

READING ROOM: KATARZYNA BONDA

“I love paper. I love holding it in my hands, tormenting and teasing it, marking it, tearing it, showering it with sand, pouring coffee over it, getting it wet while reading in the bathtub. Then the book is only mine, and I cannot give it to anyone because it is so damaged. I don't like to lend my books,” says Katarzyna Bonda. We're checking in with her to see what we can find on the bookshelves of the queen of Polish crime fiction.

TEXT Paulina Klepacz PHOTO Maciej Kaniuk



Books everywhere! I am envious of such a library. In this collection you must certainly have titles that are the most important to you.

I do keep one shelf with the most crucial books. Here is my beloved Ferdinand von Schirach and his collections of short stories, *Crime and Guilt*. They are marvellous, a very quick read, and they are based on actual cases the author knows about direct from the courtroom, thanks to his profession as a lawyer. My favourite short story, *The Key*, is like a scene from a Tarantino movie.

Also sitting here are Nesser's crime stories. I like him because he is completely unorthodox and defies every convention. The first book of his I read was *Man Without Dog*. It's a brilliant novel. In a crime story there's always a detective, and he is there from the very beginning; in Nesser's book he appears in the middle of the narrative, before that we seem to be reading a completely different story.

Are the books on this particular shelf the ones that you return to?

Yes, all of these books are the ones I return to, and I do so quite often. I reach for them when building a character, for example. Many of them are marked, some passages are underlined, because I needed them for something. Here is [Sándor Márai's – translator's note] *Embers*, which is all covered in writing – because I love to destroy books, especially those which speak strongly to me. And here is another, *The Courage to Create* by Rollo May. I read it when I was going through a very tough time. I think it is good for a writer to reach the very bottom, in a material sense, but also in his or her writing. I was at a point in my life where I did not feel that my work was bringing the results I wanted: I didn't have a lot of readers or a good publisher who cared about me enough to get my work noticed. I thought to myself: I'm done with this, especially as I felt people were looking at me like a complete lunatic for having such high expectations. At that moment I found May's book, which talks about creativity from a

scientific point of view, and about where the need for expressing ourselves originates.

***The Master and Margarita* is also amongst your favourites.**

It's a very old, worn-out edition, which is practically falling apart. I read this book in my second year of high school, and I remember that I just could not put it down. My parents forbade me from reading at night, so I hid in the bathroom with *The Master and Margarita*, sitting on the toilet between the washing machine and the bathtub until dawn, meaning that later I was unable to straighten my back properly. I found the structure of the book incredible. Back then, the thought of being a writer myself had not crossed my mind, but the technical aspects were already important to me. And it may sound like a truism, because *The Master and Margarita* is a universally acknowledged book, but to me it symbolizes the importance of remembering who we are and what shapes us. It wasn't down to reading Agatha Christie that I decided I wanted to write crime stories; it was Bulgakov's novel that was important on my path towards becoming a writer. Similarly to another beloved book of mine, *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides. When I read it, I thought to myself: this is a novel that speaks to me, that makes my stomach turn. The way in which the entire intrigue is crafted, the way in which a hermaphrodite, who is both the narrator and the protagonist at the same time, tells his story through other people's stories, and how he *is* and *is not*, at the same time, my persona as a writer comes from Eugenides.

You also have *Madame Bovary* on this shelf.

I love Flaubert for being a sufferer. I wish I were more of a sufferer. It's incredible to me that even though the book was written such a long time ago, it's still valid today. I love how, despite the title being *Madame Bovary*, the book is primarily about Flaubert. And, most importantly, he uses a type of literary craftsmanship that doesn't wear me out. I am opposed to tormenting the reader. On this shelf

you will also find *Anna Karenina*. I do not like Tolstoy's political sermonizing, but I admire him for the way he announces this female character, that at a certain point in time he gives her the black dress, which affects everything. This is how to write a melodrama.

Among my favourites you will also find Carl Gustav Jung's set of writings titled *Journey to the East*. I remember that, when I first read it, my face was all flushed. Generally speaking, I'm a big rationalist. I like to have both feet on the ground, and I rarely talk about spiritual inspiration. I have to control that side of myself, and the genre I write in requires me to have thorough planning, outlines, and only when I am well prepared can I sit down and write. But before I do my research, I try to saturate myself with something like this, I don't even know what to call it... It's not exactly metaphysics, but something that helps me search for a theme that will be close to my heart and important enough or interesting enough for me to be able to devote one or two years of my life developing it. Jung's book helps me with that. I know this book by heart, which means I'm not looking for some great revelations in it. I just need it to find something more in a simple crime story, not only to revolve around the criminology, but to play with the genre a little.

