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Focusing on mysteries with spirit of place

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Murder Most Foul–In Saskatoon?: Anthony Bidulka’s Crime Novels

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Today’s guest at *Scene of the Crime* is Canadian author Anthony Bidulka, creator of the Russell Quant series set in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, as well as various locales around the world. As New York’s *Mystery Scene Magazine* noted, “Quant makes for a riveting hero...the kind you want to have–unless you’re a killer.”

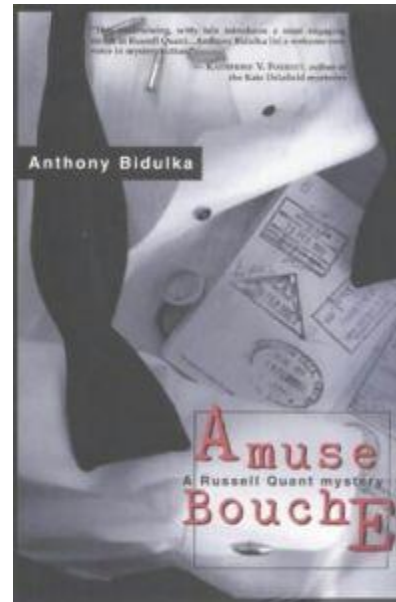
Bidulka is the winner of Lambda Literary Award and a two-time finalist for an Arthur Ellis Award. Bidulka’s series, which began in 2003 with *Amuse Bouche*, is seven strong with the 2010 addition, *Date with a Sheesha*, set partly in the Middle East. Toronto’s *Globe & Mail* felt that “Bidulka has created a clever series that has loads of charm and wit.”

Anthony, thanks much for joining us on *Scene of the Crime*. I love the short bio from your homepage:

“Anthony Bidulka has enjoyed time well-spent and misspent in the worlds of academia, accounting, footwear, food services and farming. In 1999 Anthony Bidulka, BA, BEd, BComm, CA left a decade long career as a Chartered Accountant to pursue writing.”
Good career choice.

Could we start with a description of your connection to Saskatoon and Saskatchewan?

My main character, Russell Quant, lives, as do I, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. Although I was born in a nearby farming community, I've lived in Saskatoon for the past nearly thirty years. I came to Saskatoon to attend University, obtain a degree, and begin a career (not, initially, in writing). As a young man, I might have thought that I, as so many others did at the time, would likely eventually move to a bigger, beautiful, exciting city. But by time the opportunities arose, I'd fallen in love with this prairie city, realizing I already was in a big (ish), beautiful, exciting city.



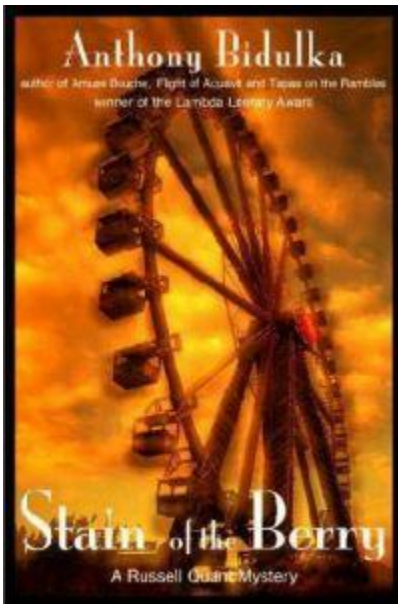
What things about Saskatoon make it unique and a good physical setting in your books?



The fact that a great majority of my readers have never heard of Saskatoon before, or if they have, don't really know where it is, or how life is lived here, presents me, as a writer, with a great opportunity. For most of us, we grew up with stories told in books, movies, and on TV, that were mostly based in places like Paris, Los Angeles, Rome, New York City. But Saskatoon? Almost never. So, from my perspective, it's like having a fresh canvas on which to draw. I treat Saskatoon like it's the new foreign, exotic location. Dubai? Nah. Morocco? Heard all about it. Saskatoon? Now, there's someplace I haven't heard about before. I'd originally assumed that the most unique – and therefore intriguing – thing about my character, compared to so many of the other PIs out there, was that he was gay. As it turns out, that wasn't entirely

accurate. So many of my readers are saying, yeah, yeah, so he's gay, but he lives *where*? What kind of place is Saskatoon? What's that about? How does he survive there?

