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Amber Ambrosia. (The Serpent's Chain)

Amber Ambrosia. (The Serpent's Chain).
Rae Bridgman.
Winnipeg, MB: Great Plains, 2007.
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Grades 5-9 / Ages 10-14.

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excerpt:

Bowing low and tucking their Abdomens in, Wil and Sophie, neither of them yet fluent in Bee-Tongue, buzz-bumbled Long Live the Queen - only to the human ear, it would have sounded like Bzzzzz, bzzzzz, Bzz, Bzzzzzzzz.

Friends or Foes? Demanded the Sentries, lowering their Wings a Notch. Friends said Sophie. We Bring Gifts of Sweet.

The Sentries Antennae whisked quickly over the Pollen Sac on Sophie's Hind Leg and frisked the Bee-Fur on Wil's Abdomen, still sprinkled with Dragonspot Lily Pollen. Satisfied, the Sentries waved Sophie and Wil on and turned back to the Entrance.

Sophie and Wil bowed low in Gratitude and cleaned their Antennae before proceeding into the Great

Hall. The Smell of Mother-of-Us-All and the Smell of Thousands of her Offspring filled the Great Hall. The Smell was hard to describe, but it was a little like the Smell of a favourite, soft Blanket, comforting and reassuring. Every Corner of the Hive was alive with Hurry and Bustle - Brood-Keepers poking and prodding, feeding and cleaning their Cradlebrood, Wax-Makers building their Ladders and Gangways, Sweet-Masters fanning Sweet Chambers, Cleaners, Builders, Gatherers, Sculptors, Architects, Sentries, all buzzbusy with their appointed Tasks.

Yet amidst the Hurry and Bustle, Wil felt soothed by the Order and Rhythm of the Honeycomb - neat Chamber after Chamber, Row after Row, some capped, others open and brimming with Pollen Splashes of Yellow, Orange, Mauve, and Black. Smells filled his Antennae - the Scents of Sweet - so beguiling, it was easy to forget All Else. Sweet from Acres of Clover, Sniffs of Lavender, Roadside Wildflowers, Fields of Spring Dandelions, Sunflowers warmed in the Sun, Boughs heavy with Apple Blossoms ... and Others he did not recognize immediately.

Chant after Chant pulsed through his Antennae and filled his Head - thousands of Bees were buzzsinging in Harmony together. Some of the Buzzes sounded like orders ...

Hark! Clean, Lick and Comb

Our Precious Shining Waxen Dome.

Bridgman's second entry in "The Serpent's Chain" series heralds the return of Sophie (Sophie Isidor) and Wil (William Wynchwood), still flush with their success at saving the snakes of Narcisse and capturing evil Rufus Crookshank. In *The Serpent's Spell* (2006), Bridgman introduced MiddleGate, a secret city hidden within Winnipeg, MB, accessible only through a portal in the Exchange District, inhabited by members of an ancient magykal society, self-contained and structured, albeit unusual. Wil joined the Isidor family in MiddleGate after his guardian and grandmother perished in a deliberately set Toronto fire. Comfortable in his new home and with his new family, Wil admits he "can't remember a time when he had been happier." However, when he registers his African egg-eating pet snake, Esme, at the Secretariat on the Status of Magical Creatures, he learns Crookshank has escaped, and Sophie overhears a discussion about national security and sick, disappearing honeybees. Another mystery awaits the duo.

As a result of a past Isidor family scandal, summer vacation finds the pair with no friends and too much time. When Sophie learns Mage Radix, the botanical's teacher, needs help with beekeeping, she volunteers their services, much to Wil's dismay. Bees serve as a prevailing motif throughout the novel - a golden bee joins the serpent on Wil's magical black medallion, a dead bee had been found in Crookshank's pockets, Aunt Violet buys a BUZZss model crystal ball for her fledgling fortune telling enterprise, a bumblebee decorates the school's celebratory cake, the honeybees of MiddleGate are

under threat, and so on. Despite Wil's apprehension, he studies bees and, thanks to a book sent by his mentor, Mr. Bertram, he gathers fascinating information to the extent that his comfort level increases.

Crookshank joins forces with a former lover, Lucretia Daggar, who sells her family property next door to the Isidors to a family with several children, two of whom Sophie and Wil immediately befriend and with whom they celebrate their eleventh birthday with a picnic. Wil's research encourages him to use the names of honeys from New Zealand, tawari, kamahi, manukuka, pohutukawa, in a secret chant for a game they play.

After taking a bite of bread drizzled with honey, in a blink Sophie and Wil find themselves transformed into honeybees, presumably because they ingest the honey from magical bees, the amber ambrosia. The pair stumble along in the bee world, gradually becoming more familiar and comfortable with their new state, learning the structure of honeybee society and its language. Bridgman's anthropological background and extensive research into bees clearly factor into her creation of an intriguing world of bees. Current news of Colony Collapse Disorder with varroa mites attacking North American apiaries may have suggested the honeybee crisis Bridgman uses as the focal conflict in the novel. In the City of Wax, Wil and Sophie find the Great Nest with Mage Radix's missing swarm of bees living in the gargoyle above the entrance to Grufford's Academy for the Magical Arts. Unfortunately, Crookshank and Daggar also develop the power to transform into honeybees and come looking for Wil and his special black medallion. They want the control of the medallion and the honeybees because honey from the special bee species, *apis mellifera magykalis*, has powers of "transformation and foreknowledge" that they are determined to acquire for themselves and the mysterious Serpent's Chain society. Fortunately, Wil and Sophie thwart the wicked plans and save the honeybees of MiddleGate.

Approximately a third of the novel's action occurs in the few hours that Sophie and Wil transform into honeybees as they fight evil Crookshank and preserve the honeybees of MiddleGate, a segment a genre fan who recently read the novel found captivating. For some stylistic reason, Bridgman chooses to abandon normal grammatical rules in the bee world chapters capitalizing nouns (inconsistently) and generously using italics for emphasis, messages, chants, buzz songs, and in lieu of quotation marks for dialogue. The novel is organized in short chapters, each titled, introduced by a proverb in Latin with an English translation, and featuring a pen and ink captioned drawing, many with serpent or bee themes. Most of the narrative focuses on Wil and Sophie, but a few segments feature the villains plotting their nefarious schemes, but little additional information emerges about the Serpent's Chain whose sinister presence, although spoken of in hushed tones, hovers over MiddleGate.

Sophie and Wil are evolving characters and will continue to delight young fans of the genre. A new set of friends introduced in this novel will undoubtedly join the adventurers in the third installment

Bridgman apparently has already written. With magic, engaging protagonists, nasty villains, a Secretariat on the Status of Magical Creatures, a dragonfly festival complete with entomophagy (eating insects) and Marco Magnifico, the bee motif, Buzz songs, the complex and fascinating City of Wax, eye glass frames changing colour according to mood, disappearing honeybees, magical honey, and mystery, Amber Ambrosia should engage young fantasy fans and have them eagerly awaiting the next Sophie and Wil escapade.

Highly Recommended.

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Review by Darleen Golke

Darleen Golke, a former teacher-librarian, lives in Abbotsford, BC.

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