

Insomniac Press
Author Interview
Anthony Bidulka

What is your primary motivation for writing?

As an adult, my primary motivation to become a writer has been to fulfill a childhood fantasy. Ever since I was able to read and write I've been in love with and fascinated, comforted and entertained by books. I remember a time, when I was quite young, finding a box of books in a storage room in my parent's home—I'm not sure how it got there or who it belonged to—but it was filled with a wide variety of books including Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls*, Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* and several Nero Wolfe mysteries. And I read them all, relishing in the world's they opened up to me, a naïve, young boy living on the Saskatchewan prairie. When I was nine years old, my first niece, Kim, was born and as soon as she was old enough to pay attention, I used her as a guinea pig for these elaborate stories I would not only write, but also illustrate. I remember them being about a group of woodland creatures—including a couple of young rabbits (whose father—it was later revealed—turned out to be the Easter Bunny), a raccoon, and a bear cub—who had these great adventures in an enchanted forest type of place. The stories were so popular (even though no one ever saw them except my nieces and nephews) that they became...well they became my first series.

Growing up I continued to write in one fashion or another—either stories, early attempts at novels, in a journal, I even remember tape recording (no VCRs back then) my favourite TV shows and transcribing them with a typewriter (no laptops then) to practice creative writing. (I'm sure my transcriptions included many bizarre details the writers and producers of those shows never envisioned.) Throughout this period my focus was not so much on the process of writing, but on the creative and dramatic aspect of the stories themselves—what were the characters wearing, how did they relate to one another, what were they feeling...how did they make me feel.

Once an adult, various factors influenced me to believe there was more wisdom in leaving behind creative writing than in trying to develop it into something I could make a living at. Over my years of university education, careers ranging from bartender to teacher to chartered accountant, my writing skill was something I often used, but more as a tool rather than as a creative outlet. However, I'm quite certain I was the last person in Canada to have finally given up writing "letters" (in longhand) to people—but I do somewhat keep up the tradition with colourful e-mails.

Every year around New Year's, my partner and I have had the habit of reviewing the past twelve months and defining goals for the next. And every year I would say the words, "I wish I had made the time to do some writing", followed by the words, "This year I will make the time to do some writing". Finally, in 1999, I meant it. I had a successful career as an audit manager with an international accounting and audit firm. It was a great position, I loved the people I worked with, but it wasn't my passion. I had recently heard the saying, "Life may be short, but it can be wide", and it really struck me. *Life is* short, too short not to make it wide, and only you can make your own life wide. And sure, I

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knew the chances of my falling flat on my face were good, but what fun and excitement I would have before that happened—and if it did happen, I knew I'd have the tenacity to pick myself up, dust myself off and try again. It may sound a bit pie-in-the-sky, but I really do believe, for me anyway, that when you are pursuing a lifelong dream, a childhood fantasy, you are infused with a courage and love of life and drive to succeed that invigorates you and not much can hold you back.

Who or what influences your work?

So many things influence my writing. I think most writers or artists can't help but to be influenced in some way by almost everything around them from whom they talked to that day or what they ate for lunch. For me some of the greatest influences are travel, the people I have and have had around me, the careers I've worked in and my experiences living life as a gay man on the Canadian prairie.

I've had the great good fortune to travel to over a dozen countries including India, Ukraine, France and Indonesia, many of which show up in my writing. I've worked as a shoe store manager, a bull cook in a Uranium mine, the head bartender at the Saskatoon airport, a teacher and an auditor. And from all those places and all those jobs and so many other things—committees, boards, hobbies—I've been involved with, I have met and gotten to know many terrific people. I'm a people watcher and my brain works in such a way that although I may not remember someone's name, there's a good chance I'll remember what you were wearing the last time I saw you or whether or not you've changed your hairstyle. And I love to talk to people and ask them questions about their lives. I may not always know exactly what day of the month it is, but I do have access to knowledge about how various types of people walk or talk, the sound they make when they eat or how they react to a specific situation. Then I mush up all this information and use it to create characters for my writing.

Other writers in many diverse genres also influence me. I read fantasy and mysteries and biographies and gritty thrillers and romance novels. There is nothing better than finding an author—who creates in her or his books—a world I can believe in. I'm a big fan of escapist writing, books that take me away on a bit of a vacation, either because of the story-line or, more often, characters I want to spend time with and learn more about. There's no better feeling than when an author I enjoy—in my case it could be Michael Nava, Patricia Cornwell, Robert B. Parker, Suzanne North, Katherine V. Forrest, Sue Grafton, John Grisham, Ellen Hart or Kate Calloway—releases a new book and I can find a lazy afternoon by the pool or evening next to the fire to indulge myself in their words.

Describe your writing process.

