

Q: Can you give us a little biography? I'm particularly interested in the work you had before becoming a professional writer.

Some people who know me today might be surprised to learn I began life as a country boy. I grew up on a grain & cattle farm on the wide-open, wind-swept Saskatchewan prairie, the nearest town six miles away with maybe two-hundred people living in it. After high school I moved to the nearest city, Saskatoon, and began an on-again, off-again relationship with the university there. Over the next decade I managed to collect three degrees – Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Education, Bachelor of Commerce – and try out eclectic work experiences. I did everything from selling shoes to teaching school, bartending, and working in a uranium mine. I eventually ended up writing (and passing) the grueling three-day exam to qualify as a Chartered Accountant (a designation I still hold today.) I was in decade-long career with the audit and accounting firm of Ernst & Young when I decided to risk it all, throw caution to the wind, and try my hand at a new career: professional writer.

Q: Do your background and upbringing play any part in the development of your themes and characters? If so, what part?

My protagonist, Russell Quant, was a farm boy who now lives in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. He risked a promising career as a police constable to chase a dream and become a prairie private eye. Sound at all familiar? Perhaps similar to the experience of attempting a writing career in Saskatchewan, the prospects of a gumshoe in a Canadian city of under 250,000 are not readily obvious or spectacular. But, to me, that's what makes both rather interesting.

As far as characters, I am often inspired by people I meet on a daily basis. So indeed, every so often a character might turn up who resembles, at least a part, someone I have met. The most obvious example of this is the character of Russell's mother, Kay Quant (nee Wistonchuk). She first turns up in *Flight of Aquavit*, the second book in the series. She was drawn from a collection of women—including my own mother (only in part, mom!)—I knew as a child growing up in Prud'homme, Saskatchewan. She was intended to be one of those characters who are more about what they tell us about the main protagonist rather than about themselves being integral to the story. I had only meant for her character to appear once, but she ended up being—and still is today—one of the most asked about and favourite characters amongst my readers. So, needless to say, Kay has finagled herself into a recurring role. My point is that it is the characters which grow from your background and personal experiences who often resonate the most, because they are based in reality.

Q: When did you first realise you wanted to be a writer, and how did you break this distressing news to your family?

I have always known I wanted to be a writer. Since I was old enough to know that pen went with paper, I was jotting down little stories (often with illustrations). In my case, I think it wasn't so much my breaking the news to my family, but more finding the courage to break the news to myself. The news that I needed to try this thing, that I'd regret it if I didn't. The family support, the support of my spouse was always there.

I was fast approaching one of those milestone ages—you know, one of those with a zero at the end and a distressingly large integer at the beginning—I was deep into a career as a senior audit manager, and I found myself asking myself: Is this it? Am I happy? How much do I have in savings?

I was fortunate enough to have what I call a 'safety net' firmly in place should I fall. I had a supportive spouse. A partner at the firm I was with who promised my job back if I ever wanted it. So, armed with that knowledge, I took the plunge.

Q: Who do you write for? Do you have any notion of an audience "out there" while you are constructing a book?

I've toured in both Canada and the US, and had the great opportunity to meet many of my readers. Added to that are the wonderful people who take the time out of their own busy days to write me/email me and talk about the Russell Quant books with me. So, as the series has progressed, I've of course become more and more aware that there are actually people out there who are reading these books and care about what happens to the characters. Even given all that, I try not to write for anyone. Someone once said that a story will be what it is meant to be. It will only be as long as it needs to be. It will only end as it is meant to end. What happens to the characters is a kind of fate. I've come to believe that if I start to write to please a certain person, or group of people, or whatever, then the writing becomes less honest. Less what it was meant to be. Less than its potential.

Very early on in my career, with the release of my first book, *Amuse Bouche*, there was some small controversy over the ending of the book (and a few other bits and pieces I won't go into here). I felt pressured by certain people to 'not go that route' in future books. This gave me pause, but I quickly concluded I could never allow myself give in to that pressure. I realized, as soon as I did that, someone else my-as-well sit at my computer and write that next book.

