

Criminal Intent

Featuring: Anthony Bidulka

Interviewed by: Janet Costello



Anthony Bidulka is the author of the six Russell Quant novels. He has been a nominee for the Arthur Ellis award, Saskatchewan Book Awards and a ReLit award. He was the first Canadian to win the Lambda Literary Award, for best men's mystery. He is a member of Crime Writers of Canada and Sisters in Crime.

Q: Russell Quant is half Ukrainian, half Irish, gay, an ex-farm boy, and an ex-cop, living in Saskatoon. How much of you is in this character?

I would say that every writer puts some of themselves in their character. When I first conceptualized Russell, many of the details of who he is came from me or my past experiences. But I must say, he's wittier than I am; he says things I would never have thought to say. He's also younger than me and, at times, a good measure more foolhardy. He's on a learning curve, relationship-wise. Over the course of the series, other parts of me creep into his character. Quirky things, like that I'm not comfortable in water, swimming. Another way Russell is like me is he's social, but he definitely likes his alone-time. He enjoys being home with his dogs and a pitcher of margaritas.

Q: You have a cornucopia of letters after your name: BA, BEd, BComm, CA. You left a ten year career as an accountant to become a writer. Do you wish you had started writing earlier or did your other experiences help you become a writer?

That's an important question. It would be easy to say I wish that I'd spent my entire life and career as a writer. Indeed, many of my best hours as a kid were spent writing. But the non-writer side of my brain was also very active. I decided to pursue higher education and varying careers, to see what was out there for me. I've never regretted that. When I finally made the decision to take the leap to writing, the timing was great. Everything to that point has been a rich source of fodder for my writing. I see that time as research years—my education for becoming a writer—and it will continue to provide great input going forward.

Q: Who is your audience?

I have found my audience has developed over the years. Just in the past week I've had attendees at readings ranging from people as young as 13, (high school students who were doing a book report on Russell Quant), to the ripe old age of 88, (a man whose daughter had recommended the books). To use your word, a cornucopia of readers. The base is

the 20-50 year old females, the mystery audience. There are different groups in between these, too, and I really love that variety. I believe there is something for everyone in a Russell Quant book.

Q: Was there any pressure NOT to use a small town setting as Russell's home base?

You know, surprisingly not. Insomniac Press liked a locale that was out of the ordinary. I know a lot of writers who, when writing Canadian find it difficult to make the jump beyond their own provincial borders and, in search of larger readership, beyond national borders. When you think about all the books you've read based in Boston, Chicago, Paris or other big cities, I think people are beginning to find it refreshing to read about somewhere new, unusual, and wonder where is this place?...and they want to learn more. I had a reading in Texas, and there was one fellow at the back watching me very closely. At the end, he approached me and said, "I'm surprised. You're very well-dressed for a Canadian." People ask me if I'm offended by things like this. The answer is no. I see this as an opportunity to inform people about the real Canada, the real Saskatchewan. It's fun.

Q: Do you travel in order to write about foreign settings or do your foreign settings dictate travel?

My career today is a wonderful marriage of two things I love: writing and travel. However, although a good story can survive and flourish without the travel aspect of my books, the reverse is not true. The Story must come first. When I travel, I ask myself, would this be a good place for Russell to have an adventure? But I don't use that location until it fits with a story I've decided to tell. For instance, I was travelling in the Middle East while I was conceptualizing my latest book, Aloha, Candy Hearts. But the location simply didn't fit the tone and focus of the story I wanted to tell, whereas the sultriness and romance of Hawaii meshed very nicely.

Q: You have a special ability to recall what people wore and their hairstyles the last time you saw them. Does this make its way into your writing?

Oh, ALL the time! It's the peculiar way my brain works and how I relate to people. I'm a visual person. When I write, whether it's about a character or a place, I write to a picture I've created in my head. And this picture comes from the people/places from my life. To know a character and his/her situation whatever that might be, a visual representation is important (without going overboard). This also holds true for speech patterns, how something sounds and feels. Having every sense as much as possible infused in my writing is something I strive for, because that is how I experience life.

My greatest hope is for people to experience my writing the same way I write it: with joy. One reader recently wrote me that she read my latest book sitting on her deck on a sunny, Sunday afternoon, drink in hand, dogs at her feet, chores waiting for another day. Isn't that wonderful? For me, the books I remember the most are the ones that come with/encourage a lovely experience.

Q: You start with outlines and character biographies, but your work feels spontaneous. Does the writing always go according to plan?

Hmmmm. (delighted chuckle) NO! At the beginning, being a Chartered Accountant, much of my writing was by a well-defined, organized plan. With time and experience comes a certain wildness and flexibility I quite enjoy (with some underlying structure). As the series, and its characters, mature, I find that at times, the writing has become less about what I'm revealing to the reader about the characters, and more about what the characters are revealing to me about who they are. It's an alive/exciting process.

Q: Talk about the spirit of Ubuntu.

It was something I didn't know about or internalize before I visited Africa. At its core, ubuntu is common sense really. It's about humanity to others and recognizing that every thing you do good or

bad affects your community, and vice versa. It's changed how I look at the world. Normally when you return from a trip, you unpack and regular life overtakes you. But this concept stayed with me. I refocused some of my community work. For example, we now support two kids through high school in Africa. We also started the Ubuntu Purse foundation to fund Camp fYrefly, a life skills and leadership retreat for LGBT youth. We've had great success in raising funds, and this summer the camp is being held in Saskatchewan for the first time.

Q: Tell us about Aloha, Candy Hearts.

Aloha, Candy Hearts is a departure from my usual structure for a Quant novel. Russell usually begins each book in his prairie home town, heads off to an exotic location for some adventure, then finishes up back home. This book instead begins and ends in the exotic location of Hawaii, but the whole middle of the book takes place in Saskatoon. Of the six books so far, this one deals the most with Russell's romantic life. And, as we all know, home is where the heart is. That being said, this is still a mystery at its core, and this time we have Russell on a deadly treasure hunt that takes him on a voyage through Saskatoon's past, and exposes a blackmail scheme of one of Canada's most famous literary giants..

Q: How has being a Sister in Crime affected you?

When writers ask me for advice, the first thing I say is: get involved. Sisters in Crime is all about being involved. There's a sense of solidarity, camaraderie, belonging. We can be as different as two people can be, but there is an undeniable bond. You're connected. Writing can be a solitary profession. An organization like Sisters in Crime, proves it isn't always so.

For more information on **Anthony Bidulka**, and just to see his incredible website, visit:

<http://www.anthonymbidulka.com/home.php>

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