

I have a few questions about your process as a writer and some specific questions about Russell and your books.

- 1) Who are your influences as an author? Do you find that those influences have changed over time?

In terms of other authors, my greatest influences when I started out were writers like Sue Grafton, Michael Nava, Kate Calloway, Robert B. Parker, John Morgan Wilson and John Sandford. Whereas Nava, Wilson and Sandford tell more serious tales, Grafton, Calloway and Parker tended to the more light-hearted. Both appealed to me as a reader and a writer. Nava in particular, and Morgan to an extent, taught me that it was possible to have an imperfect hero who goes through great turmoil in life, and that a perfect, happy ending isn't always necessary. Kind of like real life. I think in a series, an author has more flexibility in this regard in that there is always the next book to make things better. Or not.

With Grafton's Kinsey Milhone alphabet series and Parkers Spenser novels, I found that I really looked forward to spending time with these books and the characters because they were so enjoyable and funny in a sometimes acerbic and always clever way.

I am also very influenced by people who I meet. Family, friends, strangers on the street, doesn't matter. I guess the way my head works is that I'm an observer who then stores what I see, sense or assume, and then pull it out when needed.

My influences have changed over the years as I've discovered new writers, like Louise Penny and Ellen Hart. It's exciting to read a writer whose work you're unfamiliar with, just to see what they're doing and discover unique new perspectives. My favourite recent find was the UK writer Paul Magrs, who has created one of the most unexpected and unique sleuthing duos I've seen in a long while.

- 2) What do you like to read?

Years ago I read quite widely, in many genres, from mystery to biographies to science fiction, fantasy, and even some romance. I think this eclectic interest is evident in my own books which, although primarily considered mysteries, include many other aspects like travel, humour, in depth character development, and romance. Today, as I meet more and more mystery writers and colleagues whose works I like to keep up with, I sometimes find it has been months since I've read anything other than a mystery novel.

It is difficult to chose, but some of my favourites today include Louise Penny, Gail Bowen, Ellen Hart, Neil Plakcy, John Grisham, Alexander McCall Smith, Katherine V. Forrest, Kathy Reichs.

- 3) Where do you write? When? Is there a particular time of day that you find works best for your writing?

I write in my home in what is quite nearly my dream office. A couple years after beginning to write the Russell Quant series I reconfigured a space in my home that is at the end of a quiet, private hallway at one far end of the house. The desk faces a large, glass, sliding door that overlooks my backyard, with a (rather popular) birdbath, some overgrown mugho pines, and a small bistro table in prominent view. I am very influenced by nature and weather in my writing—it appears often in the books—and so I love being able to look out and see it as I write. The problem comes when I've written a scene that takes place during a raging prairie winter snow storm—then find myself editing galleys of the scene several months later during a hot and muggy August afternoon.

I think as a result of my business background, I have always treated my writing time similar to any other normal working week (with some tweaks and a great deal more flexibility, granted). I work Monday to Friday (only occasionally on the weekend—if deadline or inspiration strike), and usually begin early, somewhere between 6:30 and 7:30 a.m. My writing day will end early to mid afternoon, with few breaks in between. One of the greatest adjustments that I, and others, had to make to this new life as a writer was that I no longer really “did lunch.” Friends would want me to meet them for a bite, but it no longer worked for me. In my particular writing groove, to take an hour or more out of my writing time to go somewhere for lunch would derail my momentum for the day.

- 4) What was the best piece of advice you received as a writer? What advice would you pass on to writers just starting out?

The answers to both questions are the same:

1. Keep on writing.
2. Be involved.
3. Write what you know.

#1 came in handy after I'd written my first book. I had completed my opus (in my mind), had submitted it to every agent, publisher, editor, and person willing to read it, that I could find. Then what? The answer: Keep on writing. So I began writing another book—just for practice—while I waited for the multi-million dollar publishing contract to show up in the mailbox. As it turned out, it was the “practice” book, *Amuse Bouche*, which ended up being the first book I published. The “opus” is still sitting in a drawer somewhere.

#2 means, get to know your industry, do your research, meet people who can help you or encourage you or teach you. Very early in my career I joined the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild (SWG) and several other local, national, and international writing groups. The most powerful experience I had as a newbie writer was attending my first ever annual

SWG conference. I remember calling home after the first day and saying something like: I'm finally with people like me. Not only did I learn a lot about my craft, I felt part of a community, and that is a wonderful thing. I now sit on the boards of the Crime Writers of Canada and the International Association of Crime Writers, as well as volunteer for various other committees. It's good to take, greater to give back.

#3 goes back to the experience I talked about in #1. My opus was an international thriller. The book I actually sold was much closer to what I actually knew about and experienced, about Saskatchewan, about travelling. I wrote what I knew and it showed in the realism of the book.

In talking with other writers, there is one more bit of advice I like to give. And that is: Marketing is important. You can write the best book in the world, but if no one knows about it, you won't sell any. Several months ago I presented on this topic at the SWG conference, and if anyone is interested in what I call the Five Cs of Marketing, a copy of the presentation appears in both the SWG freelance magazine and on my blog.

- 5) I've noticed a number of science fiction references, among the numerous popular culture references, in your books. Have you ever thought about writing something other than mysteries?