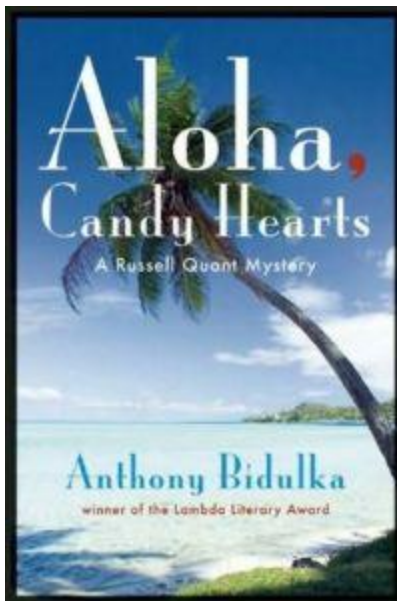
Did you consciously set out to use Saskatoon as a “character” in your books, or did this grow naturally out of the initial story or stories?



I don't know that I was initially conscious of having the city as a character, but it quickly evolved into one. As soon as the first book came out, Saskatoon was something people wanted to know more about. Of those who did have some idea of where it was, many had wild misconceptions about what life in a place like this would be like. When I conceptualized this series, I fell back on “write what you know”. I knew about life in a small, prairie city. I also thought about how to distinguish these books in a competitive field. Setting a mystery in Saskatoon certainly did that.

How do you incorporate location in your fiction? Do you pay overt attention to it in certain scenes, or is it a background inspiration for you?

There will be times when I come across a location in the city – for instance the trailer park in *Stain of the Berry*, Innovation Place Research Park in *Amuse Bouche*, the old Sanatorium site in *Aloha, Candy Hearts* – and I'll think to myself: this would be a great location to write about. I'll file it and if an opportunity arises, I will use it. But I don't recall an instance where I've consciously written a scene because I wanted to include a specific location in the city. The story comes first, the location next.



On the other hand, there are certain scenes in my books where location plays a much bigger part than in others. Where I pay close attention to description of the surroundings, the smells, the weather, the foliage, that sort of thing. In those instances, I really feel the location is a key ingredient to the recipe for how I want my reader to experience that particular scene. When I want them to really BE there, I use a lot of location type markers.

A big part of my series revolves around the fact that my protagonist, Russell Quant, always spends part of his investigation travelling somewhere else in the world. He's been places like Africa, France, Spain. These are conscious decisions, but somehow or other, I must feel that the sensibility of the location fits the story. For instance, the story in *Aloha, Candy Hearts*

is lighter and more romantic, and fits the Hawaiian locale nicely. The same story would not have fit so well with a Middle Eastern locale as a base.

How does Russell Quant interact with his surroundings?

Again, like me, Russell Quant was born in a farming community, and moved to Saskatoon as a young man to pursue higher education and a career. Similarly, both Russell and I love the city and its people. As such, I think there is much joy infused into my writing about Saskatoon and its people (even if some of them are murderers and miscreants).

Has there been any local reaction to your works?

Many of my readers and reviewers have mentioned how wonderful they perceive Saskatoon to be, because of how it is portrayed in these books. The *London Free Press* said: “His characters [have] the happy side effect of making Saskatoon an intriguingly lively spot on the map.”

