

WRITING GIRL

Katarzyna Bonda is the most popular female author of crime fiction in Poland. Each new book in the series about profiler Sasza Załuska becomes a bestseller even before it is released. Her latest work *Okularnik* (The White Mercedes) is no exception

Interview by Anita Zuchora

Apart from writing crime fiction, you are also an advocate for developing writing techniques. Reading the emotional preface to your book *Maszyna do pisania* (The Writing Machine) is enough to make one think one could become a writer. Should everyone write?

No. Very few people should become writers. But I believe that everyone who tries deserves to be informed about the necessary craftsmanship. Because, in fact, writing is a craft.

Why a book on how to write?

Talent cannot be given to others, but what can be shared are the lessons learned from the experience of writing. Hence the book *The Writing Machine*, a website and writing school under the same name. Why should the young generation of writers set out on a wild goose chase? Plus, when the potential scribblers learn this, their writing will improve. I tell my students during writing courses that it's not enough that what they write gives them pleasure. Their writing should be a pleasure for the reader. And yet the romantic image of writers and the myth of talent and creative inspiration still persist.

You don't believe in talent?

Talent is a prerequisite. It is a gift. But discipline is equally essential. A novel cannot be created overnight. The writing process is long and exhausting – like a marathon. Those who are not able to keep up drop out quickly. Of course, you'll always find some tough customers that adamantly

continue their scribbling and sometimes even get published... But I also believe that reading even a lowbrow book is better than following game shows on TV. Reading provides an opportunity to stop and think for a while.

Do you think that readers are able to discern the good books from the bad?

I believe the readers know. And they don't necessarily have to be well-educated to do so. I remember one man from a reading I did – with a moustache and a comb over to cover his baldness. I sensed he felt alien. At the end of the meeting, he approached me and said he is a butcher and owner of a meat-processing plant and that he had not read a book in 30 years. But my book sparked his interest, because he saw through the bookshop window how I talked about it. Some time later, I received an email from him which was both critical, to show he had read the book, and extremely nice.

So we all carry this susceptibility to the written word?

I do not think it's about words. Books are intended to stir emotions, as it is emotions we are susceptible to. When we look at writers, they have not always been extraordinarily educated people. Take London, Miller, Bukowski or Agatha Christie, who was quite a simple woman. There is no need for a writer to be God-knows-how educated – a writer should have a surplus or lack of something. You can start writing at any age. There is no rule. When I decided to create *The Writing Machine*, I was

not expecting to change the world. And yet it turned out that this machine helped many people.

It also has some opponents...

I was fiercely attacked by adherents of the creative inspiration theory. But I stubbornly claim that the writing process should be made public, for the common good. It is true that we might not need technique for the first book. But then it gets worse. There are many one-hit-wonder authors who can't repeat their success and whose career is soon over – proof they did nothing to work on their technique. Learning the technique also helps on a mental level. Even with a few books under my belt, I did not feel like a proper writer. After all, these were crime novels and non-fiction stories, and there was little respect for these genres a dozen years ago.

Nowadays crime novels are different.

They used to be “toy-stories” with a crime puzzle that needed to be solved. Then the Scandinavians deconstructed the genre to recreate it from scratch. But nothing new can be created without a revolution. The result is that a modern crime story can be anything: a novel of manners, a social novel, a novel with political elements... Scandinavian writers have taken on the role of the media. The Scandinavian wave hit the world of literature like a tsunami and finally reached Poland. I have always written long books, but only after this genre revolution has this become a virtue (laughs).

Did you write your first books without prior knowledge of writing techniques?

I wrote using my intuition. But I'm like an old, boring librarian. I need hard data. I wanted to learn as much as possible about the writing process, problem-solving and various techniques. In Poland, no place offered such courses. Sure, I could attend lectures at Jagiellonian University in Krakow and learn that I have to wait for inspiration to hit. And I'm not one to wait. I want to

distribute my corpses like a pro! First, I headed to the film school in Łódź. But a screenwriter is someone that needs to work in a team, while I'm the independent type. And you need to subordinate yourself to the producers and the film director – ultimately it is the latter who is credited as the author of the film. I wrote a few screenplays, one of which qualified for a prestigious competition at Cannes. But that was also the time I discovered creative writing classes, taught by outstanding novelists. I had just sold the film rights to the detective Meyer series, *Polskie morderczynie* (Polish Murderesses) and *Zbrodnia niedoskonała* (An Imperfect Crime), so I used this money for traveling and education. Among others, I attended a workshop with my favourite writer, Jeffrey Eugenides. He won the Pulitzer, yet he swears like a sailor and is wonderfully normal. Thanks to these classes, everything started falling into place. I learned new things about sequential thinking and plot development, as well as scene and character building.