Absolutely. I'd like to try a children's book, or a fantasy, or even just a different mystery series. The problem is time. For the most part, since *Amuse Bouche*, I've been releasing a new book every year. This involves not only the planning, conceptualizing, researching and writing of the book, but also a large chunk of time is spent on the substantive and copy editing phases, and development of the final product that ends up on the shelves, including cover concepts, back cover blurbs, that type of thing. In between all that, I spend a lot of time on the aforementioned marketing. Not only for the new book coming out, but for the past books already out there. I really have been focused on expanding my readership in Canada and breaking into the US market. I spend a fair bit of time travelling, on book tour, attending conferences, working with media and marketing professionals. It's a bit along the line of a short term pain, long term gain type of strategy.

As some of my readership will have noticed, the time between the last Russell Quant book, *Sundowner Ubuntu*, and this newest release, *Aloha, Candy Hearts*, was longer than normal—eighteen months rather than the usual twelve. In actuality, I had planned a twenty-four month break, just to give me some time to start playing around with some new book ideas. But it was difficult to stay away from Russell, and the writing of *Aloha, Candy Hearts* went so well, we were able to pull it into production six months earlier than expected.

- 6) Agatha Christie was famously tired of Hercule Poirot long before she stopped writing him, do you ever think you'll ever get tired of writing Russell?

I learned a long time ago to never say never. Today, I can't imagine ever getting completely tired of Russell Quant. I can imagine writing to a less stringent schedule than

a book a year. Just having this extra six months between the fifth and sixth books was a good experience, in part because I was very happy to be writing about Russell again when the time came. And the reinvigoration was such that I immediately jumped into book seven. Sometimes a time-out can be the best thing.

- 7) Could you tell us something about Russell that only you know, something that hasn't made it into a book, or into a book yet?

If you had asked me this several years ago, I'd have had a long list of things to tell you (but I probably wouldn't have because I hate to ruin a surprise). But I am finding as the series matures, an interesting thing is happening. Somewhere along the line it becomes less about what I as the author tell the character to do (or be) and more about what the character tells me about himself (herself) which I then reveal to the readers. In that way, Russell has become more "real" to me. And his character—along with several of the other main subsidiary characters in the series—has become so full and well-defined, that he begins to take over some of the writing process.

I think many writers have had the experience where they've written a scene for a character and found it just doesn't work. You battle with the scene until you realize that there is no fixing it. The character has basically told you: Uh-uh, I ain't doing that. I find that, albeit frustrating at times, very very cool.

This happened to me very recently in the first blushes of outlining book seven. I was very sure I knew what was going to happen in Russell's love life. I was wrong. But that's for the readers to find out about next year.

- 8) I love the humour in your books, especially Russell's internal monologues. Does writing humour come easily or is it something you really have to work on?

This is weird for me because when people ask me how much of Russell Quant is Anthony Bidulka, the one thing I always say is that Russell is much funnier than I am. And it is true. It's one of those mysterious things that happens in the writing process. I'll be writing a scene and these internal dialogues or crazy sayings just pop out. I'll sit back and think, where the heck did that come from? I've never said that or even thought it in my head. It's all Russell, and thankfully it tends to come quite easily to him.

- 9) Russell's work takes him on fantastic trips around the world and it is clear from the authenticity of your writing voice that you've done extensive research into his destinations. Have you traveled to all of the places you've sent Russell to? If you have, which comes first the trip or the story? Do you travel first and then think hey, this would be a great place for Russell to tussle (I couldn't resist the rhyme) with bad guys or do you come up with a plot and then think, "I really should go to Spain, Africa, France, Hawaii etc. to research this"?

I have been to all of Russell's locations with the exception of one. In terms of which comes first, the travel or the story, I've come full circle on my thoughts on this. Several

years ago I would have proclaimed that of course the story comes first, after all I am a story teller. The travel is simply a device to further the story or add an interesting context to enhance the story telling.

But then I got to thinking about books like *Tapas on the Ramblas*. This book takes place almost entirely on a Mediterranean cruise which mimics all the ports of call on my own cruise in that part of the world. And I recall being on that cruise and thinking: this would be a fun place for Russell to tussle (good rhyme!). And then there is book number seven which takes place in the Middle East. I honeymooned in the Middle East just last year. So it began to seem to me that in some cases the trip came before the story.

But alas, I think this is not true after all. I look at books like *Sundowner Ubuntu*. Again I had travelled to Africa. But the story was one I'd developed years ago and had put away for future use. It only fit when I considered Africa as a potential location for a Quant book. The travel fit the story, not the opposite. In the end, I think the story—the mystery—has to be at the core of a good book. In my case, the two are very closely tied together, but the story telling can always exist without the travel.

10) Do you now, or have you ever, owned a pair of “wonderpants”?

Absolutely.

The wonderpants were first mentioned in *Amuse Bouche*, the first book in the series—another one of those Russell-isms that just came out of his mouth. But I have to say, of almost anything I've written, the wonderpants have been commented on and asked about the most. From Saskatoon to San Antonio, Texas, from Winnipeg to Washington, DC people want to know about the wonderpants or tell me about their wonderpants. It's become one of those things that so many people can relate to. Everyone it seems has their own version of wonderpants.

11) Finally, I know there has been talk about a Russell Quant television series, how is that going? Will we be seeing Russell, Barbra and Brutus on the small screen sometime in the near future?

Wouldn't that be fun? To be honest I don't know the answer to that. Although the series is still currently under option, I fear the recent slump in the economy and reversals of fortunes in the media world have perhaps derailed the possibility in the near future. But I am an optimist and hope springs eternal that we may someday see Russell and the gang on screen. In the meantime, I do know that there are more wonderful adventures, exotic locations, loves and losses and big living to enjoy on the pages of upcoming Russell Quant books.

I truly find it a joy to write these books, and I hope readers find that joy in the reading of them.