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## Fish & Sphinx

Fish & Sphinx.

Rae Bridgman.  
Winnipeg, MB: Great Plains, 2008.  
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excerpt:

*"That's funny," said Wil. "I thought I heard voices. They were everywhere - whispers. But I couldn't understand what they were saying. Sshhh, listen, there they are again."*

*Sophie's glasses turned pale mauve and her eyes widened. "I hear them now... but there's no one here, just us."*

*The fog swirled around the children, holding them close. A splash by the river startled them both and they turned to see what it was. There standing before them, was a woman wearing long, silvery robes. Her hair was matted and whiskers trailed from her chin. But it was her eyes that were the most startling. Pale and wide-set, they glimmered like two moons.*

*The woman was surrounded by shimmering figures - a young girl wearing diaphanous clothing, her body*

*covered in colourful tattoos, a woman wearing a long blue cloak, who gazed at Wil and Sophie with what seemed like great sadness, two young children about six and nine, one girl, one boy, both with blond hair almost white, several young men wearing rough denim jackets, an old man with grizzled beard and ragged clothes.*

*The figures seemed real enough, but their eyes were an unearthly, glowing green. They were whispering something, but Wil could not understand the words. Their hands reached out to Sophie and Wil, as if to pull them into the water, while the woman in the blue cloak bowed her head.*

*Even though he had not been touched by them, Wil felt their wet cold. He and Sophie drew back from them, frightened, but the figures only pressed forward.*

*The woman raised her hand. At her gesture, the figures joined hands and encircled Wil, Sophie, and the woman. They danced around them until Wil began to feel dizzy. An ancient, fishy smell filled the air, as the woman gazed at them both. But she said nothing; she seemed to be waiting for them to speak.*

*"Who... who... are you?" asked Wil finally.*

*"Wait'ysh for you," said the woman, her voice a mere whisper. "In your world, my name be'ysh Catfysh."*

*"You're... you're a fish?" asked Sophie incredulously.*

*"Human'ysh myself and walk'ysh on the earth," said Catfysh. "I carry'ysh a message."*

The adventures of 11-year-old Wil (Wychwood) and Sophie (Isidor), introduced in *The Serpent's Spell* 006 and continued in *Amber Ambrosia* 007, return in Bridgman's third novel of the MiddleGate books. The action begins just days before Wil and Sophie return to school at Gruffud's Academy for the Magical Arts in MiddleGate, the secret city hidden in Winnipeg's Exchange District and accessed through a portal in historic Kelly House. At MiddleGate Library run by Wil's friend and mentor, Bartholomew Bertram, who replaced the disgraced former librarian, Sophie sees a fish hiding in the griffin's coil, and Wil receives a book with a "nasty-looking fish on the front" that emits an "old, rancid fishy smell" delivered by the library ghost, Peeping Peerslie. Wil hastily dumps the book back on a shelf, but when fish images keep appearing, he will later retrieve it. At school, Mage Terpsy, the verbology teacher, assigns a group project examining serpent myths from around the world. Wil and Sophie enact MIXUSFIXUS number scrambling to ensure they partner with Beatriz and Phinneas, their new neighbours and friends, to study Egypt.

The fish imagery continues. A golden fish with long whiskers joins the tiny gold serpent and a golden bee inside the outline of a silver arrow on one side of the "coin-sized disc hanging from a crescent moon" on Wil's black medallion that he received from his grandmother before her untimely death. At the river, Wil and Sophie encounter a woman with matted hair, whiskers, and glimmering eyes and wearing long, silvery robes. The woman introduces herself as Catfysh, spirit of the river, and she delivers a warning about the Serpent's Chain, an ancient, magical secret society outlawed centuries before, yet rumoured to be active again in MiddleGate. Wil sometimes resents being custodian of the medallion and the associated responsibilities, but he remains intrigued by the mystery surrounding it. He sees fish images everywhere during a field trip to the Palace of the Blazing Star known outside of MiddleGate as the Manitoba Legislative Buildings.

