

TAKING SKELETONS OUT OF THE CLOSET

52,000 copies of *Okularnik* (The White Mercedes) were sold in less than a month. This means that Poles have a yearning to unearth the truth. They have no trouble getting through my 800+ pages!



Katarzyna Bonda, September 2014. Photo: Bartosz Bobkowski / AGENCJA GAZETA

ANNA MAZIUK: The plot of your latest book, *The White Mercedes*, is set in your home town of Hajnówka [in north-eastern Poland – translator’s note] and contains more personal threads than your previous novels.

KATARZYNA BONDA: Whilst writing this book, I broke all my rules. Time and again, I would say that I won’t use elements of my personal history in my writing, I won’t set my plot in familiar places. But this is not because – as was once suggested to me at a meet-the-author event in Hajnówka – I’m ashamed of where I come from.

First I needed to find an appropriate role for this location in the novel. When I went there for my first research trip, I came up

against a sentimental, naïve space. I was furious – what have they done to my beloved town? Why is it so terribly ugly here? I had an entirely different memory of the place. Ten years ago my mum moved right next to the Belarusian border, to a cottage my father bought before he died, so I no longer had any excuse to visit the town.

You don’t feel emotionally attached to Hajnówka?

I’ve lived in Warsaw for years, this is where my heart is. It’s not in my nature to return and reminisce. Especially since I used to hate this small-town atmosphere, the fact that people are constantly looking in your windows, that you always have to do whatever is expected of you and not stand

out. I was never afraid to speak my mind. But you're not supposed to do that in a small town. I attended a Belarusian high school, but I refused to be brainwashed. I rebelled when we were taught that the Union of Lublin [which formed the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1569 – translator's note] was tantamount to a Polish-Lithuanian partition of Belarus. As a result, my parents would constantly need to come to school and explain my actions.

Why did you end up in this school in the first place?

There are still two high schools in Hajnówka today. The Belarusian one is simply better – I had German classes seven times a week. I couldn't speak Belarusian, I didn't even know the alphabet. It was terrible, because all the other students had an established identity, had their roots, knew the language. Whereas I kept hearing – even in the final grade – that my accent was too harsh and that I'd never speak Belarusian well.

My mother always spoke to me in Polish. I sometimes visited our distant relatives in the countryside – to me, they spoke in a dialect. I didn't understand much.

So you knew about your Belarusian roots back then, but you never wanted to find out more? When did you learn that your grandmother was one of the victims of a pogrom in Orthodox villages orchestrated by Romuald 'Bury' Rajs?

All the pieces of the puzzle suddenly came together. My parents' ancestors were Orthodox, they came from this area. And at that time land and faith were enough to define your national identity. Yet when I lived there, I lived in complete ignorance, even of the pogrom. We weren't taught about it, not even in that Belarusian high school. You live in the midst of something like that, but everyone keeps quiet about it. There were dozens of situations that confused me as a child. The case of the cart drivers

[several dozen Belarusians murdered by Rajs's men – translator's note] was the most peculiar. Their bones were left buried in the forests from 1946 until 1994. And people knew about it. Now find me a more powerful story.

You've probably attracted a lot of criticism for this book.

Some people now bear a grudge against me, believing I should have kept silent, because Hajnówka used to be such a peaceful and quiet place. And these are young people, you know? They moved there from somewhere, settled down and are now protecting the status quo, protecting the established order. Others are delighted, because thanks to a best-selling book this niche subject has entered the mainstream for the first time, sparking a debate not only about Belarus or Belarusians, but the entire Podlasie region.

I get a lot of letters from people. Even from Podhale [Poland's southernmost region – translator's note], where they had their own pogrom. The resulting nationwide debate has Poland buzzing, but people in Hajnówka still pretend that nothing ever took place. There's yet another group of people, who don't give a damn about 'Bury', 'doomed soldiers', and the pogrom, but want to know how I dare describe their town as ugly. They complain about there being so many bad people in my book. That the reality is not like that at all. It's so beautiful, just take a look, we have a traditional band and all the folklore. I'm like, "Hello? Swedish writer Camilla Läckberg sets her plot in a town three times smaller than Hajnówka, and every other citizen is either a murderer or a suspect. And they're happy about it, because it attracts swarms of tourists".

This is the mentality I kept running away from. Only when you live far away and you know that you won't be dependent on the local butcher, the phone vendor or the lady working at the registry office, can you venture to do something like that.

