

Books: Date with a Sheesha - Anthony Bidulka

GENRE FICTION / Russell Quant, from Saskatoon to Saudi Arabia

James K Moran / Toronto / Thursday, August 12, 2010

Queer Saskatoon author Anthony Bidulka pits private investigator Russell Quant against his seventh mystery, characteristically mixing the hilarious with the angst-ridden.

Although Quant's adventures unfold in exotic locales, Bidulka typically opens them in Saskatoon. In a city not renowned for intrigue, the endearing, overbearingly human Quant finds himself consistently entertaining predicaments.

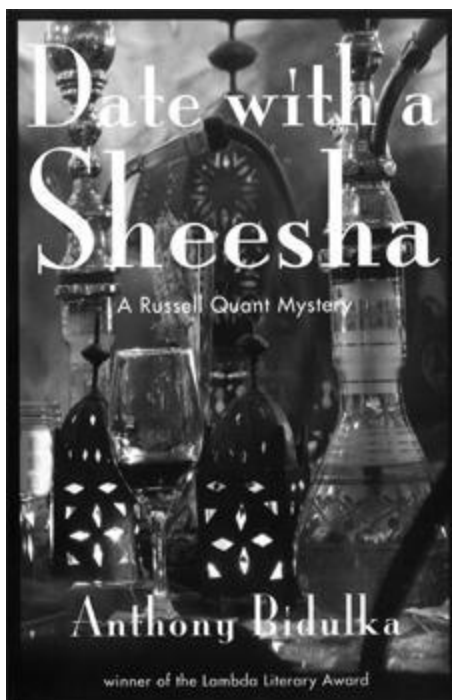
Consider, for instance, that Quant must buck up and tell his boyfriend, Ethan, that he will soon fly overseas. He butters Ethan up with a glass of shiraz by a glowing fireplace as marinated salmon cooks in the background.

Like Ethan, readers can savour these details that make Bidulka's novels run smoothly, in which he often contrasts creature comforts with the sleuth's emotional discomfort. While Quant owns a new Mazda5 minivan, he's mildly troubled that his 69-year-old mother owns one, too. And, although he sips herbal tea in the hot tub, Quant is actually procrastinating over talking to Ethan about a new case.

Prava Gupta has asked him to investigate the murder of his son in Dubai, which Prava suspects was related to Neil's being queer. Prava sends Quant on a journey that involves camel-riding, posh nightclubs, the gay underground scene and glitzy architecture, immersing him in a society where being gay is a crime. In turn, Quant realizes he takes the freedom to be openly gay for granted.

At Ethan's insistence, Quant wears a wedding band to pass as straight in his travels, which include Saudi Arabia, but this façade barely keeps his admirers at bay, such as when he is caught in a tug-of-war between two studs at a nightclub. As the plot unrolls, Quant suspects that Neil was actually murdered because of his connections in the antique carpet business. While this topic may present a cure for insomnia for certain readers, references to the trade, including the Pazyryk Carpet, are mercifully short.

Faced with the unenviable task of reading carpet textbooks, Quant quips, "They reminded me of cramming for university exams, an activity I liked less than throwing up and probably only a little more than getting crabs ? another reminder of university." With such wit, Quant dives into one mess after another, a big lug in a larger whodunit.



Quant investigates the murder of a gay man in Dubai in Date with a Sheesha. Hilarious moments include his attempt to command a camel, spoiling an epically cinematic moonlit chase scene in the desert.

The sleuth's delightfully difficult friends and family from previous adventures return, lecturing him when he least wants, including his overbearing Ukrainian mother, retail store owner Anthony and the ever-enigmatic Sereena Orion Smith. His overseas escapade is colourful and the mystery is complex, featuring an array of suspects.

While solving the mystery, Quant grapples with questions of friends, family and the meaning of love. For the Saskatoon segments, Bidulka wisely employs the coldest winter months as a character in itself, a contrast to the detective's warm heart. Quant, even in his darkest trials, tries to be good.

Despite his bumbling, he proves his mettle in the end, ultimately enduring a heart-wrenching kicker. Suffice to say that the lovable sleuth is surrounded by far more support than he perceives, including readers lucky enough to have followed him, and his tightly fitting "wonderpants," since book one.

Date with a Sheesha
A Russell Quant Mystery
Anthony Bidulka
\$20, Insomniac Press

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