

Rumpled private dick IN PRINT / Turning a stereotype on its ear in Saskatoon

Rachel Giese / Xtra / Thursday, August 18, 2005

Anthony Bidulka says that his publishing success is a textbook example of the fiction-writing-class advice to write what you know.



BLACK SOIL. Anthony Bidulka, author of the Russell Quant mysteries, has found fertile territory in his native Saskatchewan.

"My first manuscript was a thriller. I thought it was fantastic," laughs Bidulka over the phone from Saskatoon, where he lives with his partner of 13 years. "But no one was buying it. So while I waited to hear back from publishers, I entertained myself with an exercise: I wrote a book set in Saskatoon with a gay hero. And that was the one that sold."

The book was *Amuse Bouche*, first in a series of mystery novels set in the Prairies and featuring Russell Quant, an affable ex-cop turned private investigator. With his laidback demeanour and urbane taste in clothes, food and wine, the openly gay Quant turns the rumpled private dick stereotype on its ear.

"There's a really strong genre of gay mystery writing out there that seems to fall into two extremes: the serious, often political, police procedurals and the romp. Both are great, but I thought there might be room for something in the middle."

Amuse Bouche went on to be nominated for an Arthur Ellis Award for Canadian Crime Writing in 2004. The second Russell Quant mystery, *Flight Of Aquavit*, was published last year and is being optioned for film rights. A third Quant mystery is due out in October and Bidulka is working on the second draft of installment number four. Not bad for someone who didn't start writing until his late 30s after several previous careers in teaching, retail, bartending and, most recently, accounting. It was only when Bidulka saw his 40th birthday looming in the near distance that he decided to revisit his childhood ambition to write.

"I realized that if I don't chase this dream, I might never do it. And if I didn't do it, I'd regret it." Bidulka discussed his longing to write with his "extremely supportive" partner and very quickly decided to quit his job at Ernst And Young. "I left work on Friday and on Monday I was writing at my home computer. And that Monday morning I was a successful writer- just because I had taken the risk and tried. It really didn't matter whether I was ever published. It felt like a success just to write."

Success of a more material kind quickly followed. In 2003, three years after he quit his day job, Bidulka published *Amuse Bouche*. "I've been very, very lucky. I

think I struck a chord with readers. A lot of the fans of the books are people from cities like Saskatoon and they like seeing their world reflected."

The self-described "farm boy" was born and raised in Saskatchewan and is proud to set his mysteries in Saskatoon. The city plays such a big part in the mysteries that Bidulka says, "It's almost like another character.

"My books are unapologetically gay, unapologetically Canadian and unapologetically from the Prairies." But Bidulka still sends Russell travelling, to Paris and New York and soon to Spain, for contrast.

"I love to travel, so that reflects my life, too, and the life of a lot of people on the Prairies.

"There's a misconception that because we're small and landlocked that our view of the world is landlocked. In fact, there's a lot of diversity and worldliness. Because of the weather, people here travel a lot and that makes them more open and respectful of difference. And Saskatoon is just big enough to have one of everything: one French restaurant, one gay bar, one symphony, one opera association. It might not have the kind of choice that you get in a bigger city, but there's still a lot to offer."

Flight Of Aquavit.
Anthony Bidulka.
Insomniac Press.
\$22.

Amuse Bouche.
Anthony Bidulka.
Insomniac Press.
\$10.