



## **An unknown Quant-ity**

Is Canadian television ready for a series about a gay detective in Saskatoon, with a great wardrobe and two schnauzers? The project could soon be in the works, writes Paul Gessell.

**Paul Gessell**

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Russell Quant is a private detective in Saskatoon who chases both the bad guys and the cute guys.

And he may be coming to a television near you.

The folks who created the hit show, *Corner Gas*, are in talks with CTV to launch another series set in Saskatchewan, this one involving a gay detective in Saskatoon.

The 13 hour-long episodes, tentatively titled *Quant*, would be based on the Russell Quant

mystery novels written by Saskatoon author Anthony Bidulka, a 45-year-old former accountant who is in the running this year at the Nov. 24 Saskatchewan Book Awards for a prize accorded the province's favourite author.

The fifth and latest book in the series, *Sundowner Ubuntu*, has just been published by Insomniac Press, has hit bookstores in Canada and will invade the American market next spring.

Toronto-based Breakthrough Films, creator of such Showcase programs as *Paradise Falls* and *Kenny Vs. Spenny*, first approached Bidulka two years ago about creating a television series involving the fictional gay detective.

Vérité Films, the Corner Gas powerhouse based in Regina, was brought on board. The two film companies have since signed a deal with CTV to develop the series.

"My understanding is that the next step, over the next several months, will be in the hands of CTV-approved writers developing a script for how the show might look," says Bidulka. "At that point, CTV will be approached again with the idea and will either accept or deny the project for a pilot."

Bidulka is excited, even though the project could still fall through.

"At this point, I'm thrilled that CTV saw enough merit in the books and idea behind the Russell Quant character to take us to this new level. I have no idea whether or not this will amount to a whole hill of beans but I have fingers crossed and am enjoying the journey."

Saskatchewan is not just enjoying an economic boom these days, but a cultural one as well. It has a thriving film industry and is definitely the "in" place for Canadian television. *Corner Gas* and *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, the brainchild of Regina's WestWind Pictures, are among the top domestic shows on the tube.

So, is Canadian television ready for a gay detective with a great wardrobe and two cute schnauzers named Barbra and Brutus?

Interestingly, discussion of the prospective Quant series on the Breakthrough website does not specifically state the detective is gay. Certain code words, however, tantalize a discerning reader.

"Quant features a uniquely original detective, Russell Quant, who handles often-perilous cases with comic flair and his trademark sense of style," the website says.

"Set in Saskatoon, Quant turns the prairies a lighter shade of noir. Quant is a co-production with Vérité Films. Thirteen one-hour episodes are being developed."

This coyness about the gay issue does not mean Quant's homosexuality is a problem, Bidulka says.

"I believe in my conversations with them (the television series developers), quite the

opposite. That's the selling feature."

There have even been discussions about whether Quant should be married -- to a man, that is. Same-sex marriage is legal, after all, and apparently widely accepted.

In the books, Quant is a swinging single who tracks down murderers, has loads of eccentric friends, worries about his weight and age and is prone to self-deprecating humour.

Generally, Bidulka describes Quant as "the first, perhaps only, half-Ukrainian, half-Irish, gay, ex-farm boy, ex-cop, world-travelling, Canadian, Saskatchewan prairie, private detective being written about anywhere."

The author deliberately keeps physical details about Quant vague in the books because he wants readers to create their own mental image of the detective. But Bidulka did say he sees Quant as attractive, of average height and weight, with sandy-blond hair and bluish-green eyes.

"I don't want him to be a super-macho, super-sexy person."

Instead, Bidulka wants people to be able to "relate" to Quant.

How would Quant look on television?

Initial suggestions from Breakthrough would be that Quant could be a character physically similar to the very macho British actor Clive Owen (King Arthur, Elizabeth: The Golden Age).

"That is so much not who I thought Russell would be," says Bidulka.

More than half of Bidulka's book sales are in the United States. Many of those are from on-line sales. Independent bookstores generally sell more than the big chains.

In Ottawa, David Rimmer, owner of the gay bookstore After Stonewall, says Bidulka is his best-selling author. His first shipment of Sundowner Ubuntu contained 50 books.

"I'll sell those in a week," Rimmer said.

The books have a noticeable following among gay men and older women, Rimmer says. His own 80-year-old mother once lined up for more than an hour to get Bidulka's autograph.

In Sundowner Ubuntu, Quant is hired by a Saskatoon woman to track down her long-lost son. The job takes Quant to southern Africa and considerable danger.

Like the other Quant mysteries, Sundowner is more entertaining than literary. The books are of the type usually described as perfect for a day at the beach.

Norman Dahl, a retired editor-translator in Gatineau, is one of Bidulka's biggest fans.

Dahl likes the way Bidulka builds suspense. He enjoys all the quirky characters and praises

the author for not "pushing" a gay agenda.

"I wouldn't call them gay novels."

And that's the way Bidulka wants his books to be seen.

"They are not books about being gay," the author says. "They're books with gay characters."

And if all goes according to plans, those gay characters will be in your living room one day.

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