



## Bidulka, Anthony (b. 1962)

by Raymond-Jean Frontain

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Lambda Award-winning novelist Anthony Bidulka is the author of the Russell Quant detective series, which thus far includes eight titles: *Amuse Bouche* (2003), *Flight of Aquavit* (2004), *Tapas on the Ramblas* (2005), *Stain of the Berry* (2006), *Sundowner Ubuntu* (2007), *Aloha, Candy Hearts* (2009), *Date with a Sheesha* (2010), and *Dos Equis* (2012).

Quant is a private investigator who lives in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, but whose cases lead him to such comparatively exotic locales as the south of France, a luxury hotel in Manhattan, a fortress-like chateau in the Arctic, a cruise ship stopping in ports around the western Mediterranean, an African game preserve, Waikiki Beach, the sand dunes of Saudi Arabia, and Mexico's Costa Grande.

Much of the comic pleasure of the series comes from challenges presented by the larger world that disrupt Russell's otherwise parochial life as a no-longer-young gay man on the Canadian prairie. The eagerness with which he embraces the finer things in life is suggested by the gustatory metaphor contained in each novel's title.

As in the *noir* tradition, Bidulka's narratives are told in the detective's own voice. But unlike the somber, world-weary voice of the iconic Sam Spade, or of Joseph Hansen's groundbreaking gay insurance claims investigator Dave Brandstetter, Russell's is chatty, and occasionally even campy. While forced to endure his share of the physical altercations that come with his profession, he is more likely to negotiate danger with a quip than with his fists.

As a result, Bidulka's detective offers a significant departure from his generic counterparts. "Life is short, but it can be wide," Bidulka is fond of saying. And Russell is more likely to question the hindrances that people create to their own enjoyment of life than resign himself to negotiating the dark side of human nature. It is his emotional buoyancy that saves the day, not his hard-boiled cynicism or fire power.

### Biography

Born July 24, 1962 (the same birth date that he has given his protagonist), Anthony Bidulka was raised as the youngest of three children on a farm outside of Prud'homme, Saskatchewan.

Portions of the Canadian plains had been settled by Ukranian immigrants, whose culture continues to be evident in the restaurants, Orthodox churches, and art and design in the province's capital, Saskatoon. Bidulka celebrates his Ukranian heritage in his novels, where the idiomatic expressions spoken by, and the meals prepared by, Russell's mother may seem as exotic to Russell's non-ethnic friends (and to the reader) as those that Russell encounters on his far-flung travels. In addition, Bidulka acknowledges the continuing presence of the native Cree people, who named Saskatchewan's principal places.

In 1980 Bidulka entered the University of Saskatchewan, initially to study optometry, but graduated in 1983 with a B.A. in psychology. Dissatisfied with his job prospects, he returned to school several times during the



Anthony Bidulka in 2007.  
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next decade, obtaining first a teaching license, then a business degree and, eventually, certification as a public accountant.

In 1999, he summoned the courage to leave a successful career as a corporate auditor and to fulfill what he terms his "boyhood dream" of writing. (In an interview he describes his adolescent attempts to write a novel by typing out what he could recall of a television program he had watched earlier.) After his first novel was rejected by a variety of publishers, he hit upon the formula which has established the popularity of the Russell Quant series.

In a committed relationship since 1991, Bidulka and his partner continue to live in Saskatoon. Their love of entertaining makes its way into Bidulka's novels, where parts of the action are played out over meals or while sipping wines that are identified with a gourmand's finesse. Their love of travel has its place as well, Anthony and his partner's vacations informing the background of Russell's cases.

### **Detective as Clown**

"Melodrama--it's just one of those things you need to pull out of your purse once in a while," Russell quips at the close of a sexually charged encounter with a suspect in *Amuse Bouche*, the first novel in the series. The comment suggests both the moral dimensions of Russell's world and the manner in which Bidulka skirts the detective novel's dark, melodramatic, and easily satirized conventions.

On each of his cases, Russell negotiates a threat to his client's happiness. In *Amuse Bouche*, for example, he is hired by a wealthy local businessman to locate the boyfriend who disappeared on the day of the commitment ceremony to which sixty of their friends and relatives had been invited.

Similarly, in *Flight of Aquavit*, a married, closeted accountant who only recently began experimenting sexually is being blackmailed, seemingly by one of his tricks. And in *Tapas on the Ramblas*, eighty-year-old lesbian millionairess Charity Wiser is convinced that a member of her extended family--and overeager heir--is trying to kill her.

The psychological ante is upped considerably in Bidulka's later novels, in which the threat is often generated from within a gay person rather than directed at him or her from without.

The action of *Stain of the Berry* is driven by an unattractive gay man who terrorizes those who ignored and unintentionally humiliated him. The novel, which additionally investigates the way in which people allow fear to take over their lives, proves the most Hitchcockian of Bidulka's efforts.

