

KATARZYNA BONDA: MY BOOKS ARE NOT CRIME STORIES

The popular novelist on writing, her protagonist Sasza, and the real-life inspiration behind her.

TEXT Anita Czapryn PHOTOS Bartek Syta



Are you afraid of fire?

No. I'm afraid of heights and the deep sea.

Were you a little arsonist as a kid?

(Laughs) It rarely happens to women. But I witnessed a fire as a kid, so maybe this has had an effect on my subconscious, because this recollection came back to me when I was writing *Lampiony* [Lanterns]. My relatives lived in the countryside. I rarely visited them, but I remember spending one Christmas there. It was winter, and there were tiled stoves in the house. In one of the rooms, too much firewood had been placed in the stove

and it cracked. Smoke instantly filled the house, but what I remember as most terrifying was the fire that started to emerge from the stove. At a moment like that you can really see it as a force of nature, it's really powerful and we humans seem weak in comparison. Fire is a greedy beast. At the time it was quickly extinguished – the smoke was worse, because it permeated the entire house. Smoke is misleading – you might not feel it, but people die from carbon monoxide poisoning more often than from injuries caused by the fire itself. I think that in the past, when people used open fire and knew they had to keep it alive to cook food and stay warm, they had more respect for it.

Nowadays we neither appreciate it nor treat it with due respect.

Why have you actually dedicated your quartet of crime novels to the four elements? *Girl at Midnight* is devoted to air, *Okularnik* [The white Mercedes] – to earth, in *Lanterns* we have fire, and the last part of Sasza Załuska's story will be about water.

This is a story in four volumes about Sasza – a woman who has been through a lot and carries a certain amount of baggage. If, having experienced all that, you want to straighten up your life, and get your feet out of this puddle of mud, you won't come out clean right away. You have to go through the four elements – according to I-Ching philosophy the correct order is air, earth, fire and water. After the trauma suffered by my protagonist – which is the origin of everything and will be the key to the puzzle in the last part of the novel – she needs to find some fresh air first. It's what we all do: after each critical, shocking, dangerous, unpleasant or uncomfortable event, we open the window and have to believe that it's possible to sort our lives out. I write about that between the lines in *Girl at Midnight*. In *The White Mercedes* I'm trying to show that Sasza needs to stand firmly on the ground and face what she's running from. And you can't stand your ground if you're not willing to face up to what's inside you. People have this natural tendency to run away from trouble. We try to rationalise problems, somehow belittle this monster we're afraid of. However, only after looking at ourselves in the mirror and seeing that whatever happens to us results – like in Sasza's case – from specific characteristics and unsolved issues, may we act like she did in the book. I won't say how, because maybe someone hasn't read it yet.

Let's focus on your latest book, *Lanterns*, and fire.

Fire has a purifying power. Until we burn down and destroy all those elements that disturb us – also in a metaphorical and emotional sense – evil will remain inside us. Only fire can destroy it, make it burn away. And then comes water, which cleanses everything, bringing revival and energy. So only after Sasza goes through the four elements, can she begin her new life. You know, no one has ever asked me about that before, no-one seemed to care. You're the first and it's quite a beautiful thing that you were the one to notice that and ask me this question.

This might be inappropriate, because the third part has only just come out, and I'm already wanting to know what will happen in the last one – maybe you could reveal some of your plans to the readers?

As I've already mentioned, after self-immolation you have to wash yourself in an act of purification, but this would be quite useless if you hadn't gone through the element of air beforehand and believed that the world can be a good place, that when you open the window, you let some fresh air into your life. Maintaining the entire cycle is required to be reborn, to complete the destructive process and start a new life, a new beginning. My novels also feature yet another aspect, much more down-to-earth and noticeable, namely their criminological space, where the crime is combined with a specific element. In *Girl at Midnight* we have scent identification, in *The White Mercedes* the body is buried in the earth – and without a body, there's no crime – while in *Lanterns* we have fires and explosions. In the last part, titled *Czerwony pajak* [The red spider], the dominant element will be water, as you've already mentioned. I'm going to return to the

Polish coast, the plot will be set in Gdynia and in other seaside locations.