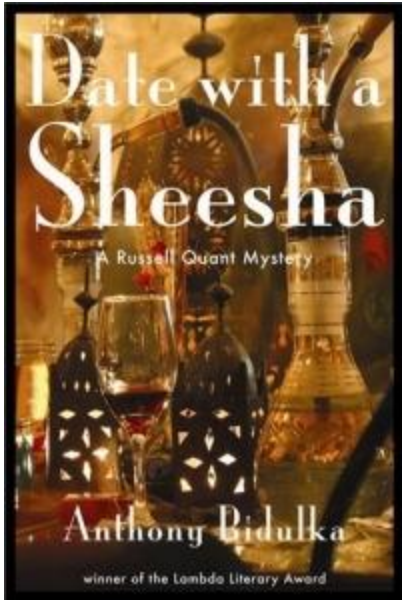
This past summer, two readers who had never visited Saskatchewan before, decided to visit for a week, based on their love of the books and Russell’s hometown. As it turns out, I was hosting a small party while they were in town, to which I invited them. They were delightful, and from all accounts greatly enjoyed their visit. On another occasion, the phone rang – rather early – on a Sunday morning. It was another reader who was in town, wanting to know the address of Colourful Mary’s (a fictional restaurant I often write about).

Have you ever made any goofs in depicting your location or time period? Please share—the more humorous the better (we all have).

Not so much goofs, but more a bit of a reputation for causing the downfall of businesses! On more than one occasion, a business I’ve mentioned in a book has ceased to exist by the publication date. There is a scene in one book where Russell is being chased down a busy street in Vancouver. To set his place, I name a number of the businesses he runs by. By time I launched the book, over half were gone!

In *Stain of the Berry*, a young woman falls from her high rise apartment balcony. I wanted the building to be a real building in Saskatoon, but because of the grisly circumstance, I decided the apartment number (which I needed to mention as part of the story) should be made up. I did my research and came up with a bogus apartment. Even at that, I thought the chances of someone from that particular building (or section of the building) reading this particular book was remote. Well, low and behold, at the Saskatoon launch of the book, a man comes through the signing line and announces that the woman jumped from *his* exact apartment balcony. Fortunately he was thrilled about it.

Of the Russell Quant novels, do you have a favorite book or scene that focuses on the place?



Both *Flight of Aquavit* and *Aloha, Candy Hearts* contain some lovely pieces about Saskatoon/Saskatchewan. *Flight of Aquavit* was the book that first attracted the production company that had the series under Film Rights Option for a while – specifically because one of the principals loved the scene where the bad guys try to dispose of Russell by loading him into a grain truck and dumping him in the country in the middle of a raging Saskatchewan winter blizzard. To him it was an ultimate Saskatchewan type of scene. One that wouldn't happen in Miami or Toronto or almost anywhere else. *Aloha, Candy Hearts* in part, revolves around a treasure hunt that has Russell visiting some very unique Saskatoon locations, and digging into some of the city's history. It was a nice showcase for the city. In terms of other locations, I am particularly fond of the descriptive scenes of the African desert in *Sundowner Ubuntu*, southern France in *Amuse Bouche*, and Barcelona in *Tapas on the Ramblas*.

Who are your favorite writers, and do you feel that other writers influenced you in your use of the spirit of place in your novels?

I am a big fan of writers like Gail Bowen, Louise Penny, Vicki Delany, Greg Herren, Neil Plakcy, John Grisham, Frances Mayes, Ellen Hart, and I could go on – all writers who very solidly and skillfully put you in a certain place – be in Quebec countryside, New Orleans, the deep south, France – and never let you forget where you are.

What's next for Russell?

The newest book, just out this month (April) in Canada, and fall 2010 in the US, sees Russell Quant on a journey to Arabia. It is loosely based, in part, on my recent travels to that part of the world, as well as an ode to those great exotic tales of my youth, like *Sinbad of the Seven Seas* and *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* – done Russell Quant style.

Thanks again, Anthony, for taking the time to talk with *Scene of the Crime*.

For more information on Anthony Bidulka and his novels, see his [homepage](#).