

Saskatchewan writer Anthony Bidulka has steered his distinctive Prairie-raised private investigator, Russell Quant, through seven acclaimed novels.

"Writers are often told to write what you know," says Bidulka, who lives in Saskatoon.

"I knew mysteries. I knew Saskatchewan. I knew about travel, food and wine. So I invented a private detective, who was half-Ukrainian, half-Irish, gay, an ex-farmboy, an ex-policeman, and immersed him into a world I knew," says Bidulka.

"Despite the accoutrement of people and places, at the end of the day, the mystery comes first. My first responsibility is to the people who buy the books for a good mystery. In the series of seven, I've added to the base mystery aspects of thrillers, who-dun-its, romances and I like to place stories in settings where the readers least suspect. The one common link is that they all start and finish in Saskatoon, which is Quant's home."

"It's important not to allow the charm and the beauty of the setting you're writing about overwhelm the story you're telling. But I've found every place I have ever travelled is fertile ground for a good mystery." Bidulka's fertile ground has included France for *Amuse-Bouche*, New York for *Flight of Aquavit*, a Mediterranean cruise for *Tapas on the Ramblas*, British Columbia and the Arctic for *Stain of the Berry*, South Africa for *Sundowner Ubuntu*, Hawaii for *Aloha*, *Candy Hearts* and *Dubai* and the Middle East for *Date with a Sheesha*. All have been published by Insomniac Press of Toronto.

Bidulka, who was raised on a farm and was a chartered accountant until he plunged full-time into writing in 1999, says his own travel has created adventures and first-hand knowledge which he can build into the mysteries.

In *Date with a Sheesha*, released earlier this year, Bidulka was able to build on life experiences like riding a camel, going on dune buggy rides in the desert and smoking a sheesha.

"Riding a camel is not the gentlest or most comfortable means of transportation. Even so, there's something magical about it. When the camel is lowered to its knees to allow you to climb aboard, it is a rather ungainly sight. Then as the animal gets up, you feel you're on the sheer side of a flurry cliff, looking down. You soon settle into a groove of the jerky up and down side to side motion. You definitely need strong abdominal and back muscles."

"Smoking a sheesha pipe, at night, in a Bedouin encampment, hidden in the sand dunes of an Arabian desert, sounds like a mystical experience, right? And I can tell you, it is. The process itself is wonderfully ceremonial, coloured by age-old local traditions and courtesies. The actual smoking of the thing, however, is rather short-lived and lung-clutching for a non-smoker like me. But I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

Every vacation is memorable, admits Bidulka, and he tends to keep daily journals for future reference.

For *Tapas on the Ramblas*, he borrowed on the experience of "my first cruise, from Barcelona to Rome, getting the sense of a fine lifestyle. I knew a cruise was going to be a perfect fit for a Quant adventure."

For *Flight of Aquavit*, "I found there was nothing that could ever match the excitement of New York. Everything you could be wanting in the world was right there – the food, the drink,

the entertainment, the art, the architecture, the hubbub. I can find the best Afghani food, or visit a Rembrandt.”

For Amuse-Bouche, “a trip to southern France wasn’t a fireworks thing but it was exposure to a gentle way of living. There’s something to be said for people who take two-to-three-hour lunch breaks chatting over wine. The European experience yet again showed me a different lifestyle.”

Flight of Aquavit won Bidulka the 2005 Lambda Literary award for best gay mystery novel and he was nominated again in 2007 and 2008. He’s also been nominated for the Crime Writers of Canada Arthur Ellis and Saskatchewan Book awards, both most recently in 2010.

Bidulka was born and raised in Prudhomme, found out that teaching wasn’t a calling, worked as a bartender, in retail sales and even at an uranium mine. His return to the University of Saskatchewan gave him a bachelor of commerce degree in addition to his degrees in arts and education.

Bidulka's agent is currently looking at his latest mystery novel, which doesn’t include Russell Quant, but does fit the genre where he feels most comfortable. He will bring back Quant in his next writing exercise.

Saskatoon will be front and centre in Quant’s continued adventures.

“Aloha, Candy Hearts had a Hawaiian flavour but essentially most of the story unfolded in Saskatoon. My readers around the world were very accepting of that. I’ve made Saskatoon accessible to them. I love my environment and, in many ways, Saskatoon is as exciting and exotic as any of the faraway places I've written about.” says Bidulka.