions and

imagination. I love reading to her before bed. We lie down together, I get up only after she has fallen asleep, but there are moments when I just cannot leave her. Nina is able to do anything she wants with me.

Is there room for a man in your life?

I can cope with everything on my own, but I couldn't live a solitary life. I know I will never have a husband though. I'm in an informal relationship with Mariusz Czubaj (professor of anthropology and author of crime novels – editor's note). We don't live together – we're dating and we like it that way.

Why are you so reluctant to marry?

I haven't met anyone who would be fit for living with me. It's not a reproach, I just know myself pretty well. Anyway, I wouldn't make your stereotypical 'good wife' – I'm no good at the 'hearth and home' type of thing.

There are men who don't expect this from their wife.

Really? If you look deeper into relationships between partners, you'll notice that even the most modern wives fulfil traditional roles. I just can't do it. I choose independence: I support myself, I make decisions – what kind of car to buy, what apartment...

Don't you ever get tired of this?

Only when I have to carry the groceries up to the fourth floor. I got used to all the rest.

I wonder, what does a relationship between two writers look like?

Mariusz has got used to the fact that when I write it's hard to get in touch with me for many days, I don't pick up the phone. It's difficult for a guy. And let's be honest, of course we compete with each other. This year we have both been nominated for the prestigious High Calibre Award. Me for *Girl at Midnight*, him for *Martwe popołudnie*

(Dead Afternoon). That's the main subject of our conversations at the moment.

You don't steal each other's ideas?

Not exactly, but we do get 'tarnished' with the other person's ideas. We've both started writing our latest books with a scene at a shooting gallery. We hadn't consulted each other. I was pissed off: "I came up with it first!"

We're always involved in our stories, we tell each other about our characters. There's no other way. When I'm stuck, I ask Mariusz for help. He always gives me good advice. I respect him as an author, and that's probably why our relationship works.

Do you read each other's books before they are printed?

When they are still in the making, except for the situation I just mentioned, no, we don't. We send each other complete texts when they are ready to be critiqued, because, as writers and people who are close to each other, we see more. I had a couple of comments about Mariusz's last book, he had the chance to change it. He didn't finish reading mine in time though, so I got mad.

Your book is 800 pages long...

Mariusz says the same, but I haven't forgiven him.

Aren't you tired of being the tough girl? Don't you sometimes pray: "God, please let me have a more peaceful life"?

But I don't need peace. I only pray to be healthy and able to tell all the stories that I have in my head. I'm almost forty; I'll probably live to be eighty. I've counted that, with my writing pace, I can write about 20 books. That's not many.