

The Serpent's Spell
Rae Bridgman
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Kids' Lit

by M. Wayne Cunningham

TEN-YEAR-OLD orphaned cousins, William Wychwood and Sophie Isidor, are definitely not your average fifth graders. For one thing, Wil “but with one l, not with two,” and Sophie with her cat, Cadmus, live in Middlegate. That’s the mysterious world of Winnipeg author Rae Bridgman, where buses can drive through brick walls, leaning houses dot streets with names like Half Moon Lane and Wog’s Hollow, and Egbertine & Son in their shop near Grunion Square occasionally speak French to their customers. The cousins’ school, the four-hundred-and-ninety-four-year-old Gruffud’s Academy, is out of this world too. Here, teachers like Mage Adderson, Mage Quartz, and Mage Terpsy, teach subjects like numeristics, botanicals, cartology, and verbology from textbooks like *Magykal Spelling, Grammar and Palaver*, and use spells to prevent students from cheating. There are rules too; for instance, there is to be no magic off campus, “no practising of magic in the hallways,” and no eating except in the west wing of Stone Hall. In the library, which is connected to Stone Hall by a tunnel, a lisping Miss Heese rules the roost with her

puffy “white curly hair, which reminded Wil of Dandelion fluff.” She hisses out her “four simple ruleless”, including “No noissee,” while Wil “but with one l, not with two,” covertly leafs through *The Golden Wing: A History of All Creatures Magykal*, while a “tower of books” floats above the counter, and a playful ghost, Peeping Peerslie, plays practical jokes on library patrons of all ages. Overseeing Gruffud’s goings-on are the stone carvings and statues of snakes and the talking gargoyles, Portia and Portius, with their animated braids of writhing snakes. There are lots more snakes as well in the nearby town of Narcisse, hibernating and-gestating in their hibernaculums. But someone, as Wil and Sophie find out, is committing serpicide, wantonly killing the snakes. So who, how and why becomes the mystery the one-l-Wil and his cousin Sophie have to solve.

Snakes, however, aren’t the only victims in Bridgman’s superb page-turning flight of fancy. Sophie’s dad mysteriously disappeared after the murder of a librarian at the Academy, leaving her to cope with the suspicion of, and ostracism by, her classmates. And Wil’s beloved Gran has recently died in a fire, leaving Wil not only with just the one l in his name but also with a horrible dream of a

shadowy figure running away from the flames. The two kids know that Aunt Rue and Aunt Violet, who are raising them now, are keeping secrets from them as well. When the aunts learn of the serpent-embossed medallion and gold ring Wil wears around his neck, they warn him, “Beware the Serpent’s Chain,” without telling him what the “Serpent’s Chain” is. So the l-deprived Wil and the clear-minded Sophie have lots to keep them occupied. Sophie’s Cadmus hates Wil’s pet snake, Esme. Classmates, the twins Sylvain and Sygnithia Sly, despise the cousins and do everything they can to upset their lives. Every book in the library with references to the “Serpent’s Chain” has the relevant pages torn out. At school Wil and Sophie have to master tongue-twisting incantations and tricky spells, separate “dingleberries” from poisonous and edible ones, put up with Peeping Peerslie’s pranks, and puzzle out the identities of the two persons in the skeleton costumes and why they were fighting in the washroom at the Halloween Masquerade Ball. Then they have to escape kidnappers—not once, but twice—to hide and recover Wil’s amulet and ring, and to allay their growing suspicions about whether Erro Sibelius Skelch, the Minister of the Secretariat on the Status of Magykal Creatures is truly the champion for the Narcisse snakes or really just a snake in the grass.

With Miss Heese’s sibilant sentences, and Mage Terpsy’s “tipsy-terpies” in her sentences (clap in the tass for top in the class, for example), with Wil getting dog poop stuck on his shoe and his tongue stuck on a frost-

covered metal pole, and with his fumbling attempts at the games of ditchball and snapdragon, there is a lot of fun to be enjoyed before the serpicide mystery is solved. There is also a great deal of useful information about snakes, their habits and habitats. Finally, Bridgman's spellbinding story has sentence after sentence of melodiously evocative language. For example, on the field trip to Narcisse on "one of those sweltering September days—summer's last gasp" when the "bus barrelled along the open road. Pastures gave way to flat fields of rippling wheat, and bales of hay—huge, round biscuits—dotted the horizon." If it's exquisitely told spells that you're after, *The Serpent's Spell* has more than enough for even the most discriminating and insatiable reader.