

Detecting Gayness

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Sundowner Ubuntu by Anthony Bidulka. Insomniac Press. 286 pages, \$15.95.

The continued popularity of detective fiction is due in large part to the genre's preoccupation with metaphysical matters. In a world that is morally dark and murky, the detective is called upon to sift through seemingly random clues and uncover a pattern of significance. Often termed a "private eye," the detective is the one person on the scene who is able to "see" what is not immediately obvious-- to peer god-like, even, into the heart of an evil-doer. The detective is an existentialist hero, for no matter how jaded he has become by the corruption that he has witnessed, he labors Sisyphus-like to restore a moral order that he understands will invariably be shattered by still another malefactor, his next case forcing him to descend once again into the labyrinth out of which he'd only recently found his way. God may be in his heaven and all right with the world for Victorians like Robert Browning, but a godless, faithless modern world depends upon the detective to thwart the workings of injustice and to check the encroachment of chaos upon a barely stable social order.

A protagonist's homosexual orientation complicates the detective novel's metaphysics of revelation, making the detective himself an enigma, the signs of whose sexuality must be read-- or are liable to be misread--by the people with whom he comes in contact. Even as he attempts to ferret out the secrets that his suspects are hiding from him, his sexuality is a "secret" to be uncovered by them. Thus, in the case of the gay detective, it is not simply his unrelenting pursuit of the truth, but his sexuality, that puts him at odds with the heterosexual majority whose prejudices and hypocrisies he must negotiate. In the course of his investigations, for example, Joseph Hansen's ground-breaking protagonist, Dave Brandstetter, is called upon to uncover a

pornography racket, expose environmentally poisonous dumping, infiltrate a white supremacist group, and bring to justice both a wife beater and a child abuser- -that is, bring to light behaviors which a heterosexual-dominated society is conspiring to cover up in order to maintain a facade of respectability and rectitude.

Anthony Bidulka's Russell Quant novels offer an engaging variation upon the pattern established by Hansen and extended by writers like Michael Nava in the Henry Rios series and Sue Grafton in the alphabet series. Far from being marginalized by his society, Russell lives at the center of a strong circle of friends, both gay and straight, who meet regularly for drinks, celebrate each other's birthdays, and support each other in times of trial. One of the most engaging features of the series is the shifting balance of their relationships as personal crises arise among his friends to which Russell must attend while working on a case. In addition, his office is in a small complex where he shares coffee, gossip, and a receptionist with three other professionals. Thus, although he must endure his share of beatings and take part in the periodic car chase, Russell relies more upon language and his other social skills than upon intimidation and subterfuge, and is more likely to try to negotiate his way out of a tight situation with a quip than with his fists. While his sexuality is the defining element of Russell's identity, it is surprising how seldom it becomes an issue for those with whom he comes in contact.

The action of *Sundowner Ubuntu*, the fifth entry in the Russell Quant series, is set in motion when Russell is hired by a middle-aged woman named Clara Ridge to locate the son whose juvenile delinquency caused her husband to disown the boy when he was only sixteen. The recent death of her flint-hearted husband has freed her to search for Matthew, whom she has not seen or heard from in twenty years. Russell's search eventually takes him to a slum in South Africa and a game preserve in Botswana, where Matthew- - who mysteriously changed his name

and dedicated himself to teaching after serving a period of juvenile incarceration- - volunteers at an impoverished school and moonlights as an English-language translator. Russell's search is complicated when he falls in with an American photographer in Johannesburg who, unbeknownst to her, is being trailed by a detective hired by her jealous husband. Much of the delight of the novel stems from Bidulka's juxtaposition of the "local color" of the Canadian prairies (Russell's home is in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan) with the steamy, exotic grasslands of South Africa- -and by the novelist's placing in big game country a man who, in the opening scene of the novel, is rattled by having to butcher the chicken that his farm-bound mother wants to prepare for dinner in honor of his visit.

"I want a new life," Russell's friend Jared tells him early in the novel while seeking help extricating himself from his eight-year relationship with Anthony, Russell's mentor and confidant. Everyone in the novel is seeking to start over in one way or another. Russell's return to the family farm on which he was raised reminds the reader of the world he left behind in order to make a gay life for himself in the relatively large city of Saskatoon; and throughout the novel he questions where his relationship with Alex, a new boyfriend, is going. Kelley, Russell's best friend from college, reappears after having abandoned her lesbian partner in the wake of a breast cancer crisis. Cassandra, the photographer whom Russell meets on the plane to South Africa, proves to have been seeking in the exotic bush a momentary respite from the pedestrian marriage to which, when Russell last sees her, she is returning like a wild animal forced into a cage. And Matthew Ridge, the subject of Russell's search, proves to have renamed and dedicated himself to serving the disadvantaged as penance for having brutally "fag bashed" and nearly killed a fellow high school student in an attempt to repress his burgeoning awareness of his own homosexuality.

Russell's laid-back personality invests the formulaically tense situations with comic

relief. Under pressure, Russell quips silently to himself (and, indirectly, to the reader)- -as, for example, when he has to board an African commuter plane no bigger than a crop duster. “I’m okay with planes but not when they weigh less than I do. I like big planes. The bigger the better. Somehow, for me, when it comes to aircraft, size does matter.” And Bidulka parodies the classic car chase when an exasperated Russell and Cassandra flee across the border from South Africa to Botswana in a locally built automobile that cannot go more than 35 mph, pursued by a gunman in a similarly limited vehicle, making for a lethal chase in two putt-putt cars.

But the moral seriousness of the novel is suggested by the title. *Ubuntu* is an African word meaning humanity that comes from community: “I am what I am because of who we all are.” Russell is moved to discover that South African tribal culture is founded upon a sense that “no bad deed against anyone is perpetrated without consequence, otherwise all bad deeds against humanity will flourish.” As the mystery unfolds, Russell figures out that a series of vicious attacks on the witnesses whom he contacts is the residual result of Matthew’s adolescent act of violence: unable to forgive the attack that tragically altered his life, Matthew’s victim resurrects and pursues his vendetta in adulthood. But, Bidulka implies, Matthew’s dedication as a teacher and his gentleness as an adult male are also the results of that act. In the novel’s climactic scene, Russell and Matthew are saved, ironically, by the loyalty of Russell’s dog, who has a personality as sharply drawn across the novels as that of any of the human characters. In the novel’s most moving instance of *ubuntu*, Russell’s affectionate care of the dog has created a bond stronger than the fear that generated, and the hatred that resulted from, Matthew’s adolescent homophobia. That Russell should be saved by an animal while on a case that has thrust him into a world where Westerners callously kill big game for sport is rich cosmic, rather than comic, irony.

In the novel's concluding scene, their friends crowd into Russell and Alex's bedroom to welcome the latter home after he has been released from the hospital. Russell's local community proves as joyous as the one he discovered in the slums of South Africa, in which people silently and unobtrusively mobilize to protect a member in danger. The philosophy of *ubuntu*, Russell was told, allowed the black community to survive apartheid. South African apartheid and North American homophobia prove two sides of the same coin. Russell's community of friends bears witness against the negative *ubuntu* of Matthew Ridge's adolescent gay self-hatred.