I'm wondering if your writing can still be called crime fiction?

My books are not just crime fiction. This may be the main thread, because I have to adhere to the rules of the genre, but I think it'd be hard to classify my novels as classical crime stories. These are just novels with a pinch of crime and suspense. If you expect to get a 100% pure product you might not be satisfied. But I also write for those people who see what we just spoke about – that this is a story about a woman, somewhat strange, as it's divided into four volumes, and each of these parts has its own space. Perhaps you'll only be able to find it and join all the loose ends at the end. For the time being, I'm leading my readers through subsequent volumes in a particular way, trying to give them some hints. All of them will come together in the final part, *The Red Spider*. But, as I've said before, my protagonist's adventures in subsequent volumes serve a different purpose – she needs to go through this cycle. Incidentally, it's rather interesting that my readers always ask me about what Sasza really looks like. In the books, I only provide very basic information: she's got red, curly hair, freckles, a certain type of figure and she never wears skirts. That's it. Readers have to create her image on their own, without me. This is that empty space the reader has to fill in. That's what it's all about. That's what I'm fighting for.

And do you know what Sasza Załuska looks like? Does she have her real-life model?

I know perfectly well what she looks like. This person exists for real. And I'm sure you know her. As soon as I saw her, I knew that Sasza would look like her. It's not about personality or behaviour, but she and Sasza

are like two peas in a pod. When I write about Sasza, I think about this woman.

Now I won't be able to go to sleep until I discover who she is. But back to the elements: I wonder which of them carries you? By the way, even though we've known each other for many years, I've only just realised that I don't know either the date or the month of your birthday.

My element is definitely fire. I was born on August 26th, but I'm not big on astrology. It's not like I can't get out of bed until I check my horoscope (laughs). But I have the element of fire inside me. I get very fiery in conflict situations. There are people who can mitigate this side of me, and I can also do the honourable thing. And afterwards, like fire, I feel burnt out. I involve myself in everything – 100%. I can't do things by halves. I enter as deeply as possible, knowing that I have to be burning inside, I have to feel this kind of fascination, terror, it has to be a strong connection. Inspiration is not a good word here. I don't have too much in common with air, I don't have my head in the clouds. Like devouring fire, I need to take over the territory I'm in. This is how I do the research for my novels, and this is how I write. There's something ultimate to it.

I did think that you had made a rather risky decision to suddenly move the plot of your latest novel, *Lanterns*. It was supposed to take place in the Subcarpathian region [in south-east Poland – translator's note], but by chance you found yourself in Łódź.

I've already done it two times before. The first time was with *Florystka* [The florist], then with *The White Mercedes*, where my hometown of Hajnówka became the plot location. The third time was easy. The dramatic structure – the plot, the stories that are to take place, the subjects to be

mentioned – all of that doesn't change. The only thing that changes is the location of the plot. But I couldn't have made a different decision, because nothing is more valuable than a space that gives you ample room to create a certain kind of story. Thanks to Łódź I could spectacularly broaden my ideas. Certain things were acceptable there that wouldn't be acceptable anywhere else, for example in the Subcarpathian Province. It was crazy, I knew that I'd be taking on additional work, but I couldn't stop myself. You could say that I have a nose for it, but in fact it only means that I always stay close to myself, close to my gut. And I know when something gets me, when I have shivers down my spine, when I have a gut feeling whether 'this is it' or not. For quite some time now I never do anything unless I feel this connection. I learned to say no, even to myself. So changing the plot location was wholly beneficial from my point of view, I just had to put more effort into it. Because here was an entirely new city – and an enormous one to boot – that I wasn't familiar with. On the other hand, it was a challenge, too. And I need challenges. I need places where I have to fight, contend, conquer and win.

Perhaps this wouldn't have happened if real life hadn't interfered with your plot, if you hadn't arrived in the city whilst a glue factory was burning down, and where there had been a series of other fires in the recent past.

