

## I AM NOT JAMES BOND

Dubbed the “Queen of Polish Crime Fiction”, she’s walking proof that writing can be profitable – and that a pretty blonde can find her way in a world of criminals and victims. Where did Katarzyna Bonda come from, what is she like and what secrets does she hide? Katarzyna Piątkowska investigates.



**Does the fact that you’re a voluptuous blonde help you get by in a world reserved almost exclusively for men?**

For many years this was my curse. I would wear leather jackets, combat trousers and army boots, and tie my hair back in a ponytail. I even learned to speak with a low voice. I used to dress down to minimize the side effects. After all, I had entered a man’s world – a world of prosecutors and investigators... Being a pretty girl helped me get that access – but at the beginning you are treated as a sex object. The flirtation and not being taken seriously never ends. Guys have it easier, they don’t have to prove they have a brain. I had to. Wherever I would go, to just about any scheduled interview, the conversation would always start with: “Why is such a nice, pretty lady interested in these subjects?” Why don’t they ask male crime authors that?

**Because none of them are nice, pretty ladies?**

Exactly. They come in and get a decent conversation right away. And I have to, or rather I *had* to – it’s better now – prove that I

had a pretty good idea of what I wanted to talk about. I love the moment when my interlocutor realizes that I’m not a stereotypical blonde, that I’m well prepared and capable of logical thinking. Then everything ‘clicks’ and the conversation enters an entirely different level.

**They start treating you like a professional.**

When they realise that I can distinguish between ‘suspect’ and ‘defendant’, I know legal regulations and understand my interlocutor’s line of work, it’s an entirely different conversation. In order to find the elements I need for my plot, I often have to meet the same person several times, so I need to gain their trust. In short, while my appearance didn’t help me in the past, it doesn’t really matter anymore – what helps is the fact that my books are everywhere and I’ve become recognizable.

**Does the sentence “My name is Katarzyna Bonda” open all doors?**

Not exactly, but people are much less reluctant to talk to me. Some of my experts have in the meantime become my readers.

Sometimes they even call me out of the blue to tell me stories. And that's a good thing, because everything I write about in my books is rooted in reality. My plots follow me everywhere. I can't even go on a holiday in the Bieszczady Mountains, because even there I end up finding stories.

**Does Sasza Załuska, the protagonist of *Girl at Midnight* and other novels, have a lot in common with you?**

Everything apart from the hair colour. I gave her red hair, because I've always wanted to have red hair myself. I'm fascinated with red-haired people – I think they're a bit different, like 'the chosen ones'. And I never wanted to be like everyone else. Sasza has all my faults and weaknesses.

**What about her good points?**

I'm not sure if she has any. Or if I do, for that matter. She's definitely hard working and she knows what she wants. She seems strong on the outside, but on the inside she's soft. And she doesn't know a lot about love, just like me. My problem is that I know exactly what I want and I'm not one to compromise. I'm not going to enter a relationship just because I don't want to be alone. I feel great in my own company. I've been fighting my whole life, wearing a suit of armour onto which I keep adding new layers. If I were to start a relationship, it would have to be with someone I can talk to in a normal female voice. Besides, I've got high expectations in terms of gifts. Cubic zirconia won't do. After all, diamonds are a girl's best friend, right? Apart from that, writing books is a lonely activity, it's not easy to live with a writer. That's why writers go on all those retreats, to create in solitude. I, on the other hand, don't have to do anything. So I endowed Sasza with my entire emotionality.

**You have to be a bit of an exhibitionist.**

Writing books is the most exhibitionist profession there is. I always wink at my readers between the lines. I had to give Sasza my features to make her real.

**How does Katarzyna Bonda work?**

At the beginning I think, analyse and collect data. My creative work entails six months of lying down. I lie down and think. I put a blanket over my head to forget about the outside world. The book has to arrange itself in my mind. After that I begin my documentary research. I often invent a story first and then make it believable by looking for the pieces that will enable readers to connect with it. Writing it all down is actually the last stage of the work.

