

Amber Ambrosia by Rae Bridgman
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by M. Wayne Cunningham

THEY'RE BACK. All those marvelous characters from Winnipeg author Rae Bridgman's highly successful first novel, *The Serpent's Spell*, are indeed back. *Amber Ambrosia* is Bridgman's equally entertaining second book in the MiddleGate series. We reencounter ten-year-old Wil (with one l) Wychwood, his pet snake, Esme, his mentor, Mr. Bertram, his ten-year-old cousin, Sophie Isidor, their aunts, Violet and Rue, their Gruffud's Academy teachers Mage Tibor (cartology), Mage Adderson (numeristics) and Mage Terpsy (verbology), and the Academy's two-faced stone Gatekeeper, Portia and Portius, and even the sleazy, distrusted Minister Skelch and Wil's decidedly evil enemy, Rufus Crookshank. New characters have been added as well. And with a whole new set of exciting adventures to keep them all busy as bees, it's a novel definitely worth reading.

While snakes predominated in *The Serpent's Spell*, magykalis bees are at the centre of *Amber Ambrosia*. But whether it's bees or snakes that drive the action, the story still involves magyck with a 'y', the Secretariat for the Status of Magical Creatures, Wil's medallion with its strange inscriptions, Sophie's magical glasses with colours to match her moods, Aunt Vi's references to Hedda's Horoscopes and her tasseomancy readings, academic activities at Gruffud's, strange goings-on in MiddleGate, and the behind the scenes shenanigans of Rufus Crookshank and his new partner. While Aunt Rue is busy keeping secrets regarding what she knows about the bees from her confidential government work, Wil and Sophie busily puzzle over the apiponis destructor. They drop in on Mage Radix in his beekeeping lab at the Academy, sample exotic honey at market stalls, and visit new neighbours, the clairvoyant Mrs. Hester Bain and twins Beatriz and Phinneas whom Sophie felt "were going to be their friends forever." It's a friendship Sophie and Wil sorely need when they get a bee's eye view of the world after they are magically transformed into bees and buzz into the City of Wax and the Great Nest. There they escape from a life-and-death battle with Rogue-Bee and Pale-Bee before morphing back into their human forms with massive doses of help from the twins. It's an action-packed story abuzz with excitement and suspense.

As usual Bridgman's characters bear unique names like Mrs. Flyboottom, Mrs. Clop, Mr. Redelmeier, and Lucretia Daggar. MiddleGate has its memorable sites like Half Moon Lane and Gruffud's Academy, and events like the Dragonfly Festival, and when necessary, as in the bee episodes of the story, a whole new universe and vocabulary of Sister Bees and Brother Drones with Bee-Veins and Bee-Bodies and a "joyous Buzzhum of the Bees" musically unfolds for believers in magic and mystery. As well, there are enough questions left over to ensure a number of future novels. For example, why won't Aunts Rue and Violet tell anyone how old they are, "for snake's sake"? And will Sophie's Dad ever return to clear his name? And will Aunt Violet set up her new Auntie Vi's Fortune Telling Shop? And what about Wil and Sophie's "friends forever" Beatriz and Phinneas? And will Rufus Crookshank resurface under a new identity and with new evildoers in tow even though he's "in the hands of the Firecatchers—for good"? So, another volume is definitely possible, even to be hoped for, since as Wil says, "We know the Serpent's Chain is back...but it's like a big rattlesnake coiled in the corner of the room, and everyone is pretending like it really isn't there." So what next, Ms. Bridgman, what next?