I get these situations when it feels like something or someone is leading me by the hand. Some say it's a higher power, others think it's my guardian angel, providence, fate, the Great Mathematician, or however you want to call it. I'm more trivial about it: I'm just open to whatever reality is telling me. If it tells me that here is a place with fires

breaking out everywhere, military planes flying above it, clouds of soot falling from the sky, tenements burning down and collapsing – irrespective of the many reasons why all this happens – you just can't play it down. I may have had a different plan, but so what? This decision was also fair to myself. In all likelihood, that book would have been written anyway, it would also have been about fire, but it would have been different, have an entirely different atmosphere, a different vibe. Books are not written by robots – they're written by people who need a certain energy to do that. Some books cannot be written at a particular moment. Sometimes you have to wait for it, feel that you're ready. I did. I felt strong enough to do it. If I didn't have this power, this sense that I could make it, I wouldn't have gone to that war at all. To fight with this city. This is a contemporary novel that talks about what happens here and now – it's not a vintage crime story or a historical novel. Even though I used retrospection in previous novels, as both the past and the present were there, references to things that have happened, are happening, and will happen – I wanted this novel to play out in real life. I wanted to set another challenge for myself. I don't want to keep writing stories based on the same structure, even if I risk attracting criticism from readers who won't like that because they prefer *The White Mercedes*, where I was dealing with a serious subject. I respect that, but I also have my own perspective of the surprise I'm preparing for my readers, so that they know this is what they can expect from me.

Łódź really dragged you in...

Like no other city. I didn't feel like exploring any other city "to its guts". But Łódź is like that. So I couldn't give up. I couldn't give up on that pleasure.



You unearthed what really haunts Łódź, and what all cities, and all communities, usually prefer to brush under the carpet. Interestingly enough, you were aided here by none other than the inhabitants of Łódź. Does the fact that they were so dedicated to showing you the city result from their love for it or did they want you to capture it in a particular way?

I don't know why these people helped me. I'm a terrible bully, I enter areas that are often uncomfortable for others. But writing books, in general, is about entering areas that are not even taboo, but – like you said – brushed under the carpet. And yet secrets are key to storytelling. All stories, in some way, unearth the invisible. In Łódź there are things like that too, the citizens know about them, but not everyone else has to know. On the other hand, I thought, they've not had a book about their city since, you know, Władysław Reymont's *The Promised Land* [from 1899 – translator's note]. There were also *The Brothers Ashkenazi* by Isaac Bashevis Singer [from 1935 – translator's note]. As you're probably aware, I'm playing with both those novels in my own book. Of course, there is some vintage crime fiction written about the city, but it is all about the old Łódź, not its contemporary incarnation, so I think that its inhabitants could have felt a little left out. I felt regret, too, because this city is truly extraordinary. You couldn't call it beautiful, it doesn't have the looks to please all tastes. But it has character. I'd call it, I don't know, *impressive*, I guess.

Overwhelming maybe?

In a word: respect (laughs). But that's not all. The citizens are perfectly aware of all its shortcomings, drawbacks and problems. And they do complain about them among themselves.

I don't know when it happened, but ever since I can remember Łódź has been perceived as a place where only evil things have taken place. Someone was beaten up or killed, a child fell out of a balcony – typical Łódź. Have you taken some of those demons away?

I didn't want to remove any demons, nor did I want to fight anyone or write paeans about them. For me this was a fascinating setting. I treated it in an egoistic fashion. It was as if I had a ready-made scene: I let the actors loose, they played their part, and I didn't have to create any set design. It was brilliant. This is how I thought about it. And all those stories I contained there, which seem entirely unbelievable at times, are based on real pieces of the jigsaw.

The one about the firefighter, the stripper, the canals...

Not a word more! Don't reveal my facts (laughs). I have to admit that I couldn't tear myself away from the research, which has to end at some point – because I know when I have enough, and if I spend more time there I'll have to buy slippers and decide that this is my place on earth. I need distance, I need to have a bird's eye view. When you get too involved, you begin to be scared to write, you're afraid to show it to the world. In this case, I kept finding new elements and kept wanting more.

And I guess at a certain point you came close to the slipper scenario, when you were on the verge of buying an apartment in Łódź?

