



PRAIRIE FIRE REVIEW OF BOOKS



Amber Ambrosia

by Rae Bridgman

Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 2007, ISBN 978-1-894283-73-1, 171 pp., \$14.95 paper (Young Adult).

Amber Ambrosia by University of Manitoba professor Rae Bridgman is the second book in her Serpent's Chain series for young readers aged 8 to 13. Somewhat modelled on the Harry Potter series, in that the heroes are orphans who attend a magical school and must fight against an evil foe, this series is distinct in that the setting is southern Manitoba. The main characters, ten-year-old cousins William Wychwood (Wil) and Sophie Isidor, live with Aunt Violet and Aunt Rue in Winnipeg but in the hidden city of MiddleGate, where the people have a special affinity with snakes and magic.

In the first book of the series, *The Serpent's Spell*, the young cousins were involved in two main mysteries: one dealing with the Narcisse snakes, which they managed to save from destruction; and the other involving an ancient secret society called the Serpent's Chain. *Amber Ambrosia* begins immediately after *The Serpent's Spell*, which readers are advised to read first, as there are frequent references to earlier events. (In fact, if it's some time since you read the first one, rereading it might help your understanding of the second one, as the author doesn't explain all the relationships, settings and events from the first book.)

The new story begins near the end of the school year, as summer holidays are about to begin. Wil and Sophie are heroes after saving the Narcisse snakes and capturing the villain, Rufus Crookshank. But almost at once they learn that he has somehow escaped custody. They also begin to learn about several other mysteries. Why are the honeybees of MiddleGate falling sick, and why has the symbol of a golden bee appeared on Wil's medallion? Why is the empty house at the end of the street suddenly spruced up, and who is the unfriendly real estate agent? Where is Wil's missing pet snake, Esme?

With time on their hands, and hoping to find clues, the children apply to help the school's botanical teacher with his beekeeping duties--unaware that before long a magical force will cause the children to be transformed into bees, and that Rufus Crookshank and his sidekick have also returned to the area.

Young readers who like fantasy will surely enjoy this book, and the *Serpent's Chain* series, especially with its local setting and interesting characters, such as Aunt Violet with her purple hair, and Sophie, whose eyeglasses change colour along with her emotions. The author's attempt to picture life as a human honeybee, with its many dangers, is also an interesting concept.

Watch for future adventures, as well. The author has already written the third manuscript in the series, and plotted out a total of nine books. There are frequent hints about a resurfacing mystery with the *Serpent's Chain* secret society, and two new friends introduced in this book will probably appear in future stories. Educators may be interested in a teachers' guide for the book available on the author's web page.

Donna Gamache is the author of *Spruce Woods Adventure* (Compascore Manitoba) as well as many short stories for both children and adults.

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