

Review: 100 Minutes With an Author

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This past October the Winnipeg Public Library and the Writers' Collective co-produced the 100 Minutes with an Author lecture and reading series. On four Tuesday nights in October, the reading and writing public enjoyed the unique opportunity to hear four different authors delve into the nitty-gritty of the writing process, share practical tips about getting published, and read from a variety of their published works. Writers' Collective member Hilary Friesen attended each lecture and her reviews—personal, playful, and provocative—give you a taste of this intimate, inspiring, and intellectually invigorating event.

Look out for the return of this series in fall 2008!

Rae Bridgman

When Rae Bridgman takes the floor after being introduced by Cynara Geissler, the first thing she asks is, "Can everybody hear me?" Declining to use the mic, she declares that, with her years of experience as a university professor, she can hold a room of two or two hundred enthralled. She makes good on her promise. For the next 100 minutes, her voice dramatizes the magical nitty-gritty of writing children's fiction.

She launches into a series of anecdotes about the fragments that come together in her MiddleGate series (begun in 2006 with *Serpent's Spell*), one of which was an "asphalt pilgrimage" to the Narcisse Wildlife Management Area north of Winnipeg – a twice yearly gathering place for garter snakes. Rae describes it as a "very alive place," the ground covered in thousands of snakes. In the mating season, "dozens of snakes are conglommated together" in mating balls.

Rae is a professor of anthropology at

University of Manitoba and a mother of six, as well as a writer and illustrator. The inspiration for her books (*Serpent's Spell* was followed in 2007 by *Amber Ambrosia*, and a third is due in 2008) is diverse and varied, extraordinary and mundane – the snakes of Narcisse are joined by snakes from unexpected nooks and crannies of Winnipeg (Union Station, 460 Main, the performance stage in Old Market Square), a derelict house at 88 Adelaide connected to a scandal around the construction of the Legislature, two odd family trinkets found and secreted in her childhood, the Middle Gate neighborhood in Wolseley, J.R.R. Tolkien and (of course) J.K. Rowling.

J.K. Rowling, once raised, remains an elephant in the room. Rae has come to terms with the comparisons. In fact, she admits that her first novel is "derivative" of Rowling's work. But then, as she points out, Rowling's work is also tied into the immense fabric of children's fiction. *Troll*, a 1986 movie, featured a protagonist named "Harry Potter" who discovers a magical world,

SELECTED WORKS BY RAE BRIDGMAN

Amber Ambrosia, 2007, Great Plains Publications

The Serpent's Spell, 2006, Great Plains Publications.

and in a 1994 novel by Eva Ibbitson titled *The Secret of Platform 13*, a door to another world is hidden under a platform at King's Cross Station, similar Rowling's Platform 9 and three-quarters. Rae is happy to take her place in the ranks of children's fiction writers who draw on a shared fictional lineage and a shared well of ideas. A scene in *Amber Ambrosia* in which her two protagonists are transformed into bees is inspired by her fascination with the many transformations of the character Wart in T.H. White's *Once and Future King*.

Having highlighted some of the more notable specimens in the seething mass of inspiration, Rae describes the process that corrals and transforms these many bits and pieces into a novel. She starts with brainstorming, then tackles the "mammoth" work of research – for *Amber Ambrosia*, this included a bee-keeping class. She begins writing with a one-page plot summary (which can double as a synopsis for approaching publishers) and moves on to a chapter-by-chapter outline – 70 to 80 pages of "truly creative fun." After that comes the "painful" scene-by-scene construction of a novel and the interesting moments when "the outline bulges, and a new chapter or a new character begins to grow." Finally, she's ready to revise and "edit and edit and edit and edit..."

For Rae, writing children's fiction – and she prefers the 10 to 12 demographic, no "teen angst" for her – is a counterbalance to her day job as an anthropology professor, where she has done extensive work with the homeless. Working with the homeless, she explains, "few wonderful things happen." The people she

meets are "resourceful and witty," but "on a quick road to death." Yet Rae's work with the homeless is another writhing snake in the history of how she came to write fiction. The difficulties of portraying the "extraordinary speech patterns" of marginalized people, of protecting anonymity by inventing pseudonyms and amalgamating personalities, pushed her to stretch the boundaries of academic writing. She inserted fictional passages in her

"nonfiction" works on homelessness: a fictional logbook of shelter workers, a screenplay of a town hall meeting.

Rae was inspired to illustrate her books by Cornelia Funke's *Inkheart* – and the thought that she could do better. She has a varied history as an artist – masks, installation, theatre, clowning, fine art quilts – but had never drawn until she dug out a straight quill one of her elementary school teachers had taught her to write with and started drawing. She was ten

chapters into *The Serpent's Spell* before she realized it would be much quicker to pencil first and ink later.

Rae began her 100 minutes with a picture of a two-headed snake, one of the top Google queries that leads people to her website (www.raebridgman.ca). She explained that she is like the two-headed snake – a writer and an illustrator as well. I'm inclined to compare Rae's writing life to the Narcisse snake pits – swarming with dozens of "conglomerated" snakes – nothing as simple as two heads.