After a decade as a chartered accountant, I left my office for the last time on a Friday afternoon and at 6:00 a.m. the following Monday I was in my at-home office beginning research on my first novel. The work ethic and professional requirements of my former careers have certainly followed me into my life as a writer. And most recently coming

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from a work environment where every fifteen minutes of my day was accounted for and recorded on a charge-out sheet, I had, and still have, a very strong understanding and respect for how my time is used. Although I have made many allowances for differences inherent in work that involves creativity and no longer put in the 10, 20 or 30 hours of overtime I did in previous careers, I do treat my writing as a job that necessitates some structure and organization.

Once I figured out (fortunately for me *and* my household) that indeed my creative juices flowed best during regular daytime hours (rather than in the middle of night or some other such thing) I created a routine that I have now followed for years. I wake up not much later than I did before I began writing, get ready for the day and head into my at-home office. While I'm in the process of actual writing, my day behind the computer will range anywhere from 4 to 6 hours. I put my head down and work. I take few breaks and often eat lunch at my desk, so when my day is done, often mid afternoon, I've put in a good amount of work and exhausted my mental and creative capabilities for the day. At that point I usually try to mentally let go of whatever project I'm working on and go about other activities I've planned for the day. When I go to bed at night I, in a sense, begin work again—I often go to bed thinking about what I'm going to write the next day, ideas of how to punch up a paragraph I worked on that day, or fleshing out ideas for a new project—so when I wake up the next morning I often have no need to sit and think about what to write, I've already done it and am ready to go.

I'm a draft writer. I go through several drafts before a piece is ready for someone to read it. This is all, of course, after I've spent a fair bit of time working on outlines and characters biographies and other research as required by the story I'm working on. The first draft will be just punching out the story, getting it down in chapter form based on a detailed outline. The second draft will be getting it into good enough shape so that it's at least smooth enough to be readable by me. Another draft will be a pure grammar check. Another one might be fact checking. And so on. By the time I'm ready to have someone other than me read it, I've seen it in several different drafts. The most fascinating thing to me about the writing process is how things don't always turn out as you plan—characters turn out to be different people than you thought they'd be, or they relate differently to other characters or the story line in a way you didn't expect...they almost take on a life of their own. I love that. I really felt I'd learned a good lesson when I finally gave in to that and allowed myself to be flexible enough as a writer to use that dynamic rather than fight against it or ignore it. I think it improved my writing process and the resultant writing.

What inspired you to write on the subjects you have chosen?

The originating ideas for *Amuse Bouche* revolved around the main character, Russell Quant, and a desire to create a character and setting very different from those I've experienced in mainstream (and non-mainstream) novels in the genre. As an avid reader I could find countless mysteries with countless different types of heroes set in countless (usually big city) locales. But finding mysteries set in smaller centres yielded fewer

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options and ones set in Canada even fewer still. The quantity continued to dwindle when looking for mysteries with gay heroes and more so for mysteries with gay heroes set in Canada. I found none set in Saskatchewan.

Being a gay man living on the Saskatchewan prairie who knows life here can be as fascinating and fun and wonderful (or whatever you want it to be) as anywhere else, I knew I had a unique perspective from which to write a mystery. Having travelled a great deal throughout the world also gave me the opportunity to add an international/sophisticated flavour to the main character and the story.

When I read a mystery, I love it when there is a dash of something more thrown in—characters who surprise me or ones I've never met before in any other book; locations I've never visited; peeks into lives and lifestyles I know little or nothing about. Enter Russell Quant. He is a detective who is inexperienced, gay and lives in the middle of the Canadian prairie. His inexperience makes him fallible, at times unsure of himself, sometimes imperfect in the eyes of the reader. The book is not about being gay, but it adds flavour to Russell's life and how he lives it and with whom he lives it. Living in Saskatoon, as anywhere else, has its own peculiar challenges and rewards. It is a beautiful place where the extremes of biting cold winters and scorchingly hot summers reflect the city itself and its inhabitants—good fodder for storytelling.

In addition to Saskatoon, a major part of the book takes place in France. I recorded those images and ideas on a trip that followed much the same route as that described in the book. Every highway and hotel mentioned is based on a real experience that greatly influenced the original ideas and tenor of the book. The title of the book, *Amuse Bouche*, comes from an actual experience during that trip. My partner, Herb, has a fair command of the French language, and upon reading those words on a menu, his mind (incorrectly) translated them to mean 'a party in your mouth', which we, and our waiter, found humorous (the wine may have helped to make it so). When I was searching for a title for the book, I wanted something that didn't immediately appear clear to the audience, but raised some curiosity and eventually would make sense, not so much in describing the content of the book, but rather its feel.

Throughout the world and even in some parts of Canada I feel there can be a misconception about what life on the Canadian prairies is like, what kind of people live there and how they fit into and relate to the rest of the world. The same can be said for life as a gay person. *Amuse Bouche* tells the story from these unique points of view and in a way that is subtle, non-confrontational, amusing and hopefully compelling enough that readers will want to find out more about the book's cast of characters.