

# Bonda and Storytelling

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## In Search of Operational Knowledge

A few years ago, I crossed the barricade and began to write crime novels. These days, I am slowly coming to terms with the extent to which this moment was a powerful turning point in my career as a literary critic.

Why is that?

I'll be frank. In my desire to write popular tales, or those that would reach a broad audience, I was forced to reconfigure my mentality. I had to silence my internal critic, and even my "internal scholar," who was constantly whispering in my ear that this or that can't be written, for it lacks ambition. Before long it became clear that everything the academic disapproves of, the reader adores. This should come as no surprise, but this divergence of tastes had one grave consequence. In texts by friends in my field, I failed to find any (sorely needed!) knowledge I might put to use to conceive new and engaging plots. Even the formalists and structuralists had nothing particularly inspiring to offer. **I would identify the knowledge I sought as operational knowledge.**

I therefore had to change trades and turn to filmmakers, and specifically those with an expertise in screenwriting who write in vivid prose in the vein of applied poetics.

This turned out to be a rather fruitful and incredibly inspiring training route for many reasons, not least the fact that **knowledge on narrative structure was adequately attuned to knowledge of the mechanics of imparting narrative to the audience.** As we know, the scholar tends to relegate the category of the reader (understood as a specific participant in the communicative act) to the second or third order of importance.

When I began to put this knowledge to the test, this time as an author exploring the specific and isolated case of the reception of his own crime novels, I found this body of knowledge to be entirely sound – as it happens, it actually works.

So I got bitten by the bug. Writing, which, for the most part, seeks to operate on the reader's emotions, drew me in and became a passion: a side job.

It was around this time that I began to lead workshops in creative writing on a broader scale. This forced me to compile a list of texts that would be useful for my students.

To my dismay, I became aware of the scarcity of publications by literary critics (with the exception of scripts by Joanna Wrycza-Bekier, who nonetheless has no involvement with academic work). For as it turns out, **the perspective of the writer and university-level instructor perceives literary study as an autotelic activity** – a sophisticated but (yes, I’ll say it) unproductive game for the extremely educated who often boast a refined intellect.

Who, in the end, made it onto this list? I selected screenwriters and directors, marketing pundits, “business storytelling” scholars, storytellers, and even some anthropologists (or at least Joseph Campbell). In other words, to speak in the broadest possible terms, the list consisted of experts in **narrative as a tool of influence**.

Among these names, a certain Katarzyna Bonda appeared. Bonda is a crime novelist who founded the writing school “Typewriter” (“*Maszyna do Pisania*”) and published a textbook in 2015, right after putting out “Absorber” (“*Pochłaniacz*”), the novel that launched her prose career. Relevantly, Bonda was trained as a journalist.

### The Basic Premise of “Typewriter”

The title gets right to the point: “Typewriter: A Course in Creative Writing” (“*Maszyna do pisania. Kurs kreatywnego pisania*”). Bonda’s fundamental ideas revolve around the major premise that “it is possible to learn how to write.” This claim quickly runs up against her assertion that “writing can only ever be a gift from God.”

I would like to cite and comment on a few of her preliminary remarks in order to foreground the author’s overall intention.

It is entirely possible - writes Bonda in the introduction. - It is entirely possible to learn how to write. However, as my grandmother often said: ‘It’s not like you can oil up the noggin of just anyone.’ You either are a writer or you aren’t. Many of my students have that ‘special something.’ Sometimes it is obvious from the first scene they write in a warm-up activity, and sometimes it surfaces only after several months of training. It’s true - writing is like a sport. All it takes is to write a single paragraph and the hand is abuzz with sentences. For some, a few words of encouragement and constructive criticism are enough (this feedback has nothing to do with the grades you receive in school). Others work themselves to a pulp throughout the course, for few people know that to write, you have to open yourself up.<sup>1</sup>

Literary critics so often respond to the idea of “creative writing” with the reluctant phrase: “talent cannot be learned.” As we have seen, Bonda confirms this while simultaneously proposing different stakes: it is a matter, rather, of training talent.

<sup>1</sup> K. Bonda, *Maszyna do pisania. Kurs kreatywnego pisania*, Warszawa 2015, pp. 16-17.

Perhaps it is about testing your own limits. Honing those skills that have had no chance to rear their heads. Testing the operational knowledge that writers have evolved over centuries and continue to adapt to the public's changing expectations.

