



Out in Africa

Author Anthony Bidulka and his detective alter-ego circle the globe

So the new book—*Sundowner...Ubuntu*, is it?

Oo-boon-too.

There should be a pronunciation guide.

A lot of people give me a hard time for my titles [laughs]. It adds to the mystery, I think.

Which we'll get into, but let's talk about the character first. He's definitely an original—a gay Saskatoon epicurean detective. Where'd Russell Quant come from?

I was trying to find a way to distinguish myself and I fell back on one of the old tenets of writing, which is 'write what you know.' I knew about mysteries, I knew about travel, I knew about being a gay person in Canada, I knew about the Prairies, I knew a little bit about food and wine. I thought I'd just shmush it all together and see what I'd come up with. That's how Russell Quant was born and how his world was born. In each of the books, although he always begins and ends in Saskatoon, he travels to another country somewhere along the line in the investigation. It's a nice marriage for me of two things I love, which are writing and travel.

Which came first—did you go to Africa and then write a mystery around it or did you have a plot in mind and you went to research it?

The first two or three books, I used locations I'd already been. With Africa, I didn't go there because I wanted to write Russell in those areas but I went there with the thought already in my head that I wanted to pay special attention and see if this would be a good place for Russell to exist. It's not the type of thing where I was in Africa, jotting down ideas for a Russell Quant book, but I was writing down things that, if the next book was set there, I'd want to remember them.

Soaking up the atmosphere.

Exactly. The location has to fit the story I want to tell. I've been lucky to have traveled lots of places and every place has its own little mystery to it.

This idea of *ubuntu*—why did it grab you?

The concept of *ubuntu* is basically that I am who I am because of who all of you are. There's nothing you do that doesn't affect me and there's nothing I can do that doesn't affect someone else. It's a concept of community—that we all have to work together, that we can't allow people

to do wrong without some kind of cause and effect taking place. If I allow someone to steal that purse, what's to stop him from stealing my purse next week? It really struck me and helped me understand the post-apartheid culture in South Africa...It's a hard concept to grasp and harder to live by but it's nice to keep in the back of your head.

It sounds very Buddhist—the interconnectedness.

Yes, that's exactly it.

Talking about the culture, though, food is a big part of the book. Any minute, I was expecting a recipe guide!

[Laughs] Yes, each of the books has a taste of that. If you look at the titles, each of them has some small connection to either food or alcohol in the country he's traveling. In *Sundowner Ubuntu*, the Sundowner is what they call a break for cocktails at sunset.

Which personally I think we should start doing in Canada.

I'm with you there! It was so amazing, the first time it happened. There you are, in the middle of scrubland with elephants in the distance, and there's white linen service. It's really something! place has its own mystery to it."

And you did this at your book launch party.

Yes, we did African recipes, dancers...Again, reflecting my love of writing and travel and drinking lots of wine!

See, I have to admit a bias in Toronto, which is that no one really thinks of Saskatoon as being particularly cosmopolitan.

I actually feel that people in Saskatoon are more cosmopolitan than we're given credit for because we travel a lot. Now, part of it is because we have long winters and we want to get away. We're aware that we don't have everything so we'll go someplace else to get it. It's hard to meet someone in Saskatchewan who hasn't traveled a fair bit, whereas people I know in the bigger cities...

...tend to let the world come to us.

One of the questions I get a lot is "where do you live now?" and people are quite surprised when I say Saskatoon. My perception of the best place to live has more to do with the people who are around me rather than the place itself. I love Toronto, I love Vancouver, I love Sri Lanka but in choosing a place to live, I want to be with my friends and my family.

But for a gay man, how's the scene in Saskatoon?

Pretty much what you'd say about the opera scene or the dining scene [laughs] or any other scene: it's limited, it's small but it's rich and vibrant.

What I experience here as a gay man is that we don't have a cohesive physical community but instead we're everywhere, running through the fabric of the city. We don't have each other to lean on all the time so we make sure that we're part of everyday life. I go through everyday life expecting acceptance, but nothing else, and my experience here has been excellent.

That kind of sensibility is certainly there in the book but were you ever tempted to make your main character straight?

Wouldn't you get a wider readership that way?

I think it comes back to, like I said, wanting to distinguish myself. The very first book I wrote was not a gay-themed book, it wasn't even a mystery, it was a thriller. I still think it was a pretty darn good book but it became obvious pretty quickly that my little book was going to be like a one tiny guppy in that ocean. But if I honed myself down to this one genre, I felt I could make a bit more of a difference. It's not just a mystery, it's a gay mystery; it's not just a gay mystery; it's a gay mystery on the Prairies. All the things that made it different helped me get my foot in the door. That first novel got nothing but rejection but the first Russell Quant book was immediately noticed.

Which seems counterintuitive somehow.

Exactly, it's so contrary to what you'd expect, but it's the real reason I am where I am today. That said, however, obviously the market I sell to is much smaller. The challenge is that I want non-gay audiences to read these books and I've had a fairly good level of success in doing that.

I like this sort of paradox where such a specifically Canadian book, set on the Prairies, has become popular in the States. What's drawing them in?

When I talk to people in the States, they're less fascinated in the books being about a gay detective than they are in the books taking place in something called Saskatoon! You wouldn't believe the number of emails I get from all over the place from people who say they'd really like to come to Saskatoon.


So what's next for you and Russell?

Well, *Sundowner Ubuntu* comes out in the States in May. My history has been to do a Russell Quant book about once a year but there'll be a bit of a break before the next one. I'm actually working on a non- Russell Quant book, to challenge myself a bit as a writer. There's a desire to spread your wings a little bit. It's a mystery but a different kind of story. It's a bit of a risk but I'm hoping the Russell Quant series is strong enough to survive a two-year break. If the new book works, that'll be excellent; if it doesn't, hopefully I'll still have a career with Russell left [laughs].

In a sense, isn't that how it all started, when you quit your accounting career to write novels?

That's true. I do like taking a little bit of a left turn!

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 *Scott Dagostino is fab's managing editor. He's traveled north, south, east but oddly, never west.*