And there have been other strong suggestions made. People want Russell to get a serious long-term love interest. Some people want the books to have more sex. Or less sex. More humor. Less humor. I want my audience to be satisfied. But a series of books is like a grand voyage, it's like a life shared with the reader in 300-page increments. Life is not always what you expect it to be. Some parts you like, some you don't. It all comes down to how it's told, and how much you want to experience it with the characters who populate that life. It begins with choosing—or not—to read the series in the first place.

Q: Go back to the days you spent writing what would become your first published novel. Did you think it was good? Did you think it would be published? In daydreaming moments, did you cast the movie?

When I was writing *Amuse Bouche*, my first published novel and first in the Russell Quant mystery series, I was writing for the pure joy of it, and to maybe get some practice in, hone the writing chops so to speak, until my real book—a thriller I'd recently submitted to countless agents and publishes—was discovered and propelled me to unthinkable fame and success. So, no, I did not, at first, think *Amuse Bouche* would be the book I would publish. But as I got closer to finishing it, I realized what a good time I had writing it. I actually thought it was quite good and introduced to the genre a hero not quite like any other I'd seen. I decided to submit it—under a pseudonym—and see if anyone else thought so too. As it turned out, my prairie gay detective novel quickly got attention, whilst my thriller was lost in the piles of never-to-be-reads.

A couple years ago, the Quant series was optioned for film. I've had suggestions from Clive Owens to Charlie David for the role. In my own daydreams, I think Nathan Fillion fits the bill perfectly.

Q: When you first came up with Russell Quant, you probably had no idea the series would be published, and that you would go on to write many more books featuring the character. Had you known, is there anything about him you would have made different right from the start? If so, what and why?

Contrary to some of my colleagues who wish their protagonist was younger, I wish Russell Quant was a little older. At the beginning of the series, Russell is in his early thirties, and now, six books later he's closing in on forty. I find the development of his character, especially as a single, gay male living in a small prairie city to be more and more interesting, and in some ways challenging, the older he gets. Other than that, I sometimes wonder whether I should have given him more obvious flaws or personal challenges. But like any one of us, Russell has his own little foibles and quirks – some of which I'm just discovering myself. In the end, he is who he is supposed to be. I love that many reviewers comment on his wit and his likeability, two things that I think keep readers wanting to spend time with him.

Q: There is a strong sense of place in your books, predominately your hero's little-known home town city of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, as well as the various exotic locales he travels to throughout the series. Can you tell us a little about how you go about absorbing and recreating these places?

I've always loved any sort of entertainment, be it books, tv or movies, that evoked a strong sense of the place in which they take place. It is one of the skills of writing that I pay attention to and continue to work hard at to develop. Part of it has to do with how I experience a place in my own life. Wherever I am, I try to appreciate what is beyond what I see; the aroma of the air, the taste of the food, the weather, the music, the way people are dressed, how voices echo off walls, that sort of thing.

Saskatoon has become another character in my series. And like any character that is unique or virtually unknown to many readers, it has built in mystery. Most of my readers, even Canadian readers, have never been to Saskatoon. Many have never even heard of it. I see this as an opportunity rather than a problem. What a wonderful thing to be able to introduce people to somewhere new. I take the responsibility seriously. When plotting, once I know the story, and how much of it will take place in Saskatoon, I will often head out with a camera and scout the city for just the right spots to place my action. In doing so, I've found curious little corners that even I didn't know existed (and I've lived her for decades.)

When it comes to writing about the exotic locations, I rely on my own personal travels. With only one exception, everywhere Russell has been, I have been. Although I don't necessarily plan my vacations around where I think Russell should go, while I'm traveling, I will sometimes hear a voice that tells me: this is a good place for Russell. So I pay a little more attention, maybe jot down a thing or two of particular interest. More than one of the titles of the books in my series has found its genesis on the pages of my travel diary.

When it comes time to recreate the place on the page, I research the cold hard facts, but for the important stuff, the stuff that really places the reader on that city street, in that pub, airport or desert, I rely on my senses, or rather the memory of my senses: how did it smell, what flowers grew in the pots, was there a breeze or was it a wind, were there animal sounds, how did the food taste.

