

Coming out in Africa

Fusing the exotic with the erotic

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

A criticism sometimes leveled at Canadian writers is that often they are too bland, largely indistinguishable from their American counterparts.

No one can say that about the author of this week's pick. Anthony Bidulka is a larger-than-life, card-carrying *bon vivant* and eccentric. It shows in his writing, which is frequently over-the-top and occasionally irritating, but seldom dull.

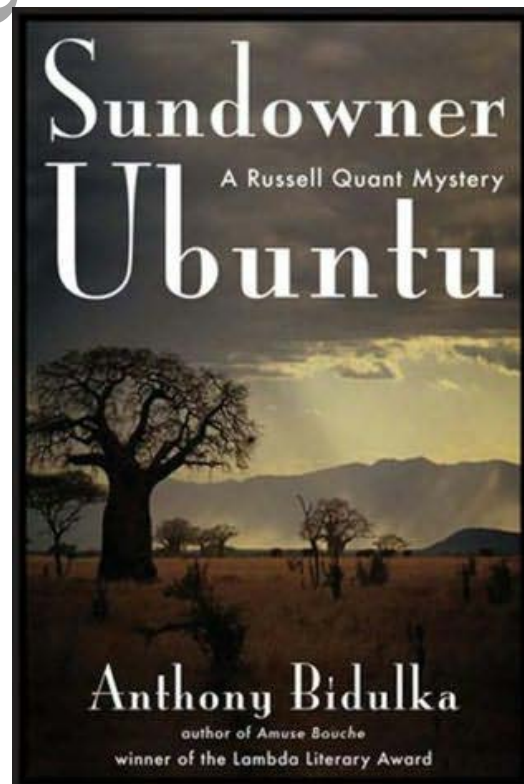
The protagonist of Bidulka's crime novels, Russell Quant, is likewise a Canadian original: a gay, Saskatoon-based private investigator who wades into the most perilous of situations with nary a thought to his own well-being—at least until it's almost too late. On the silver screen Quant's exploits would lie somewhere between *The Perils of Pauline* and a Woody Allen film—and in fact his off-the-wall sense of humour owes a lot to both traditions. Termed by one reviewer as “a lighter shade of noir,” the Russell Quant mysteries are unmistakably stories for our times.

Anthony Bidulka

Anthony Bidulka was born in 1962 and brought up on a farm near Prud'homme, Saskatchewan. He attended the University of Saskatchewan, graduating with degrees in Arts, Education and Commerce, and subsequently obtaining his designation as a Chartered Accountant.

In addition to his writing, Bidulka is actively involved in several community and charitable organizations, including committees and boards for the International Association of Crime Writers, the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild, and a fund he co-founded called Ubuntu Purse in support of Camp Fyrefly, a youth life-skills camp based in Edmonton.

Like his protagonist, Anthony Bidulka lives in Saskatoon. In June he will be the Master of Ceremonies at the 2008 Bloody Words crimefest, which will take place in Toronto.



Sundowner Ubuntu
(*Insomnia Press, 2007*)

Private Investigator Russell Quant lives in Saskatoon, occasionally sharing his bed with his lover Alex Canyon. When a middle-aged woman named Clara Ridge seeks him out and tells him she wants to hire him to find her grown son, Quant is intrigued. All she will tell him is that her son Matthew got into some trouble with the law years ago, and after serving time for his sins, disappeared. Over the years her husband had blocked her efforts to locate him; now her husband is dead, and Clara wants to resume her quest.

Quant figures this will be relatively easy. He is wrong. He tracks down Matthew's former teachers and schoolmates, only to find that no one can—or will—help him. More disturbingly, everyone seems to have something to hide. But a glimmer of hope appears when a former employer tells him that Matthew Ridge had changed his name to Matthew Moxley.

When a masked thug tries to warn him off, Quant's hackles are raised. He locates one of Matt's ex-boyfriends, Ethan Ash, who tells him Matthew became a primary-school teacher and moved to southern Saskatchewan. Driving there to speak with the local Principal, Quant learns that Matt was involved in humanitarian work in Africa. A local pastor is able to provide some of the details, and after clearing it with Clara Ridge, Quant sets off for the Dark Continent.

Before his journey is completed, Quant will meet a strikingly beautiful woman who challenges his sexuality, and a mysterious gun-toting German; he will find himself marooned in the wilds of Africa and shot at; and he will be told that Matthew Moxley died of AIDS

some months earlier. Despondent that his labours have come to an end, Quant returns to Saskatoon to break the news to Matthew's mother.

Then, as they say, the going really gets tough.

A fresh, outrageous voice

Sundowner Ubuntu is populated by a large cast of delightful eccentrics with names like Gladys Nussbottem, Bobo Tox, and Cassandra Wellness, and a witty, sometimes irritatingly fey protagonist who is immersed in an improbable plot that bounces along at an antic pace. It has to be said that the sheer number of gay characters in *Sundowner* is improbable. To steal a line from Billy Crystal, it's like Starbucks: there's a gay person on every corner. Never having been to Saskatoon, I'm in no position to challenge Bidulka's account; but it does sometimes seem as though the story would be more plausibly set in Vancouver. Chalk it up to literary licentiousness.

Finally, there is a puzzle, but it's not solvable, making this an action-thriller rather than a mystery. Not a problem, as the story is character-driven: the reader is by turns astounded and enraged by Quant's frequent insouciance to his own plight, but ultimately is seduced by his sheer exuberant quirkiness.

Bidulka's informal, breezy style has won him legions of readers; his penchant for puns, campy one liners, and arch commentary enlivens his prose. But Hemingway it ain't: often overwritten, the book screams out for editing: there are simply too many dashes, parenthetical insertions, and seven-line sentences interrupting the narrative. Elsewhere, excessively long, pedantic passages sometimes read as if they've

been lifted from a travel brochure. A firmer editing hand will help diminish such problems.

That said, Bidulka brings a fresh voice to Canadian crime fiction, with a sense of humour that is often outrageous and always original; he provides his readers with a cleverly-crafted tale full of twists and turns, and challenges readers to broaden their perspectives. Most readers will either love his writing or hate it.

Previous novels in the Russell Quant series include Bidulka's debut novel, *Amuse Bouche*, followed by *Flight of Aquavit*, *Tapas on the Ramblas*, and *Stain of the Berry*. The sixth Russell Quant mystery is scheduled to hit bookstore shelves in 2009. The series has been nominated for a Crime Writers of Canada Arthur Ellis Award, Saskatchewan Book Award, and a ReLit award. *Flight of Aquavit* was also awarded the Lambda Literary Award for Best Men's Mystery, making Bidulka the first Canadian to win in that category. He is currently working on his first non-Russell Quant mystery, tentatively titled *Once Upon a Time in Fable Glen*.

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