When I'm building my characters I like using Chinese horoscopes. It's much more interesting than the usual nine psychological profiles. I think to myself 'this character will be an astrological rooster, and I work with that. I use Confucius' *Dialogues* for divination. I choose a fragment at random, I read it and it gives me enough food for thought to last the whole day. [Katarzyna opens the Confucius book she is holding in her hands]. Take this for example: "Chai is hard-headed, Tian is simple-hearted, Shil is far away in his thoughts, and Ju is learned". These things are amazing, they really direct one's thinking into uncharted waters.

Whenever you have to write a sex scene, for example, do you look up how other authors have dealt with the subject?

Whenever I write, I do not read. It's a simple but effective rule. I do it in order not to soak my work with someone else's words. I do my reading earlier, before I sit down to write. Whenever I write, I eventually read whatever I need to ensure the accuracy of the facts. If I write about the Polish city of Łódź, I go through all the monographs I can find about it, which is so dull you can fall right asleep. Sometimes I have to read literature from fields such as chemistry or architecture. That's why I have many weird titles in my collection. For example, *The Humanistic Encyclopaedia of Sports*, or, *Forest Mushrooms*. When writing *Okularnik* [The white Mercedes], I bought a book entitled *The Ways of Using Saws in Sawmills*. I also have a German-Polish chemical dictionary. When writing *Florystka* [The Florist] I had to buy a book on cacti.

And what is your opinion about "how-to" books for creative writing?

There is a book – a strictly technical one – that helped me to move away from my intuitive writing that needed a lot of improvements. I even postponed the publication of *The Florist* and decided to attend a course to organize my knowledge. I wanted someone to tell me how to write, to point out the errors, and to explain why something doesn't work, because I knew it didn't work and that the reader will be able to tell. Back then there were no meaningful courses for writers in Poland, so first I enrolled into the Łódź Film School for screenwriting, and later I started to travel the world, because there are plenty of workshops like that abroad. I even attended a short course given by Eugenides. Some people, of course, may shrug and say that writing in English is a different thing, that the English language is simple, that there is no creating neologisms and that it has many other linguistic limits. But I do not think that is true. Traditionally they focus more on the story; the plot is very important. There [in England], it turned out I have all the necessary tools to become a writer, and that all I needed was to open my mind. In England I was told about a book called, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic*

Structure for Writers by Christopher Vogler. This is a title I recommend for all writers, as it helps to understand what a plot is, how to identify the stitches in a story, how a story is perceived by the writer and how it is perceived by the reader.

How is reading affected by having vast technical knowledge?

It bothers me a lot. Especially when something is poorly written and constructed in an obvious way. When I see a book that could have been written haphazardly in two months, I don't feel like reading it anymore. I just put it away and that's that. This knowledge also makes me more aware of the type of person the author is, and what his level of development is. It's not that I look for books in which the author plays the wise guy; I search for titles that show me the person behind the book is curious and truly intelligent. It does not have to be an educated person. I want to feel that the story he is telling me belongs to the person behind it. Someone like Henry Miller, for example.

I can see Miller on your shelf, but I also see new titles.

I must keep myself up to date. Writing is my profession, so reading the competition is a must.

Is there a specific key to your arrangement of books? For example: do the new titles have a separate, dedicated space? I already know that you have a shelf with your favourites...

Well, there is an entire wall with crime novels, but some of them are kept elsewhere. One shelf contains more 'feminine' books, but not romances – I hate them, they are dull. I think it is better to treat oneself to some romance in real life – that will be more effective than living in a bubble. On my shelves you will find books for women that deal with trauma – they are often sagas, and they usually end badly. But then, next to all this literature, I keep publications like *Criminological Profiling*.

But do you know where to find specific titles?

Well, not really... (laughs). You see, I cannot find the book about saws in sawmills right now. But on the highest shelves I keep high literature (laughs). There is Donna Tartt, whom I adore. And I prefer *The Secret History* to *The Goldfinch*. I also have a tendency to get rid of criminal fiction. I read these books, I put them away, and I donate them to the public library. This stems from the fact that I simply do not have enough space to keep all of them. But then again, if someone would ask me why I keep *Forest Mushrooms* and *The Humanistic Encyclopaedia of Sports*, or the German-Polish chemistry dictionary, while getting rid of an entire shelf of Tess Gerritsen books, for example, then I would respond that a dictionary will come in handy many times in the future, while I have read all of Gerritsen's books once, and I believe someone else could make better use of them. These books would go to waste with me, because I don't lend books to others. Though I do give books as gifts. Whenever I give a gift to someone, I always add a book. Always. I try to promote reading... (laughs). I even give them to people who don't usually read. The carpenter who does my shelves will always find something for himself during his visits, even though he only reads books about history or sports. And the only book about sports I have is *The Humanistic Encyclopaedia of Sports*.

And you're not going to give it away?

No, because I need it.

[more on entertheroom.pl: reading room]

Katarzyna Bonda is a novelist, screenwriter and documentarist. The author of, among others, the best-selling crime series about criminal profiler Sasza Załuska – the third part of the series, *Lampiony* [Lanterns] was published by Muza SA in the autumn [of 2016 – translator's note].