In the end, creating a sense of place for the exotic locations in my books is the offspring of a lovely marriage of two of my favourite things: writing and travel.

Q: Seems to me the eternal question when it comes to series fiction is how do you keep it fresh and interesting. Do you care to answer that and perhaps enlighten me?

I think this is important, not only to keep readers interested and involved and curious about what comes next, but to do the same for you as the writer. I know there is the argument with series novels that formula sells. Readers want to know that when they're settling in with your book, it is a bit like comfort food. They don't want their vanilla ice cream to suddenly be filled with chunks of chocolate. If that's what they wanted, that's what they would have purchased in the first place. I can appreciate that. But I think there is a balance that can be achieved. One that provides the expected, but with just enough of the unexpected to keep the experience fresh yet comfortable.

One of the ways I try to do this is to convince myself that even when I'm not writing about these characters, they are still having lives. So when it comes time to plot out a new book, perhaps a year has gone by, and I ask myself for each character: what has happened to them over the past twelve months. This has turned into personal life stories that include deaths, births, illnesses, break-ups and new relationships. Sometimes I work these into the plot, other times they are mentioned only through passing reference. My hope is that when you read a Russell Quant book, it becomes like catching up with old friends you haven't seen for a while.

Another method I use to keep things fresh is to give each book a slightly different focus in terms of ambiance and style. I want people to have no doubt they are reading a Russell Quant book, the same kind of book they've come to enjoy, but maybe with a subtle skew in perspective. For instance, whereas *Tapas on the Ramblas* is more humorous, *Stain of the Berry* is spookier, *Sundowner Ubuntu* is the most like a thriller, whereas *Aloha, Candy Hearts* is the most romantic of the bunch.

Q: I read an interview with Jakob Dylan once, where he said that originality is overrated. What he meant

was that he was happy to create within the tradition of music he sees himself a part of. Do you see yourself working within a tradition or genre, or combining elements from more than one? How important is it to you to break new ground?

Mystery is such a rich and diverse genre, with all these wonderful sub-genres populated by some of the most intriguing characters, living the most fantastic plotlines. Although the basic idea behind each of my plots may be rooted in traditional mystery—blackmail, murder, abandonment—that’s where the similarity ends. I often joke that my protagonist, Russell Quant, is the first and perhaps only half-Ukrainian, half-Irish, gay, Canadian, prairie, ex-farmboy, ex-cop, world-traveling private eye being written about today anywhere. When I first conceptualized Russell, I wanted to introduce readers to a character they might not have met before, solving crimes with twist they may not have considered before. Breaking ground? I don’t know about that. But I certainly hope I’m loosening it up a bit.

Q: You seem to live a busy life. You serve on boards and committees, you travel extensively, and write a novel all at the same time. Is this energy, or fantastic organizational skills or what?

I’d say it’s a mixture of good planning and prioritizing. I am an organized guy, maybe too organized. Spontaneity rarely works in my life. But, for me, making plans, often months or more in advance, is how I get done all I want to get done. I don’t get bored. I don’t run out of things to do. I’m one of those people who fears I’ll run out of time long before I get to do everything I’d like to, travel every place I’d like to visit. That being said, especially having lived the harried, 60+-hour-per-week life of a business professional for many years, I am also very cognizant of the importance of balance. Again, for me, that takes planning. Otherwise, down time is one of those things that can easily get lost in the shuffle. Writing, travel, giving back to the community, alone time, time with loved ones, health, faith, these are all important things to me. Each of them deserves attention. One of my favourite sayings is: Life is short, but it can be wide. I think the important message there is that it is up to us to make life wide, it doesn’t just happen.

Q: Okay, you wake up regular time, you have a full work day in front of you. Just you and the pages. On a scale of one to ten, how happy are you about this? Would you rather be doing something else?

Can I say eleven?

Every day I wake up feeling fortunate and blessed and eternally grateful for what I get to do every day. I didn’t get here easily, nor by the shortest route, but now that I’m here, I know it is where I was meant to be. I am now more me, than I ever have been.