**Do you do anything apart from lying down and thinking during this first period?**

I take care of my daughter, I make dumplings, I take my dog for walks. I often get asked about how my daughter manages to withstand all this. Indeed, how? There's nothing out of the ordinary about it. I don't spend my entire life working 24/7. The two or three months spent promoting are when it really gets heavy. The other difficult time is when I'm lying down and inventing, taking notes, brainstorming with myself. It's tiring, but I really enjoy it. Sometimes I have to research certain things even at the earliest stage to see if what I thought up is plausible. When the book begins to arrange itself it's a wonderful, even euphoric, feeling. But this euphoria is backed with fear and anxiety, because I'm never sure what the final outcome is going to be. Every book is a new challenge, no matter how many I've written. In fact, each new book seems worse, as I feel a palpable responsibility not to botch up the plot and to provide my readers with something new.

**You're basically living in constant stress.**

You could say that, but I like it. I keep raising my own standards.

**You need money to be able to lie down like that.**

I've arrived at a moment in life when this is no longer a concern. I have enough to be able to lie down and think. In fact I've always

worked like that, even when I was really poor.



**How did you make your living back then?**

I borrowed money, and I sold everything in my house.

**You must have felt an enormous desire to write if you could part with your most treasured objects.**

I did. And, incidentally, it's a real pleasure to get rid of everything and have absolutely nothing left.

**Didn't you feel ashamed?**

I did feel shame and regret. I pawned a table and got 150 zloty for it [about 33 euro – translator's note]. Embarrassing, isn't it? But I wasn't completely broke. I received royalties every six months. I just had to learn to lead a different life than when I had been getting paid each month. In the meantime there was the odd windfall, for example selling the rights to make a film or a TV series. But I also had worse moments. I became a single mother, I had a mortgage and no money. I thought I was crazy. But I dug my heels in. I was only good at writing anyway. At the same time, my books were becoming popular, and I began getting feedback from readers that this is good and they want more. Though at book fairs I did sometimes get very few people coming to my desk to talk or ask for an autograph. That was more humiliating than the need to sell my table.

**It paid off, though. Now you're one of the best-selling – if not *the* best-selling – author in Poland. But you have to admit that you're a bit of a daredevil.**

Every writer is a daredevil, myself included. My entire life is subordinated to writing. The only thing I'm not going to sacrifice is my daughter. I guess if I hadn't had her, I would've written more books. But she's my light and my breath. And this is more important than all the books in the world. I've always said that gay and childless people are allowed more in art. I've always believed that I'll get a better hand in life eventually. I also have a friend, Gosia, who backed me in this belief when, instead of going to work, I went on a paid screenwriting course (she lent me the money to attend). She told me: "Don't worry. One day you'll be a great writer and you'll be the one lending me money". I repaid her with interest. But apart from money, she gave me the faith that I would make it. If I hadn't had someone like her, I wouldn't be here now. Thanks to her, and, of course, to my own conviction, I knew I'd be fine.

**Where does this self-confidence come from?**

I'd gone down on my knees and bowed my head so many times that I had nothing left but to step onto the warrior path. I was losing battles, but the war was not over yet.

**Kasia on the warpath. When did you first step on it?**

When I left my hometown of Hajnówka aged 19. I resolved to become a journalist when I was in high school, which resulted in a huge row at home. It came as a blow to my parents. I've always been told things like, "You're so pretty, Kasia, you'll find a husband soon". My life would have been over by the time I was 18! And I wanted to live. In the third grade of high school I went to Białystok, to the editorial office of *Kurier Podlaski* daily, and I told the editor-in-chief that I wanted to be their Hajnówka correspondent. He treated me like a lunatic brat, and, to get me off his back, he told me to send in a text. I wrote about the privatization of one of the largest production plants in my hometown. *Kurier* printed it and the whole thing just exploded. In the text I had used statements from the head of the facility. He told me everything, because he was sure that no one would print my article. My parents told me to apologize, but I didn't want to. I got an internship. I was promoted. And then I came to Warsaw to study. It turned out that studying journalism was completely pointless. The history of the press? Economics...? I preferred to write. I started to take extracurricular classes and began work for the *Express Wieczorny* newspaper.

