

Building a mystery

Globe-trotting author maintains base in Sask.

Ned Powers, The StarPhoenix

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Anthony Bidulka admits there was risk involved in 1999 when he decided to change careers.

After spending 10 years in a relatively-safe environment as a chartered accountant with Ernst and Young, Bidulka wanted to re-ignite his dream of becoming a published writer.

"It was time to give something I always enjoyed a serious try," says Bidulka. "I was a point in my life where I knew if I didn't at least attempt writing as a profession, I would one day regret it. It was a risk I had to take.



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Anthony Bidulka has written a series of successful mystery books

Gord Waldner, The StarPhoenix

"I was aware of a statistic that said, on average, it takes six years from the time a writer starts until the time he or she gets published (if ever) -- not a challenge for the faint-of-heart."

Bidulka wrote a thriller, *On The Eighth Day*, which didn't get any response at all. The script is still sitting in a desk drawer. But while he was waiting "for that million dollar contract for *Eighth Day*," he continued to write and invented Russell Quant, a character who became the distinguishable figure in four best-selling mysteries.

"Advice commonly given to writers is: write what you know. 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 in a world I knew."

The success was almost immediate and Insomniac Press of Toronto came on board as publisher.

Bidulka maintained a Saskatchewan home base for Quant but allowed him to pursue mysteries in foreign locales. Quant went off to France to find a missing groom in *Amuse Bouche*. He went to New York in *Flight of Aquavit*. He went on a Mediterranean cruise in *Tapas on the Ramblas*. He went into British Columbia and the Canadian Arctic in *Stain of the Berry*.

In *Sundowner Ubuntu*, which will be released in Canada in October 2007 and the United States in the spring of 2008, Bidulka worked Africa into his detective's perilous search for a missing man.

As an avid traveller, Bidulka has visited most of the locations in his books. He keeps a journal of his trips but mostly he trusts a keen memory for the sights, smells and settings that appear regularly in his work.

He visited Africa in 2005, combining a visit to South Africa's wine region with both land-based and water-based safaris in Botswana, capping it off with a visit to Victoria Falls in Zambia.

"You get a different perspective on a country's history from a personal visit. The most eye-opening experience was arranging for a driver to take us to the townships that surround Capetown, where the living conditions are horrific. Yet, there was so much hope in that place. I learned a lot that day."

Although Bidulka loves to write of the places he's been, he knows the bottom line with creating a good mystery is that "you can't let the charm and the beauty of a country overwhelm the story you're writing."

Bidulka's books have been nominated for a Crime Writers of Canada Arthur Ellis award, Saskatchewan Book awards, and *Flight of Aquavit* made Bidulka the first Canadian to win the Lambda Literary award for best men's mystery.

A Canadian film production house has taken out options on the Russell Quant books with the intent of pursuing development of a possible TV series of one-hour mysteries. Bidulka would like the Saskatchewan element built into the series and notes "it would be interesting to see how a Prairie gay detective transforms from the books into television. My fingers are crossed. I think there are terrific possibilities to tell a whole new type of Saskatchewan story."

He says, with pride, there is certain fascination out there about Saskatchewan.

"Doing book tours through Canada and the United States, I have discovered a great deal of intrigue associated with Saskatchewan. Where else would you read about a kidnapping in a grain truck in the middle of a snow storm? It's pure Prairie flavour."

Bidulka was born in Prudhomme, raised on a farm and didn't move to Saskatoon until he was 18 when it was time to attend University of Saskatchewan. His father was both a farmer and an educator and his parents placed a high value on education.

"As a boy, my first experience with writing came from taping television shows. I typed out the TV dialogue but used my own skill in adding the descriptive nature of the stories. Later, I wrote and illustrated books about talking animals in an enchanted forest for my nephews and nieces. If I had been braver when I was 17, I might have become a writer immediately but I put my dreams aside for a while."

Bidulka once contemplated being a teacher but one term as a practice teacher convinced him it wasn't his calling. He became a bartender, worked in retail sales and even took a turn working at an uranium mine. A return to university gave him a bachelor of commerce degree in addition to his degrees in arts and education.

Even with the enormous success of the Quant series, Bidulka is about to embark on something a little bit different.

"I love writing about Quant, I need to be responsive to the readership. The next book after Sundowner Ubuntu will be a mystery -- but without Russell Quant. I feel strongly about writing Saskatchewan-based stories -- we have many to tell but this time, I am tossing in a little fantasy, female lead characters and factual manipulation."

But Quant isn't gone forever and Bidulka suspects the next chapter in Quant's life will be revealed in the fall of 2009.