

## Ubuntu

In March of 2005, I travelled to Africa. With stays planned in urbane Cape Town and the magnificent Stellenbosch wine region of South Africa, land and water safari adventures in Botswana, and a few days basking in the misty spray of Zambia's Victoria Falls, I was confident of finding something compelling for Russell Quant, my world-traveling protagonist, to do in a future book. It had it all. Extraordinary scenery. Fantastic food. Stellar wine. Fascinating cultures. And best of all, a backdrop that has endured as a deep, dark, mysterious place where anything can happen.

Although already working on the third book in the series (a cruise ship romp from Spain to Italy), my mind was, as always, on the lookout for potential new venues for my sleuth. A trademark of the series, Russell Quant lives in a small prairie city but somehow always finds himself involved in cases that lead him to exotic ports the world over. He's been to Paris, New York City, Barcelona, the Arctic Circle. I love the idea of setting up the contrast. If for no other reason than to show that at the end of the day, maybe these places aren't so different after all.

Yet as I flew over vast scrubland to Limpopo Valley, spotted my first leopard without bars between us, drove down the ruined (and downright scary) streets of downtown Johannesburg, battled aggressive vervet monkeys for cocktail hour peanuts, and especially when I visited the townships that surround Cape Town like a blanket of shame, I knew, more than anything else, that this was a place very different from any I'd ever been to before. How could I possibly bridge that difference to bring Africa to Russell Quant readers?

Often when I travel, I'll jot down thoughts and observances and daily activities in a journal. Memory joggers mostly. Sometimes it's just a word or phrase that has caught my imagination. Several years ago, it was one of these memory joggers that spawned the title and some key scenes for my very first Quant book, *Amuse Bouche*. I'd written it down on one of my first trips to France. I was definitely unsophisticated and green when it came to dining in fancy French restaurants (never mind seriously language-challenged). I was amused by the odd term I'd found in the menu. I laughed (to cover my naïveté), and incorrectly translated it as "party in your mouth". Today I can look back at the age-worn journal from that journey and find the notation "amuse bouche" hastily jotted in a margin. I never forgot it. It ended up being the perfect conceptual tool with which to connect my small town, witty, gay, prairie-boy detective with his first big case abroad. But Russell in Africa? After all I'd seen and done. How could that work?

From *Sundowner Ubuntu*, the fifth Russell Quant book:

*"Khayelitsha means 'new home',"* Cassandra continued, *"and was intended by the government to provide controlled housing to all legal residents. But the influx controls didn't work. Keep in mind, Russell, they planned for one hundred and twenty thousand*

*people to live there—today Khayelitsha is home to over half a million. Most of them are unemployed and many live without basic infrastructure services.”*

It was my guide through the slum of Khayelitsha, that warm Monday morning in March 2005, who first introduced me to the African humanist philosophy of ubuntu. In part, it means: I am what I am, because of who we all are; our differences cannot be as important as our common humanity, because we could not exist in any meaningful sense without each other. The concept was especially relevant during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission trials that marked the end of the apartheid years.

*Ubuntu. I am what I am, because of who we all are.* I jotted it down in my journal.

Although I was quite taken by the powerful notion, even as I walked amongst the personification of it, I felt removed. Ubuntu, like Africa, seemed too deep. Too dark. Too mysterious. This wasn't part of my life. And it certainly wasn't meant for a decidedly apolitical, feel-good mystery series like the one I wrote.

I went home. I finished the third Quant mystery, then a fourth. But like a scene in my books, I was being tailed. I'd left Africa behind. Ubuntu followed me. The longing to find a place for ubuntu—somewhere, anywhere—filled me. And so, I took the plunge. I began writing, sending Russell to Africa. I was particularly cognizant of wanting to be faithful to the established nature of the series, without giving short shrift to my weighty African experience. Finding that balance took some time, and is reflected in the title of the book: *Sundowner Ubuntu*.

Each book in the Russell Quant series has a title that contains a food or drink reference somehow relating to the foreign location featured in the book. Whereas “ubuntu” paid homage to the concept which winds its way through the story in some obvious and some less than obvious ways, “sundowner” is another African (via the British) concept which I also enjoyed in a more lighthearted way. Having a sundowner is the joyful social tradition of dropping everything one is doing at sun set to enjoy a cocktail and a wee bit of food (not dissimilar to an amuse bouche – see, we *are* all connected) with family and friends. After trying it a time or two, sitting atop a desert-dusted jeep tailgate, halfway through a safari, gazing at elephants enjoying their own watering hole as the day's incredible heat finally lost its power, I was sold.

I promised, as one often does at the conclusion of superb vacations away, to bring some of it home. You tell yourself you're going to read more, work less, practice relaxing, drink more umbrella drinks, keep up the tan, that sort of stuff. Some promises are easier kept than others. I regularly make sundowners a part of my life. Not hard to do. Ubuntu, however, is different. The concept itself is expansive and complicated, much like the country where I found it. I'll never fully understand either. But I can keep trying.

With *Sundowner Ubuntu*, I brought ubuntu to Russell Quant, in a Russell Quant way. I'm beginning to find places for it in my own life too. *I am what I am, because of who we all are.* I've always been one to get involved in community, sit on boards and committees.

As soon as we returned from Africa, I began to co-sponsor an education program in Zambia. And now, I've stepped it up. This past summer I co-founded a fund called Ubuntu Purse. The fund will raise money for an organization called Camp Fyrefly, a life skills camp for GLBTQ youth. I feel strongly that this initiative will change forever, and in some cases save, the lives of kids at risk of losing faith in themselves. With the grace and extraordinary benevolence of wonderful people in my very own small, prairie community, we've already made a difference. And, as always, we found that in giving, you get back so much more than you ever gave in the first place.

Anthony Bidulka is the author of five Russell Quant mysteries:

Amuse Bouche (2003) Insomniac Press

Flight of Aquavit (2004) Insomniac Press

Tapas on the Ramblas (2005) Insomniac Press

Stain of the Berry (2006) Insomniac Press

Sundowner Ubuntu (2007) Insomniac Press