I couldn't stop myself from showing all that. I didn't want to build an façade. A good crime novel has to be a psychological story. It has to contain evil people – the greater their number, the better the novel.

I guess this isn't just a story about Hajnówka, but about small, close-knit communities in general.

The space of small communities is extremely interesting from a dramatic point of view. Limited space generates a specific order, and often gives rise to really cold-blooded, Machiavellian crimes. If we have such an established order – with someone holding power and someone else being subordinate – corruption has to ensue. In such a small town, as I've tried to show in *The White Mercedes*, information that finds its way to the public is craftily filtered. Some people disseminate it, others don't. And you find out when you're supposed to find out – not earlier. There's no transparency, because no political cleansing has taken place here in years.

Geographic elements are also highly important. Hajnówka's golden age was the 1980s. And even then people didn't go there because it's such a beautiful place, but because of political circumstances. It had good money and good jobs. Then the wood began to run out and the sawmill that supported everything fell into decline, so now there's poverty, deprivation and unemployment. I'm telling a fictional story, but it's a likely one. I'm also using the space of a small town to show a fragment of Poland's history. There are dozens of towns like that, in Poland and abroad. You can find them, for example, in films by David Lynch or Nic Pizzolatto's *True Detective*.

It turns out we haven't yet processed our historical traumas.

It's the easy way out, because you don't have to think. You're functioning within a stereotype, the established order is simple

and taking skeletons out of the closet is a rather cumbersome task. When I decided to include the pogrom of the cart drivers in the plot of *The White Mercedes*, I posted a short note on Facebook. All hell broke loose. That's when I knew I wouldn't back down.

How did you research the pogrom?

When I went on my third research trip I warned my mum that I wouldn't come to visit. The publisher booked me a hotel room in nearby Białowieża, not in Hajnówka, to keep me comfortable at work. I had to detach myself from the memories of the place I come from. During the fourth or fifth research trip I began to feel at ease, I began to have a sense for this space, build my story, I overcame the barrier I'd built from my emotional recollections. Events began to arrange themselves together with locations, but I kept coming across the story of 'Bury'. At first I thought it was impossible. I kept asking: "Did it really happen here? But it's impossible!".

It turned out that everyone knew apart from me. So I filed an application to the Institute of National Remembrance and read through 27 folders of documents. After that I began driving to various villages to talk to people who still remembered. You really have to watch what you're talking about with whom around here. Whenever I'd ask the question to the wrong person, I'd get an answer like: "Oh, it's such an old story, never you mind. The cake is really good though, isn't it?". I found a man who fought for the exhumation of the cart drivers killed by Bury's men. I needed someone to introduce me – otherwise no one would even let me into their home. I had a whole bunch of these assistants.

Weren't you afraid that it would be too much for a crime story?

I was. I initially doubted whether I'd be able to include it in a crime novel. After all, I wasn't writing a historical novel or a

monumental work that would get nominated for big literary awards. My stories are told against a backdrop of dead bodies.

The risk was considerable, first of all because I had blasted the genre into something different. Readers could end up overwhelmed or simply bored. Not to mention the publisher's approval for such a long book. And the result? 52,000 copies were sold in less than a month. This means that Poles have a yearning to unearth the truth. That you can't treat a reader like an idiot, because they don't want spin-offs from American C-class literature. They want the Polish crime novel to be top-class, and they have no trouble getting through my 800+ pages!

Was the initial concept for *The White Mercedes* meant to be different?

Yes, it was supposed to be a universal story, with a different type of intrigue. Only one motif remained: "Without a body, there's no crime". I wrote everything from scratch. But if I had added this story merely as decoration, a red herring, or an additional element of the plot, it wouldn't have worked out.

Do you like writing crime stories?

When you're writing a crime novel you're like a demigod. You lay out a map and act like a profiler. You see the space, analyse the location of the forest, the railway line, the course of the river, the districts populated by the richer and poorer part of the population. You decide where the good character is going to stay, and where to put the bad guy – you're creating reality from scratch. But I'm not turned on by the crime itself – it's just a dramatic framework, a muzzle of sorts.

