

1. What for you, starts the process? What started the process for this book? Was it an incident? a bit of history? a chance remark?

Many times the actual genesis of an idea for a book is a mystery to me. Or, perhaps, there are too many influences for me to pinpoint which one started me on the scent of a new book's storyline. I would guess that seed of an idea often comes from something that has made an impression on me without my even knowing it at the time. I am very much influenced by people, places, travel, or even something as simple as the unique inflection in someone's speech, or how they dress or wear their hair. Someone will tell me a story, I'll read a newspaper article, I'll see something (or someone) in my everyday life, and I'll think, huh, that's interesting. Or maybe it's something from my past experiences that has stuck with me or influenced me. The way my brain seems to work, is that I store these things, happenings, people, tales, somewhere in the back of my head where they percolate and, thankfully, pop out when I need them.

Part of my process when it comes time to conceptualize a new book has a lot to do with my view of the kind of books I write. My mysteries are not police procedurals or thrillers, nor are they traditional cozies. I like to think of them as traditional with a twist. The first book in this series, *Amuse Bouche*, is a good example of this. We've all heard tales of the 'runaway bride'. There have been movies made on the topic. In coming up with a story for the first book, I thought: wouldn't it be curious to write about a 'runaway groom' instead. *Twist*. Then I thought, what if the spouse the runaway groom left at the altar was another groom. *Twist*. And then: let's make the detective investigating the case gay. *Twist*. Let's make him a Canadian prairie boy. *Twist*. Let's send him cavorting to some exotic location many readers may not be familiar with. *Twist*. And things just flowed from there.

With the new book, *Aloha, Candy Hearts*, the idea of using a treasure hunt as a device to propel the mystery really came from my childhood. I loved treasure hunts as a kid, reading about them or being on one. Writing this book was a pure joyful expression of that childhood attraction converted into adult mystery form. This fit together very well with my desire for this book to feature Saskatoon a little more than I usually do. In *Aloha, Candy Hearts*, I depart from my usual structure where my detective, Russell Quant, begins in his hometown of Saskatoon, travels somewhere exotic for further adventure, then ends up back in Saskatoon to wrap things up. Instead, in this book, Russell begins and ends in the exotic location of Oahu, Hawaii, but the entire middle of the book takes place in Saskatoon. I did this flip for a number of reasons, one of which is: Home is where the heart is. This book also focuses on Russell's romantic life, his "candy heart", and indeed, both Russell's home and heart are definitely in Saskatoon.

2. You do an excellent job of balancing character, plot, back story, sub plots. Do you outline? Do you lay out your plot before you begin to write? Do you keep notes of what has happened in the subplots of previous books in the series?

I am an extensive outliner. With each book I prepare three separate outlines. The first is the 'mystery outline' or the 'whodunit' outline. Here I outline what the crime is, who committed it, why, and how

Russell will figure it out. At its core, this is a mystery series. Even though I deal a lot with non-traditional mystery genre material, the mystery is key. It must be compelling. It must make sense. It must be satisfying.

The second outline is the 'character' outline. Russell and all of the cast (there are about six to eight main recurring characters) have a full history (basically their lives before we first met them in *Amuse Bouche*). Moving forward in the series, I like to treat the characters as if they continue to live lives in between each book. Just because I wasn't writing about them, doesn't mean things aren't happening to them. So with each new book, I look at each character individually and ask myself what has happened to them since the last time I wrote about them. This can be deaths in the family, illnesses, romances, relationships, new pets, new home, new car, new hair cut, on and on.

The third outline is the first two squished together; how do the whodunit story and the character story work together. This is the most difficult. I look for a good balance of the two. In the whole scheme of a book, one should not overshadow the other.

Once each book is finalized into a galley, I pull out the sections that relate to the development of a character (and their life in general, such as their place of work, type of car they drive, etc), and put that in their 'dossier'. So, if some time in the future I wonder about whether a character is, let's say, left-handed or right-handed, I will only have to consult the dossier rather than scour each book to find the answer. This is not an infallible process. And my readers tend to let me know if I've made a mistake. In one book, I made reference to Russell sliding open the kitchen's glass doors to his back deck. A reader wrote to tell me that in an earlier book I had indicated that the kitchen deck doors opened out and were not sliding doors, and wondered if Russell had renovated his kitchen. Isn't that wonderful?

3. Has the character of Russell Quant evolved since the first book? Has he changed as you've become better acquainted with him? Tell me about that.

Indeed. I would hope that the Russell Quant you meet in the final book – whenever that might be – will be different than the fellow we met in *Amuse Bouche* several years ago. But I wouldn't say the changes are extreme or necessarily unexpected. These are changes that everyone goes through in life.

I age my characters according to book release dates. For instance, if Russell is thirty-five in one book, and the next book came out twelve months later, in that book he'd be thirty-six. It's important to note here than many series writers do not do this. Sue Grafton's wonderful Kinsey Milhone series and Robert B. Parker's Spenser series are two examples that come to mind.

With age comes change. Like all of us, Russell is influenced by the people around him and the experiences he faces in life (inside or outside of the books). I think he'll always be a nice, witty, good-guy-to-be-a-best-friend-with person. I think he has already learned a lot about relationships, romantic and otherwise. He learns much about life in general from the powerful people in his life like Anthony and Sereena. There have already been many small changes in Russell over the first six books: how he dresses and how he relates to some of his friends, and his taste in wine. Being in the line of work that he is in, the danger can be that Russell could become adversely affected by some of the grittier aspects of being a detective. I've always thought that his optimistic nature and wit would shield him from this. But I've learned to never say never. And, as the series and the character become more mature, sometimes it is not so much about what I reveal to the reader about the character through my writing, but what the character reveals to me about themselves during the writing process.

4. Does art imitate life or does live imitate art? Might Russell's every day life (well minus the car chases and scary knifey episodes, hanging off the sides of parkades) reflect that of a typical gay man in a small prairie city?

Well, I'd first have to say that there probably is no such thing as a typical gay man. Nor a typical experience of a gay man living in a small prairie city. That being said, I absolutely believe the type of life Russell Quant lives in Saskatoon (excepting the detective bit) is one that can be lived on the prairies. Or anywhere, really. One of my favourite sayings is: Life is short, but it can be wide. The trick is: its up to us to make it wide. At the end of the day...and this, I believe, is evident in the Quant books...a wonderful, fun, fulfilling life is really not about where you live or what you have. It's about the people in your life. I recently ran a poll on my website that asked the question: What part of a Russell Quant book do you enjoy the most. Some of the options were: 'When he meets a client,' and 'When he solves the crime.' The most popular answers? 'When he's hanging out with his friends and family' and 'When he's at home alone with his dogs.'

5. I think that whenever a writer creates a book they also create hopes and dreams for that book - might be as simple as - I hope and dream this book will make a million dollars or as large as I hope and dream this book will bring peace to the entire world. What are your hopes and dreams for Aloha Candy Hearts?

You are so right about that. With every book, I feel as if I am releasing my 'literary' child to the world. I've done all I can for it, and the time has come for it to go out in the world on its own. I will be there to help (promote) it, but I hope people will treat it well and enjoy it and that it will be successful.

With each book in the series thus far, I've had very specific goals and business targets in mind. But all that business stuff aside, I really hope that people will accept and read and experience the book in the same way it was written. With joy. A recent email from a reader summed it up very nicely. She told me that she would always remember with great fondness the experience of reading Aloha, Candy Hearts: on the deck in her back yard, on a warm sunny Sunday afternoon, her pooches at her feet, a beverage in hand, smile on her face, and lots of chores that could wait for another day. I love that.