**Since you were doing such a great job, why did you leave journalism behind?**

In the court files I found stories not about crime, but about people – their dreams, fate and what pushed them onto a path of crime. And I've always been interested in stories. That's why I began to write crime fiction. It seemed that I wouldn't be able to take up literature, because a writer should be mature, old and experienced. Besides, I chose this subject purely pragmatically. I had a pretty good understanding of it all, because I had dealt with court cases whilst working at the newspaper. I wrote my first book at work.

**What happened to make you leave journalism once and for all?**

An accident, in which a man died because of me. But I don't want to talk about it...

**Without it, there would be no Katarzyna Bonda as we know her, sitting at this table with me.**

The accident was a point of transition. While there are critical moments in life, mine was extreme. I've already said everything about it, I made my confession. Each time it feels like I'm picking at the wound, even though so many years have passed. Still, for me, it was a proof that when you're not close to yourself, when you act against your better judgment, fate will bite its thumb at you.

**What had you been doing against yourself to bring about something so dramatic?**

I had wanted to leave the newspaper the year before. I didn't do it, because I earned good money, I was afraid, and I didn't know how I could live without the only thing I was good at: writing. I had been working for *Newsweek*. I was covering an out-of-town story, in place of another journalist who had gone on holiday. The thing is, I should have been the one asking for time off. I was dreadfully tired. I prayed the whole way for something to happen so that I'd no longer have to make decisions that went against my own will... What happened could happen to anyone who drives a car. We're talking about fractions of seconds here... It completely shattered me. I didn't want to go on living. I suffered from depression, PTSD, I couldn't go back to my old life and yet it was the only life I knew. I started going to therapy, I almost killed myself.

**And yet you're sitting here in front of me. What helped you? Your loved ones? The treatment?**

At the beginning people do support you to a certain extent, and tell you that they won't leave you alone. But they have their own lives, and this "not leaving you alone" lasts a few weeks at most. After that you are left alone. However, the worst thing about it all was the feeling of the meaninglessness of

existence, and at the same time an awareness that nothing is more important than human life. Of course, the process of recovery is, in its essence, a solitary one. I was the only one who could do it. But one of the elements that brought me back to life was my book. My therapist asked me to dig it out and read through it. I didn't think it would make any sense, but I did what she said. When I started reading, I thought it was really bad and I had to correct it. And when I started correcting, I suddenly realized that for the first time in a long while I wasn't thinking about what had happened, that I somehow managed to detach myself from it and I felt relieved. Of course this is a simplification, as the book alone didn't save me. If it hadn't been for the other elements – people, medication, and therapy – I wouldn't have made it. Of course it also turned out who my true friends were, and who weren't. When you reach the absolute pit of your emotions, this untouchable space, the mysticism of death and loss, you begin to have an entirely different outlook on the other aspects of life. You're no longer interested in conformism, convenience, or just having fun, because you begin to see more, as if you've only just started to see the big picture. I didn't have that before. I was a spoilt brat – I felt as if I could do anything and get away with it. I think that I managed to survive all this because it turned out that, strangely enough, writing was very much my thing. And I want to try out everything writing has to offer. I'm an advocate for the "literature of the centre". All the Booker and Pulitzer prize winners are like that, they're not stories that nobody can understand. I believe in life-changing, healing, relaxing stories. Stories that make you laugh out loud when you read them, like I did when I read *The Master and Margarita*. Stories that are completely engrossing, because you just can't tear yourself away from the plot. So it'll be this kind of story, I'm just not sure yet in which section of the bookshop it will be housed.



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