I would say that this already sounds entirely reasonable, and even professional. In the desire to make something with consistency, sincerity and success, you must prepare yourself accordingly and remain vigilant to form.

Some Polish universities are changing their attitude toward creative writing and have begun to integrate courses of this sort into their degree programs. As an example: a few weeks ago, I led a writing workshop that was part of a postbaccalaureate program organized by the University of Warsaw. I'll offer a curious fact: the workshop's participants included unpublished writers alongside those with a few books under their name and even screenwriters of popular television series.

Yes, I teach people how to write, Bonda goes on to say. - I love to share my knowledge with others, to help adepts and guide them out of the abyss of graphomania. Surely I make no dig when I say that each writer ought to take care to never "drift" too far from the substance at hand. I am not writing for my pupils, nor do I edit their work or impose my vision of the world on them. I merely try - as a midwife of sorts - to lend a helping hand in their "literary births." After all, writing books is not the same thing as poetry, where a kiss of the muse plants the seed of the verse in the writer (although this kind of enlightenment might be worth more than a workshop). Writing books is an arduous, even physical labor.<sup>2</sup>

Let us forgive Bonda her unfortunate comment about poetry and instead bracket her suggestion that "learning how to write" is a form of mentorship that is entirely commonplace and even banal in the world of film and television. In these circles, every screenplay undergoes processes known in English as "development." Why should it be any different to work on a novel?

I believe that we literary critics have surrounded ourselves with a cult of our object of study, and that as a result, we have converted our discipline into a discourse that is simultaneously evaluative and "celebratory" to a fault. We are only now beginning to pay the price: fewer and fewer students are drawn to study literature, for despite its potential, the discipline has proven to lack a sense of sorely needed pragmatism and creativity.

In my courses, working on a novel recalls the creative act of conception, however strange that might sound. It bears no resemblance to academic study - Bonda explains. - After all, the writer must give their attention wholesale to the text. Writing is work. A job like any other.<sup>3</sup>

Scholars of popular culture such as John Fiske write that academics are quick to take on the role of the police: they keep tabs on artists' achievements and confine their focus to the strict

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, pp. 19-20.

evaluation of their aesthetic value. Scholars like Fiske perceive this as a grave error, for people do not turn to art for refined content but rather for stimuli by which the story being told can effectively reel the reader into the fictional world. It is my aim that the instructor of literary criticism should adopt Bonda's perspective and become a coach of sorts. Such a figure would be qualified to help her students make their in-process novels more appealing to the reader.

This, however, would require the instructor to transition from a position of intellectual authority to what we might call a technician of narrative. What difference would this make? The former concentrates on teaching how a given work (already in existence and usually allotted a significant place in the history of literature) should be understood, while the latter offers advice on how to create an emotionally engaging story.

I will include one last quote:

I am only sharing that which I myself arrived at through hard work by training abroad and participating in a number of classes on writing and screenwriting and storytelling workshops led by famous instructors from Poland, Western Europe and the United States. I also arrived at this knowledge by experimenting within the scope of my own life and body. I now seek to pass on the loot I gathered. I open people's eyes to realities that, by now, are second nature for me. If only, at some point before I published my first book, I had had the chance to share my writing, concepts, or even my vaguest ideas with someone who also writes. (...) I would have sung the praises for these creative writing courses that I continue to think of as a kind of medicine.<sup>4</sup>

This succinctly defines the kind of knowledge Bonda wishes to convey in her book.

This knowledge has been put to the test on the literary front, discussed comprehensively with experts of narrative design, and practiced on readers again and again.

Of course, perhaps these sentiments are obvious for academics as well, but in their pragmatic nature, they render a great service for amateur writers.

This passage reminds me of yet another thing that brings me some anxiety. Professional knowledge of story structure is produced and distributed outside the walls of university literature departments.

Why should this bring me anxiety?

Well, Bonda reminds us that representatives of other fields seeking to exploit the power of narrative have gained much out of mobilizing the tools of literary criticism (which are, after all, invaluable rich).

In short: we have lost crucial territory.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p. 16.

I'll offer an example. Last year, marketing specialist Paweł Tkaczyk published a book with PWN titled "Narratology" (*Narratologia*), which apparently sold quite well and is becoming a popular reference source for how to create engaging stories. In this way, a term from literary criticism, retaining the credibility of this significant discipline, has been robbed from under our noses.