*Sundowner Ubuntu*, demonstrates how the consequences of a troubled teenager's gay self-hatred ripple outward across decades and continents.

Humor is Russell's way of defusing tension and winning people's confidence. Russell is a chatty gay man who is 31 in the first novel, and celebrates his thirty-fifth birthday in the fifth. His interior monologues offer a running commentary on his life and work. A suspect's smile is praised as "a testament to cosmetic dentistry." Another suspect gets up from a table "faster than a towel in a bathhouse," while a dead animal is as "stiff as a fag at a Chippendales [sic] show."

When an aging womanizer, oblivious to the fact that he has stumbled onto a gay cruise ship, cautions Russell's attractive lesbian companion about the sexually predatory attentions of the single young men on board, Russell's silent comment is that "the only thing any of the randy men on this boat might want from Erall would be the sequins off her dress."

And, forced to board an African commuter plane no bigger than a crop duster, Russell indulges in a nervous riff: "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."

Humor, thus, is Russell's way of puncturing delusions, of deflecting what is threatening, and of humanizing what would otherwise be alien.

In each of his novels Bidulka offers a scene that effectively undermines the conventions of a genre in which human life is cheap, women are objectified, and suspense is used to provide the reader or viewer with an adrenaline thrill.

For example, Bidulka parodies the classic car chase when a terrified Russell flees 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.

Russell nearly explodes with exasperation when he is stopped at the border to be treated to ensure that he is not inadvertently carrying hoof and mouth disease into the country. While adding to the comic incongruity of the scene, the enforced inspection unexpectedly humanizes the local farmers who, in the generic car chase, exist solely to dive for cover as the automobiles careen dangerously through their community.

Significantly, Bidulka does not hesitate to puncture Russell's own small vanities. The reader is forced to smile when Russell mentions in each novel the small refrigerator that he is inordinately proud of having incorporated into the design of his office desk.

And then there are his "famous wonderpants" that he repeatedly protests are perfect for every occasion because they never wrinkle and handsomely display his ass--but which, to his confusion, his friends forbid him to wear when going out with them. Having enjoyed a "corpulent childhood," Russell is dismayed to discover as he dresses for his thirty-fifth birthday party that his "wonderpants" have grown more tight than snug.

Russell acknowledges his own past failures when he smartly observes that "you have to get up awfully early to fool Russell Quant, PI (a second time)."

### **Saskatoon Ubuntu**

Russell's sense of humor is part of the central impulse of Bidulka's novels: the need "to recognize the moment." Humor is a way of resisting someone else's inauthenticity, and what Russell most admires in those members of an older generation who have generously mentored him--his late gay uncle, his uncle's surviving partner, and a female neighbor named Sereena who is as imperturbable as her name--is the value of recognizing and celebrating one's deepest and truest self.

*Flight of Aquavit*, the second novel in the series, offers in its title a metaphor for how Russell learns to live his life. In introducing him to a Swedish aperitif that comes in multiple flavors, Sereena models for Russell the joy of accepting in its complexity the truth of one's identity and of celebrating that moment of acceptance with a friend. Russell in turn tries to teach his client--a married closeted accountant--to do the same.

Similarly, the title of each of the other novels contains a food reference that speaks to the need of the individual to share both a meal and one's self with other people, nourishing them and being nourished by them.

Traditionally, the detective is marginalized within his community by his disgust at other people's greed and hypocrisy. But Russell is at the center of a circle of friends that includes not simply other gay men, but his lesbian best friend from college and her lover, his mysterious straight female friend and neighbor Sereena, the female professionals with whom he shares an office complex, and even the antagonistic Darren Kirsch, a snidely macho family man on the Saskatoon police force to whom Russell must periodically turn for information.

The friends prepare meals for each other, share confidences, and rely upon each other in times of crisis. Hovering over the group is Russell's mother, who lives to feed and tend to others, and a lesbian couple who operate Colourful Mary's, the local restaurant where one of the women moves from table to table attending to her guests' needs, and the other stands in the doorway of her kitchen anxiously studying the faces of the diners to make certain that they are enjoying what she has cooked.

Traditionally, 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 had only recently found his way.

In contrast, Bidulka's Russell Quant learns to identify with the concept of *ubuntu*, which a native South African translates for him as meaning "I am what I am because of who we all are." "No bad deed against anyone is perpetrated without consequence," Russell is told, "otherwise all bad deeds against humanity will flourish"--proof of which emerges in a case that links South African apartheid with an instance of Canadian homophobia.

For Bidulka, one's own humanity lies in finding a way of celebrating, not diminishing or demeaning, another person. Russell's community of friends offers a telling instance of "Saskatoon ubuntu."

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**Raymond-Jean Frontain** is Professor of English at the University of Central Arkansas. He has published widely on seventeenth-century English literature and on English adaptations of Biblical literature. He is editor of *Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture*. He is engaged in a study of the David figure in homoerotic art and literature.