

STAIN OF THE BERRY
A Russell Quant Mystery

Anthony Bidulka
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By Drewey Wayne Gunn

The fourth Russell Quant novel reveals Anthony Bidulka still exploring and developing his lively talent. Here, in a bold and unusual move, the author has intertwined two mysteries with no intersection between them and has played daring games with each. One is the case his openly gay Saskatoon private investigator is hired to investigate: did Tanya Culinare kill herself, or was she murdered? This case seems to venture initially into the supernatural and involves more than a bit of sleight of hand on the part of the author. The other mystery is a private one that began in the earlier novels and promises to spill over into later works: what is the truth about Sereena Orion Smith, Russell's neighbor who disappeared in the previous novel? This mystery carries us into the sphere of Shangri-La in a dreamlike episode on an Arctic island. Reading *Stain of the Berry* is an unsettling experience.

The main case presents an intriguing set of problems. Tanya Culinare has leapt to her death from her apartment's balcony. Her parents and brother are convinced she was not the type to kill herself; they hire Russell to find out what happened. His investigation quickly uncovers the fact that her former lover earlier drowned, fully clothed, in a swimming pool back in her hometown, where she had fled. Both women claimed a Boogeyman was after them; both received a one-word message from an unknown source: "Boo." Upon being sent an unexpected photograph of the members of a GLBT choir in which the two

women sang, Russell realizes intuitively that it holds the key to the mystery. He begins interviewing the choir members, who come from many different walks of life, and discovers they all have been suffering similar harassment. Why are they being singled out? And who in the photograph is lying and is actually the perpetrator? Bidulka is at his finest in his depictions of ordinary life in his corner of Saskatchewan: Russell's engagement with the various ethnic groups that settled there, their restaurants, their entertainments, and the little corners where they congregate resonates in the reader's memory.

This novel is the most complex in the series. In the third one, *Tapas on the Ramblas*, Russell reached a new stage in his emotional growth. In the present work his private world is tested much harder. He regains a relative, only to learn the person will be snatched away from him again and that he must never reveal what has happened. His integrity and grit are almost immediately tested when first a dear friend and then he himself are attacked by the villain. Though suffering from all these emotional and physical wounds, Russell also gains the possibility of a romance. While celebrating his 35th birthday, he falls for another man. But does this person feel the same attraction to Russell? Each of the four novels has a reference to food in its title. Until this novel, the smorgasbord Bidulka offers readers has been fairly lightweight. Here, however, even though he serves only berries, the stain they leave is painful. As a result of the emotional burdens placed upon Russell, one can only anticipate much stronger fare ahead.

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