### Knowledge that Inspires

Bonda's book is divided into nine chapters, the majority of which contain a set of (often generative) exercises.

The first chapter explores "narrative" and is a well-conceived introduction to working on a novel.

The second offers essential knowledge for constructing a compelling "hero."

The third informs us of how to go about creating the "depicted world" (the diegesis).

The fourth is a lecture on structuring "plot" in order to build dramatic tension.

The fifth focuses on narrative techniques.

The sixth offers compact instructions for writing dialogue.

The seventh is titled "The Writer's Decalogue" and consists of a list of aphorisms concerning the writer's essential tasks.

The eighth guides us into the enigmatic world of self-editing.

The ninth, titled "On the Way" (*Na drogę*), tries to provide a subjective and emotional response to the question of what the writer's life entails. Essentially, the chapter grounds us in the belief that creating works of literature compels one to lead the life of a monk. Let's face it – a dash of guild mythology never hurt anyone.

So: how would I summarize the content of "Typewriter?"

A learned literary critic will perhaps find nothing new or personally illuminating here. After all, this book wasn't written for him anyway (this being said, I do imagine that writing a "guide to creative writing" would be an intriguing task for an academic). The real addressee of the book – the amateur writer – should find satisfaction and perhaps some inspiration in its pages. For me, however, Bonda's book is the most substantive publication of its kind and has fully earned its designation as a textbook for disseminating operational knowledge on how to construct a popular story.

I would like to dwell for a moment on the notion of "inspiration."

The operational knowledge I keep alluding to should have a very different tenor from academic knowledge.

Originality is by no means the determining factor of its value.

So what is?

My point is that this knowledge must 1) reach the reader's awareness without a hitch; 2) be easy to implement; 3) remind us of basic rules and "cases;" 4) inspire us to devise new strategies; and 5) offer a push of motivation and leave us excited to make new work.

Although it might seem the least substantive, the fifth point is of enormous importance!

Marshall McLuhan has said: "the medium is the message," and there you have it: effective knowledge must "massage." It must impact the senses and stimulate or agitate the nervous system.

In this sense, this knowledge lies close to "design thinking" and perhaps somewhat distant from the clever, enlightening, and severely evaluative discourse of the academy so often conveyed through scientific and intensely specialized jargon.

The writer is soldier and poet merged as one, Bonda writes. Some conglomeration of the features of both trades will guarantee your ability to finish a novel. And this – I would argue – should be the goal of any reader of this book. I assure you – if you heed my advice to set aside one hour a day to write, in time you will draw out this pleasure on your own initiative. When you see its effects, it will cease to be a chore. I have no trouble writing for six, eight, twelve, or even fourteen hours a day (especially when I am nearing the end of a novel). I work regardless of whether or not the ideas are flowing. Every morning brings breakfast, coffee, and work, followed by a lunch break (if I don't forget to eat). In the afternoon, I relax. It isn't advisable to neglect your relationships – for they hold the antidote to what ails you. I jest not. If you want to be a writer, you will spend the majority of your life alone, submerged in alternative worlds that exist solely in your imagination. Every demiurge needs someone to bounce off of. Every demiurge must leave the house and live a normal life, like anyone else. After all, how are you supposed to learn about the psychology of your characters if not by observing real people? Observe, learn, continue to grow spiritually and physically. (...) I'll let you in on a secret: discipline. Forget about epiphanies, inspiration, or strokes of creative fortune. There is no cottage on a cliff that opens out onto a view of the sea, where you and your lover will sit and write ceaselessly. Nonsense! Poet + Sergeant = Writer. And remember: you start as a craftsman and only then become an artist. That's all there is to it.<sup>5</sup>

Any scholar would surely sneer at such a passage. But without these asides and their vivid metaphors, instructions, incantations, allusions to daily life, and even personal phrases charged with emotion, no effective "course in creative writing" would be possible.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, s. 20-21.

From my perspective, Bonda (along with other experts of narrative conception) is proof that literary criticisms ought to broaden its pedagogic offerings.

In his excellent book “Literary Theory,” Jonathan Culler delineates two disciplines: poetics and hermeneutics. For Culler, poetics is concerned with the mechanisms of constructing meaning, while hermeneutics entails interpreting meaning found within the text.