To MiddleGate denizens, the Palace of the Blazing Star with its Pool of the Black Star, stone sphinxes guarding the statue of Hermes (the Golden Boy), stone bison, lion's heads, horned cow skulls, a Medusa, Athena and other decorative and stylistic elements represent magic and carry important symbolism in the mage world. Rumors of terrorist activities aimed at the Palace of the Blazing Star circulate; however, Wil and Sophie, busy with school and activities, forget about Catfish's warnings as fall turns to winter. In the spring, as they watch the river ice break, Catfish again appears and urges them to seek the "help of the sphinxes" against the Serpent's Chain who "take'ysh advantage of the imbalance in energies" created by the threat of a spring flood. Catfish turns them into small catfish welcomed into the water's "liquid embrace;" Wil encounters predators, a walleye and a chestnut lamprey, before Catfish transports them to the Pool of the Black Star at the Palace of the Blazing Star. She hustles them up to the roof to meet with the sphinxes, but, before they can present their gift, a security guard drags them back downstairs. The busy gallery downstairs suddenly freezes in place when the Serpent's Chain enacts CURSUFERRI! Fortunately, the black medallion protects Wil and Sophie who return to the sphinxes, present the gift of Nile sand that animates the figures who, in turn, animate all the other "inanimates" to thwart the nefarious Serpent's Chain plot, whatever it is.

Unfortunately, Bridgman continues to shroud the Serpent's Chain activities and motives in secrecy, and all the reader learns is that the members mysteriously vanish into thin air before the army, which had been summoned to deal with the apparent emergency, can apprehend them. The children escape back to the river via the Pool of the Black Star, return home, and smugly listen to the media reports of strange happenings at the Manitoba Legislative Building.

Both previous adventures presented fairly identifiable villains and activities. The third entry, however, sometimes meanders and never delineates what the rumoured threat actually entails, nor who the dozen robbed figures presumably belonging to the Serpent's Chain are or what their purpose is. A pair of stone sphinxes conveniently joins the fish symbols later in the novel. Wil and Sophie remain engaging characters dealing with ordinary issues to which young readers can relate, but, by the same token, because the cousins use magic as part of daily life, their adventures offer readers an escape from the commonplace. As usual, Bridgman provides a variety of interest-catching elements - slightly wacky Aunt Violet setting up a fortune-telling business in the outside world, serious Aunt Rue in line for a major promotion, quirky neighbours, new friends Beatriz and Phinneas, Euphemus the soap box orator, a mysterious white-haired German-speaking woman with piercing blue eyes, Cadmus the cat, Esme the snake, Catfish "Protectress the Immortal," the various Mages at Gruffuds, squabbling stone heads Portia and Portius, Sophie's "mood" glass frames, the annual Winterlude Festival, an unique Valentine's party, a fishy-smelling book with disappearing print, a BUZZ ball, a potential flood, magical fish, - all of which should appeal to young fantasy fans and have them anticipating another instalment in the cousins adventures. In the "Epilogue" Bridgman promises, "dear children, much, much more remains to be told."

Bridgman introduces each chapter with a well-executed pen and ink, captioned drawing. Each chapter begins with a Latin sequence followed by the English translation; Bridgman obviously loves Latin since several of the introductory sequences are as long or longer than some of the chapters. Enhancing the well-paced prose and smooth dialogue, several lyrical poetic sequences mostly sung in a "hoarse fishy voice" or whispered by Catfish, are scattered throughout the novel, and she appears on her own in the "Prologue" and another chapter. Artist, author of academic and creative works, anthropologist, Associate Dean at

University of Manitoba's Faculty of Architecture, Bridgman demonstrates her natural pedagogic inclinations providing mini lessons on various topics, among them the Fibonacci sequence, the Golden Boy, the architecture of the Manitoba Legislative Building, Egyptian mythology, Iceland, catfish and other fish species.

Fish & Sphinx has recently achieved a Honourable Mention for the 2008 "Older Writers Grant" from the Speculative Literature Foundation.

Recommended.

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Review by Darleen Golke

Darleen Golke writes from her home in Abbotsford, BC.

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