It happened quite early on, during one of my first visits to the city. I found two apartments, but wherever I went, I liked what I saw. I love places like that. I couldn't live in an ultra-modern, closed-off housing estate in Warsaw, these places are perfectly soulless. I

found a loft in Łódź, which – although it was renovated, and everything inside worked at the touch of an electronic button – had soul, because it was built in an old factory, even the structure supporting the ceiling was original. Yet it turned out to be too small for me. I also found an old apartment – and I love old apartments; I don't live in a 1938 tenement in Warsaw by chance. Even though it was rebuilt after the war and it's ugly on the outside, inside the apartments have really high ceilings. I'm totally crazy about such places.

What was the Łódź apartment like?

Fantastic. In Warsaw it'd be impossible to find, as all of them have already been bought and occupied. The one there had ceilings over 4m high, original cornicing, genuine parquet floor, furniture that seemed to be taken out of an Andrzej Wajda film set. Huge cupboards that would be impossible to remove, because they're so heavy and cumbersome – and yet on 150 sq m they looked like some lightweight IKEA furniture set. I fell in love in an instant. And I did seriously consider moving to Łódź at the time. After all, I could live anywhere, because I can write from anywhere. However, the apartment was sold before I made my decision. And I had to write my book, not spend my time packing (laughs). Still, I believe that the space you live in, whose atmosphere soaks into you from childhood, is extremely important in life. Even if Łódź tenements are dilapidated and populated by all kinds of people, some of whom have trouble making ends meet, these people still function around historical objects, they are in contact with this historical urban tissue on a day-to-day basis. Consequently, for example, citizens of Łódź have a great taste in clothes. They dress like the Italians, they have real style.

Do you think the citizens of Łódź will feel a certain pride after reading *Lanterns*?

I think they should. But I'm not a provider of urban promotion services. Even though I do experience some funny situations in relation to that, I even get offered bribes to set my plot in a specific location.

What?!

Of course I reject all of them (laughs). But some of them come in the form of rather charming and formal letters. Sometimes they propose that I meet some rather serious people.

Have you ever gone to such a meeting?

I've been to two. I wanted to check out how much they'd offer. Laughable sums, really. But I did find out that there are in fact writers who do that. Don't ask me to name names, because I'm not going to, but I'm not making it up.

Are there any other entities that would like to monopolize you, or use you for their own purposes? Social or political ones, for example? You actually never talk about your beliefs. I don't know, maybe you're planning to go to the 'black march' on Monday to protest against the abortion ban. What is your view on abortion and the current political developments?

I don't want to talk about these subjects. I write novels, so I'm often detached from reality. Ever since I quit journalism, I stopped taking part in all this. I don't have a TV, I don't read the papers. Of course I'm aware of what's happening – it'd be difficult not to be – I meet people, talk to them, it's enough to go on Facebook to have a review of the current hot topics. So I'm not entirely detached. But I try not to be infected by all that, especially when I write. Let me just

remind you that I enter deeply into non-existent territory – the fictional space – so I decided not to actively participate in what happens in reality. And I stick to that.

And how did you react to the fact that your book became a bestseller even before it hit the bookshops? It was already at number one in the pre-order stage.

On the very first day, too. It was a hard day for me, I was occupied with something completely different, related to promotion and tasks I had to complete. And I began getting those text messages. The first one around the start of the pre-order – they had to do it before the planned date, because the readers were getting impatient. Four hours later, the book was already third on the bestseller list. Forty minutes later – another text to say it had gone to number two. I happily quit what I was doing to post about it on my page, but it soon turned out that I was too quick, because less than an hour later, the book went to number one. I was so overwhelmed that I had to sit down, and then I got scared.

Of what?

I thought: “Oh my God, is it really happening, is it not all just a dream?” I still remember the times when I would sit with my novels at book fairs, and no one would approach me. I remember meet-the-author events attended by some eight people, with me “acting” as if I was talking to a crowded room. When, so many years later, you get to experience such moments, it makes you feel super humble. Of course I’m also proud of myself, but when this shop opened and only sold my latest novel, and you had my books all over the walls, I felt somehow separate from what was happening, as if I’d entered the Matrix. It’s a dream come true, an extremely pleasant feeling, but it all happens beyond me in a way. I no longer have any influence on that.