To this pairing I would add a third discipline: storytelling, which I would define in the simplest possible terms as the art of designing engaging narrative.

It is worth noting that in spite of appearances, storytelling is by no means a new field. To the contrary, it has a remarkably long, noble and downright distinguished history. It is simply practiced somewhere on the fringes.

### Storytelling as a Field within Literary Criticism

In my attempt to put storytelling on the methodological map of literary criticism, I ought to take note of the phenomenology explored in “reader-response criticism” (Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser) and the “aesthetic of reception” represented by “The Constance School” (Hans Robert Jauss).

The patron of this field is clearly Aristotle, the old favorite of screenwriters, whose “Poetics” gave rise to all theories of narrative reception.

Another significant point of reference would be McLuhan’s work. I will merely mention in broad strokes that his books convey a specific conception of the history of literature as an evolutionary tale of techniques for engaging the reader’s attention.

I would hail Edgar Allan Poe as founding father of the discipline. Poe wrote a text that might be taken as the doctrine of operational literary criticism. I am thinking of his “Philosophy of Composition” from 1846, which puts forth the thesis that creating a story is like a mathematical equation whose goal is to call out a particular emotional response.

McLuhan himself defined Poe’s role in the history of literature as follows:

In the first great age of mass production of commodities, and of literature as a commodity for the market, it became necessary to examine the effect of art and literature before producing anything at all – so argues McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. (...) It was Edgar Allan Poe who first worked out the rationale of this ultimate awareness of the poetic process and who saw that instead of directing the work to the reader, it was necessary to incorporate the reader in the work.<sup>6</sup>

One more quote from McLuhan’s book is relevant here:

<sup>6</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of Typographic Man*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto: 1962, p. 276.

Artistic rule-of-thumb usually anticipates the science and technology in these matters by a full generation or more. The meaning of the telegraphic mosaic in its journalistic manifestations was not lost to the mind of Edgar Allan Poe. He used it to establish two startlingly new inventions, the symbolist poem and the detective story. Both of these forms require do-it-yourself participation on the part of the reader. By offering an incomplete image, Poe involved his readers in the creative process in a way that Baudelaire, Valéry, T. S. Eliot, and many others have admired and followed. Poe had grasped at once the electric dynamic as one of public participation in creativity.<sup>7</sup>

To get to the point: storytelling – as a discipline of literary criticism – should be concerned with what Sergei Eisenstein, the Soviet filmmaker and fantastically innovative literary critic, called the “montage of attractions:” a montage of narratives that attract the reader.

In this light, Katarzyna Bonda’s successful writing career makes a strong argument in favor.

transl. Eliza Cushmert Rose

<sup>7</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Gingko Press, Berkeley: 2003, p. 430.



# KEYWORDS

t h e r e a d e r

Katarzyna Bonda

storytelling

EMOTIONS

OPERATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

**ABSTRACT:**

This text is a commentary on Katarzyna Bonda's book "Typewriter: A Course in Creative Writing." The well-known writer's book is offered here as an example of an inspiring textbook of operational knowledge for literary criticism as an alternative to typical academic knowledge. These reflections ultimately lead to a definition of storytelling (the art of designing engaging narrative) and a proposal to conceive of this practice as a discipline within literary criticism that has tremendous pragmatic and creative potential.

*creative writing*

## POETICS

Allan Edgar Poe

*popular literature*

## CRIME FICTION

### **NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

Michał Larek (b. 1978) is a writer, literary critic, and teacher. He works at the Institute of Polish Philology of UAM in Poznan (the Faculty of Literature and Modern Culture). He studies techniques for capturing the reader's attention and leads workshops in storytelling. In 2014 he published the book "Dead Body" (*Martwe ciała*), a true crime book about Edmund Kolanowski, a serial killer from Poznan, and in 2016 he published his crime novel "The Man in White Shoes" (*Mężczyzna w białych butach*) inspired by a true story (both books were co-written with the lawyer Waldemar Cizak). In August of 2017, his book "Fury" (*Furia*) came out, which is the first volume of his crime series "Decade" (*Dekada*). In 2018, the next two volumes will come out, titled "On the Scent" (*Na tropie*) and "Doom" (*Fatum*).