I'm made for the crime genre, because it's an incredibly precise type of narrative, which uses all of my strengths: analytical thinking and meticulous attention to detail. This doesn't mean that I'm only talking about crime. I'm sometimes accused of the fact that

my books are not like regular crime stories – but I've never said that this is what I write! I write crime novels, with an emphasis on the word "novel". We're lagging behind in that respect here in Poland, even the originators of the International Crime and Mystery Festival [in Wrocław – translator's note] are still looking for another Georges Simenon. They want a book to be thin, and filled with charades and mystery. Disrupting the genre is out of the question here – the contrary is preferred. Yet if we look at what's happening abroad, we'll see the trend is completely reversed. Why do you think the British publishing giant Hodder & Stoughton became interested in me in the first place?

The structure of the novel is really important for you. Do you write your chapters in chronological order?

I write by scenes, not by chapters. The scene with the piglet from the prologue of *The White Mercedes* was the last one I wrote. This is why I need to have a very detailed plan. I no longer use a whiteboard or index cards, but I used to write out my entire structure on an axis. I had to learn to do it. Now that I know the ropes, I write out scenes in bullet points. I precisely describe what's going to happen in the given scene.

My narrative is long and complex, so I have to have a grasp of it, or I'll get confused. But the writing itself is a really nice process. On Tuesday I may feel like doing scene number 77, because this is the year I was born. On Thursday I might be hungover, because I went to a banquet the night before, so I'm going to write an easy scene, such as searching for the bride in the forest.

I guess you're a queen of research on top of being the queen of crime fiction. You seem to take longer to prepare to write a novel than you actually spend writing it.

I spent two years working on *The White Mercedes*. The actual writing took six months. I don't believe in inventing things. Sure, you

can write one book like that and it's going to be about you. In other cases, you have to leave your desk and get some material. Even Flaubert did it. In order to write two passages of *Madame Bovary* he walked down one alleyway fourteen times, and even counted the trees. This is what research is all about. The first, easiest part is about sniffing out my location. There's also expert research, when I talk to a lot of different people. Finally, criminological research, because I have to decide how to put a head into a barrel. So I call up my consultants and they help me out.

Yes, crime novels are born from a structure. You can't write a crime story if you don't know who the killer is. If you indulge yourself at the very beginning, and just go with the flow, you risk ending up with a plot that bursts at the seams. Of course there are people who can do it without research or structure. I can't, I don't like to do hackwork and I don't like risk. I have to be sure that I'll finish the book, and when I know how many scenes I've got, I can give a pretty good estimate of how long it's going to take to write.

I've heard that you work quite regular hours.

At the beginning, when I'm only just entering the plot, I lead a normal life. I take my daughter to school and at 8.20 a.m. Then I'm at my desk. I go out at 3.30 p.m. to pick her up from class. When I'm in the second stage things begin to get interesting. For example, I may call grandma to pick up my daughter, because I've got a good flow going. At the end I sometimes arrange for Nina to stay at grandma's for a week.

This is when I'm writing around the clock. I wear pyjamas, dirty clothes, and dishes pile up in the sink. I don't do anything other than write. I only go to bed because my eyes are getting sore, otherwise I'd keep

writing. I love this obsessive state. When it's dawn outside and you're just about done writing – these are the most wonderful moments. I feel like I've done a good deal of work. Everyone is getting up, and I'm going to bed.

Before I had a child, I would only write like that. Now everything is planned. But you can't write for four hours a day, because the reader is going to feel that. My emotions are translated into the emotional space of the novel, they are there between the lines. At the end it gets hard, you're a bit fed up. I want to finish it. This is when I'm completely detached from reality, I don't answer calls. One of these days I'll have to take a photo of myself when I finish writing. All the windows are open, because I smoke like a chimney. It gets cold, and when you're sitting motionless, you get even colder. So I'm writing in a cap, scarf, warm slippers and two layers of jumpsuits. And then I get ill.

And when you're done?

This is when the emptiness kicks in. I delude myself for two more weeks. This is when the book is mine alone. I don't read it – I just look at the typescript, at how many pages there are. I lie in bed, reading other people's things. And then the book stops to be mine. I send it out and for a month or two it's being read in the publishing house. By that point I hate this text, and everything about it seems awful. I give it to my consultants to read, and they give me a cold shower, or ten, because everything's wrong and needs rewriting.

Then, when the book is published, I love it again. I open it and think: "I wrote it? Impossible. This is really awful, but this bit here, now that's quite good". After that, the book has to leave me. After completing each of my books, I have to do up my house, and not until I'm completely cleansed I do sit down to write anything new. So I'm not writing anything at the moment.