

Bridgman returns to MiddleGate

Books by University Staff

BY DALE BARBOUR
The Bulletin

This time 11-year-old cousins Wil Wychwood and Sophie Isidor get a whole new perspective on the Assiniboine River and the fishy world below its surface.

It's all part of *Fish and Sphinx*, the third book in Rae Bridgman's MiddleGate series.

"It's very much set in Manitoba and the Manitoba Legislature Building features prominently, although in the secret city of MiddleGate it's known as the Palace of the Blazing Star, and Sophie and Wil have to save it from being taken over by the Serpent's Chain," Bridgman said. The Serpent's Chain is a secret society of mages that Wil and Sophie have tangled with in the previous two MiddleGate books, *The Serpent's Spell* and *Amber Ambrosia*. Helping them in this scrap are a magical black medallion and ring that Wil received from his grandmother just days before she died in a mysterious fire.

The first book in the series had the two working to save the snakes of Narcisse, while in the second they were transformed into bees. This time a transformation into catfish is the order of the day, aided and abetted by a river spirit known as Catfysh.

When she's not writing young adult fantasy novels, Bridgman is the associate dean (research) for the Faculty of Architecture with a research interest in homelessness and innovative projects aimed at addressing homelessness.

Of course, the academic research skills come in handy when Bridgman is trying to build her fantasy world. To create a magical Manitoba Legislature Building, Bridgman looked to the work of University of Winnipeg research fellow Frank Albo, who has shown that the architects of the Legislature tapped freely from their Freemason association to create a structure filled with seemingly mystical features straight out of mythology.

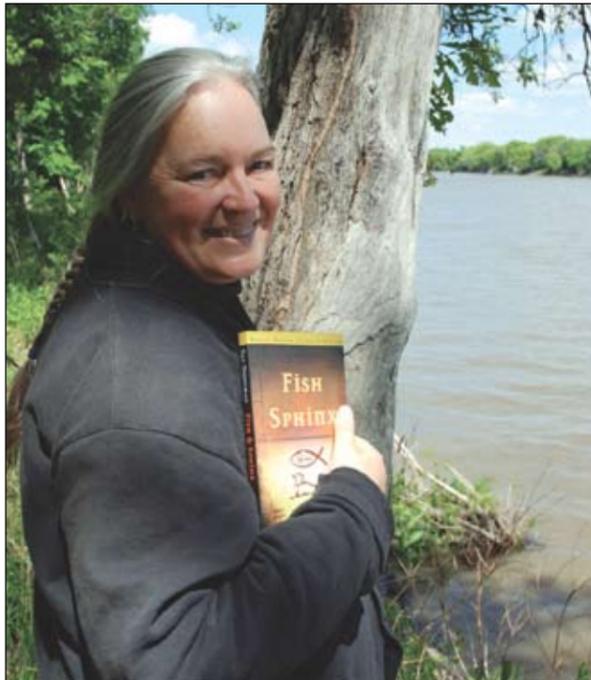


Photo by Dale Barbour

Architecture professor Rae Bridgman takes Wil and Sophie on a new adventure in *Fish and Sphinx*.

"It's remarkable that here in Winnipeg we have Egyptian sphinxes on top of the Legislature Building. It's just too enticing for a fantasy writer," Bridgman said. "And I didn't even have to make up the Pool of the Black Star."

The Sphinxes are on the roof of the Legislature Building, keeping an eye on terrain to the east and west, while the Golden Boy is looking north. The Pool of the Black Star, located at the very heart of the building acts as an echo chamber for the Legislature or, in Bridgman's world, a portal to gain entrance.

The book is a feast of language and imagery, with tangled phrases and playful rhymes. Each chapter is topped by a Latin phrase and illustration.

Bridgman perfected the Latin phrases with the help of Elizabeth Dafoe librarian Carol Steer and had help

from senior scholar Kenneth Stewart in defining the fishy world of the Assiniboine River. As for the prose of the book, that's entirely her creation.

"I love to play with language in the books. In *Amber Ambrosia* I was able to think about how bees would speak, while in this book I think about how fish speak," Bridgman said. And so Catfysh, the river spirit, ends her verbs with 'ysh,' a passing Walleye mingles Latin and English and minnows, not quite ready to handle capital letters, speak completely in lowercase.

"I don't think people play with language enough in middle school books. There are lots of wonderful words out there and I would hate for them to go extinct due to lack of use, so these books are really for people who like to learn while they're reading."

Bridgman draws the illustrations herself, creating full-sized versions and then shrinking them down for the book. They're works of art in themselves, and Bridgman did an exhibition of the work from *Amber Ambrosia* at the Winnipeg Public Library. But her overall goal with the illustrations is to move the book forward, not to create art.

"The pen-and-ink drawings don't always work as I had planned," Bridgman said. "I had drawn a great inverse white on black sketch of the Bison from the Legislature, but when I shrunk it down they just ended up looking like a big ink spot. Back to the drawing board, literally!"

Of course, as much as *Fish and Sphinx* is an adventure story, it's also a tale of two kids being kids, so Wil and Sophie go through the typical childhood entanglements of sorting out their friends, and their surrounding cast of characters get to do some growing of their own.

As for the next adventure in the series, art will reflect life when Will and Sophie travel to Iceland.

"I spent a month at a writer's retreat in Skriðuklaustur, East Iceland," Bridgman said. Some vivid descriptions of Iceland reach into *Fish and Sphinx*, but readers will have to wait until the fourth book for a magical exploration of the island country.

For more about the MiddleGate Books, you can check out Bridgman's website: www.raebbridgman.ca.



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