Did this change you as a writer?

Armed with this knowledge, I understood that I am a writer with all my heart and soul. And that I am unable not to write. Nothing satisfies me more than writing. I received many helpful tips, such as that every time I have to start from scratch and grow. I can't always be writing the same book, like Llosa or Pérez-Reverte – many publishing contracts, many books, no personal growth. I find apprenticeship and learning from others very meaningful. Only once you acquire all this knowledge can you occasionally be an artist. Identifying and further developing unique elements of one's work make an original author.

And usually bring success...

We crime fiction writers have it easier. Awards are important, but everyone envies us for our book sales. It's nice to sell your book in many copies. A perfectly crafted plot can gain you readers from all age groups.

My books are read both by middle school students who were born with the ability to edit films in their smartphones and by senior citizens, who – like my own mother – need to be taught how to take calls on a smartphone. I provide them with all kinds of emotions, because my books aren't just "whodunits." The most important question I pose is about the nature of truth. *Okularnik* (The White Mercedes) became a bestseller even before it was published – people would pre-order it. The book is 800 pages long, and yet this was not an issue.

You don't believe the statistics about low readership in Poland?

Books have more than one life. Especially e-books. Sometimes a whole neighbourhood reads one copy. In my opinion people do read. But they do not buy much. Also, there are online auction services, second-hand bookshops... And the situation could be even better if – as in most EU countries – books could be tax-deductible. I also don't understand why Polish crime fiction is not an export product. The Scandinavians subsidise translations of their books into other languages. I read a lot to be up to date with my competition, and I know that many of the foreign books promoted in Poland pale in comparison to works by our authors. We have a unique genre of police procedural fiction, a world-scale phenomenon [it offers a revamped take at propaganda crime fiction novels praising communist police – translator's note]. Fortunately, attitudes towards crime novels are starting to change. One sign of this is the fact that Zygmunt Miłoszewski received *Polityka* weekly's Passport award.

Is the division between high-brow and popular literature fading?

It is definitely outdated. I personally only recognise the division between high- and low-quality literature. If an author publishes five books a year, they have to be of poor quality, unfortunately. This is why I am fighting for an open discussion about writing techniques. Olga Tokarczuk's *The*

Books of Jacob is a case in point. Its popularity among the young generation proves that readers are not afraid of complicated books. They just want to be awed.

Don't you get tired of writing crime fiction?

There must be a corpse in any crime story, but I'm interested in other things than aesthetic shock and macabre. I don't think I'm infected with them. When I wrote my book about female murderers, I spent three years visiting different prisons. Talking to those women made a strong impression. When you are confronted with a real crime, Lord Vader has no mask on. Stripped of this mask, he becomes human. The mystery disappears. I was once involved in a car accident which led to someone's death. I went on trial and found myself in a situation where I felt I was the perpetrator and I suffered a sense of guilt. Because of all this, I don't feel the need to submerge myself in the darkness. In each of my books, I walk the line between the murderer and the light. And, anyway, anytime a male protagonist sets out on a journey, it is to have an adventure, while a female detective sets out to heal the world, her loved ones or herself.

Your protagonists are not detectives in the classical sense of the word.

Hubert Meyer and Sasza Załuska are profilers. Bodily harm, death, corpses are all just a starting point for them – a book they need to read. But the corpse is always a human being and – from the perspective of victimology – a victim, not a source of fear. There are dark moments in *The White Mercedes*, but what is more important is crossing over the thin line that separates you from crime. Something has to happen for the crime to be committed. This is what makes my work similar to Agatha Christie's, where the murderer could be anyone – a policeman, a waiter or an old lady. I think it is very much a female perspective.

And yet the protagonist of your first two books is Hubert Meyer, a male. It was only in the last two books that you made a female the lead character.

When I started writing about Hubert Meyer, no one in Poland had any idea what a criminal profiler does. And I always liked being first (laughs). I felt that choosing someone with such a profession as a protagonist was already risky, but a female profiler seemed too risky for me. The person I based Meyer on is Poland's only professional criminal profiler. Today everyone knows that profilers are experts and don't come to their conclusions by reading tea leaves. But at the time no one believed in the effectiveness of this man's work, not even the police. Clairvoyants were trusted more. Additionally, at the time I lacked all the knowledge I have now. I would not be able to draw a clear line between the female protagonist and myself. And I was never an outright exhibitionist.

Was writing from the perspective of a male protagonist easier for you?

Not at all. I was struggling. Actually, it was a tug of war between us. Somehow, Meyer still managed to retain some sort of independence. I don't even like him. But the readers took to him, so I wrote two sequels to his story. Nowadays, my readers are either awaiting Meyer's new adventures and can't forgive me for creating Sasza Załuska or they prefer Sasza.

