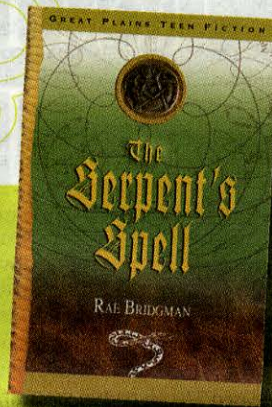


It's FUNdamental!

A look at the latest in Prairie kids' books

In our annual kidlit feature, *Prairie books NOW* takes a look at a number of kids' books from the Prairies. We kick everything off with Marty Chan's *The Mystery of the Graffiti Ghoul* (opposite). We also look at two fantasy novels for young readers, *The Serpent's Spell* (below) and *The Dragon Prince* (opposite). A stinkbug takes centre stage in *Raising a Little Stink* (below), and Calgary's famed Lougheed House is featured in *Clarence's Engine* (page 12). We are introduced to two female protagonists in *Almost Eden* (page 12) and *Wild Orchid* (page 13). A long overdue account of the *Pachyrhinosaurus* is found on page 13, and on page 14, we meet *Salt & Pepper*. We round out the feature with several titles in our annual kids' roundup (page 14). As we all know, reading is **FUNdamental!**



Sssssspellbinding

Snakes and murder and mystery, oh my!

by David Jón Fuller

If Rae Bridgman has anything to say about it, the bad rap on snakes ends now.

Bridgman found inspiration for her young adult fantasy novel, *The Serpent's Spell*, in Narcisse, Manitoba, where re-sided garter snakes hibernate en masse. And then there was that mysterious medallion she discovered as a child....

The Serpent's Spell follows young Wil Wychwood, who, along with his cousin Sophie, attends Gruffud's Academy. This school for magic is located in MiddleGate – a secret city in Winnipeg's Exchange District accessible only by supernatural means.

A distinct aspect of the book is that snakes are revered. While Wil tries to unravel the strange power of a serpentine locket from his grandmother, both he and Sophie become wrapped up in another mystery: who is killing the snakes of Narcisse?

"I was disappointed in other fantasy works, that snakes were seen as evil. And after having gone to see the snakes of Narcisse, when we first moved here, I

was overwhelmed by the numbers of them and how people were responding to them. I thought this was just one of the most amazing places on the whole planet."

As well, the story is partially rooted in a mysterious medallion Bridgman herself found.

"It was in an old chest, along with a gold ring. Could be effects from grandparents – I've asked my mother and father about them; they didn't know. So they remained a bit of a mystery. And when you're casting about for a story, you look for what mysteries you have in your own life." She still has the medallion – and it's still a mystery.

She says the most challenging part of writing the novel was "making sure all the pieces of the puzzle fit together and that a clue that is dropped in Chapter II bears fruit in Chapter XXVII. Everybody, but kids especially, pick up on incongruities."

Bridgman adds an illustrative touch to the book as well. Her drawings, along with proverbs in Latin and English, mark the beginning of each chapter.

Originally from Maple, Ontario, Bridgman moved to Winnipeg in 1998.

She is a lifelong fan of fantasy and a mother of six.

"One night we were reading with the kids," she says, "I think it was one of the Harry Potter books, and everyone was just spellbound, and I thought, what a gift to be able to sit together and enjoy a story this way. I'd like to do that for others."

And while she acknowledges the work of those who have gone before her: C.S. Lewis, J.K. Rowling, and others, she wants to contribute a Canadian kind of magic.

"This book is very much set in Winnipeg," she says. "I think we need some Canadian fantasy; there's not enough ... a lot of it is Celtic and British and it's 'over there,' far away. I think it's here. We're living right in the middle of it." ❖

The Serpent's Spell
Rae Bridgman
Great Plains Publications
\$16.95 pb, 192 pages
ISBN 1-894283-67-8

David Jón Fuller is Managing Editor of Lögberg-Heimskringla, the Icelandic community newspaper. His writing has appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press, Uptown Magazine, and the Icelandic Canadian.