You made your female protagonist an alcoholic.

It was the only element I did not mention to my publisher in the plot outline. Because I submitted my publishing plan for a whole series. The titles of the four-part series with Sasza Załuska were known from the outset. That's one thing I learned: when I embark on a journey, my destination is clear – I am carefully packed and have planned for all the stops along the way. But I did not include that one piece of information in the outline. So I handed in a book with a surprise.

And no one protested? How did you come up with this idea?

Surprisingly, no one did. And the idea appeared out of nowhere. I attended a meeting with my readers when a beautiful woman – a celebrity – approached me. We started talking. I'm interested in everything; every person is a starting point for a story, so I am a careful listener. She told me she is a "dry" alcoholic and that she had not been drinking for a few years. I could not believe her. I was naïve. I had thought that female alcoholics were few and far between and that they were either wives of alcoholics who drank with them or bums; a total stereotype of which I am now ashamed. That woman arranged for me to attend an AA meeting. Incognito. I pretended to be an alcoholic. Luckily, you don't have to speak up. It was only then that I began to understand. I saw there women as wonderful as my interlocutor.

This is a much-discussed issue these days.

When I started writing my book, it wasn't yet. Now we have Małgorzata Halber's book *Najgorszy człowiek świata* (Worst Person in the World). There is much talk on the topic. At the time, I was a little afraid. Today my uneasiness seems silly, but at the time it really felt like I was taking a risk. After all, our taboos are different for each gender – men can do more. If the publisher had demanded changes, I was ready to resist. I wanted to show female alcoholism, because, judging by my own example, I knew that the issue can be perceived in a trivialized and insensitive manner. Some of my readers now write to me because of this, because they notice the problem in their loved ones or grapple with it themselves. But there are also those who believe that my sincere portrayal of the problem must mean I myself am an alcoholic (laughs).

From today's perspective, I think that a much braver act on your part was to have *The White Mercedes* touch upon the issue

of Polish-Belarussian relations and the complicated history of the so-called Doomed Soldiers.

The novel is set in Hajnówka [in north-east Poland – translator’s note]. I know the place well, as I grew up there. That actually made it more difficult to write the book, because I had to remove the naïve childhood sentiments I was still harbouring: the park where I used a swing for the first time, the place where I kissed for the first time, an area that I liked to take walks in... After so many years, it all seemed small and ugly. I needed to spend some time there to see things with new eyes. I could not stay with my mum, so I booked a hotel room. I observed the town and searched for adversities and conflicts that could serve as fuel for the plot. And I kept encountering stories about a pogrom... It was coming out of every corner. Finally I understood that I couldn’t overlook it.

Weren’t you aware of this story earlier?

No. I visited the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) to read the documentation. I interviewed senior residents from the surrounding villages. And even though I’m indifferent to corpses, this story made an impact on me. I felt dread, and my legs turned to jelly. It turned out that this was also my family story – the grandmother I was named after died in this pogrom. She died because she was Russian Orthodox, and faith was the decisive issue – an Orthodox was by default deemed Belarussian. All my life I had been led to believe something else; I was convinced that grandma Kasia had been killed by Germans. I discovered that, to a certain extent, I am Belarussian, which distorted my life completely.

Did you start to wonder who you are?

Not only that, I wanted to know why my grandmother, who was seven months pregnant, had died. Why were units under the command of Romuald Rajs “Bury” and other Doomed Soldiers liquidating whole villages? And why did no one say anything

about it for decades? According to the files I found, these civilians died because someone from their village was a snitch for the Polish communist secret police. It’s a highly complicated situation – nothing here is black-and-white. Everything is grey. Everyone has their reasons and their truths. I came to realise that I couldn’t write a crime story set in Hajnówka without this particular story. Because location determines a number of things – how people think, how they act, what motivates them, what they are afraid of.

Weren’t you afraid what the local people would say?

I was. But I knew that I could either write a novel about this issue or nothing at all. I laid out a few theses in my novel and posed a few difficult questions. Like, is there such a thing as pure blood? With my crime novel, I took on a subject with which crime fiction had never dealt before. This type of transgression is my task, though. I will probably be stripped of my honorary resident of Hajnówka status now. But I did this for my mother and for my late grandmother. It’s an homage (though not a paean) to them.

In fact, this story found you.

I wanted to set the plot in Hajnówka, but I had no clue what would come of it. Additionally, this part of the series bears the title *Earth*. Something metaphysical happened. I believe in the techniques and in an analytical approach to writing, but I never denied that writing is a mysterious activity.