



***The Serpent's Spell.***

**Rae Bridgman.  
Winnipeg, MB: Great Plains, 2006.  
190 pp., pbk., \$16.95.  
ISBN 1-894283-67-8.**

**Grades 5-9 / Ages 10-14.**

**Review by Darleen Golke.**

**excerpt:**

*The bus weaved along busy streets and as it stopped at a red light, Wil's eyes fixed on an ornate wrought-iron door decorated with two green serpents, which looked as though they were guarding the door. Then the bus jolted along a side street pitted with potholes until it turned into a large, deserted parking lot by a brick house. It seemed to be the only house in the area, surrounded as it was by a sea of parking lots dotted with warehouses. A rising sunburst decorated the peak of the house, and a five-pointed star graced each corner.*

*Why were they stopping in a parking lot filled with old weeds? A sign by the side of the parking lot said Half Moon Lane but there was no street. The bus inched past a rusty dumpster filled with garbage bags. Two men were unloading cartons at one of the warehouse loading docks, but they didn't even look up when the bus rolled past them.*

*The bus turned to face a brick wall at the back of the house. A faded mural on the wall featured an enormous box of Black Mirror chocolates, and underneath in peeling letters the words, Satisfy Every Sweet Desire. The wall had gaping cracks and was missing chunks of mortar. Faded pink insulation poked out from a stovepipe hole, beneath which there was a green door with a small brass doorknob.*

*The bus driver got up from his seat, stepped out of the bus and inserted an ornate key into one of the chocolates. Then he clambered back onto the bus. The bus jerked forward, its engine chortling. The box of chocolates began to melt away. Wil blinked his eyes. The bus was driving . right . through . the . wall.*

*Wil looked about wildly, but no one else seemed the least bit interested that they . they were driving right through a solid brick wall . into a long stone tunnel lit by lanterns. Wil turned to look back at Sophie. Her eyeglass frames were brilliant yellow. Hadn't they just been red and white polka dots? Wil looked down at Esme, shut his eyes for a moment and wished he could curl up tight inside her little hut.*

Winnipeg anthropologist, artist, writer, and University of Manitoba Faculty of Architecture professor, Rae Bridgman departs from her academic publications about homelessness to launch her first novel, a fantasy for young readers.

Inspired by Manitoba's red-sided garter snakes of Narcisse and Inwood, Bridgman sets the story in "never-never-now" MiddleGate, a secret city hidden in Winnipeg's Exchange District, accessible only to the denizens of the magykal society that traces its history back hundreds of years to Britain. An orphan since age one, 10-year-old Wil Wychwood arrives from Toronto to live at MiddleGate with his two aunts and his cousin, Sophie Isidor, in a "ramshackle brick house built from a hodgepodge of twisted black, brown, pale yellow, burnt red and blue bricks." A suspicious fire costs Gran, his guardian's life, forcing Wil to travel with his only companion, Esme, an African egg-eating snake, to an unknown future with his mother's relatives whom he has never met, a "mage family" that traces its ancestry back ten generations. Gran, a confirmed skeptic, had called magic "nothing but hocus-pocus bogus," "pure nonsense," and "wishful thinking and party games;" however, she had given him a black medallion, a "coin-sized disc hanging from a crescent moon" with a "tiny gold symbol of a snake" that shimmered on "the black surface, surrounded by the outline of a silver arrow" on one side and a "simple outline of a silver triangle" glimmering on the other side, and a "worn and scratched gold ring" warning him never to let either out of his sight. The black medallion glows when aroused and early in the novel shocks Aunt Violet into a trancelike state whispering, "Beware the Serpent's Chain." Finding information about the Serpent's Chain Society founded in the Middle Ages proves difficult for the children, not to mention the readers.

Trying to adjust to his new living arrangements, his new guardians, and his mage family challenges Wil as does beginning school at Gruffud's Academy of sorcery where he encounters games like shadow-cutting, sciamachy and subjects like numeristics, verbology, cartology, and botanicals taught by a collection of eccentric individuals, the Mages. Snakes, he learns, figure significantly in MiddleGate's culture, and the citizens worry about reports of thousands of Narcisse snakes found murdered. On a field trip to Narcisse, Wil and Sophie get separated from the school group and, to their horror, stumble upon a cave with piles of snakeskins. However, interest in their find and in the mysterious slaughter of snakes fades as the winter hibernation ensues and school festivities preoccupy Wil and Sophie.

Gruffud's hosts the yearly Halloween Masquerade Ball where Wil hears Minister Skelch arguing with another man, thereby cementing Wil's suspicions that Skelch looks like the man near the fire that killed Gran in Toronto. At Winterlude Festival, Wil is kidnapped. Fearing that the kidnappers might want his black medallion, he hides it and denies all knowledge when questioned. Sophie discovers Wil imprisoned in a room below the library and, with the help of the librarian, Miss Heese, and the Firecatchers, frees him. More convinced than ever of Skelch's guilt, Wil recruits Sophie to help him investigate the mysteries. Sophie learns that before her father, an accused murderer, disappeared, he had hypothesized that another gate in and out of MiddleGate existed. However, her investigation halts abruptly when she is kidnapped. Wil comes to her rescue, makes the startling and dangerous identification of the villain, and faces down

his enemy with the help of Esme and magic until Sophie returns with help. Sophie and Wil are heroes for capturing the "Snake in the Grass" who insists he acted as a middleman "facilitating the capture and slaughter of thousands of snakes. When dried and pulverized, the snakes' skins are one of the ingredients promising everlasting youth"; the real villains are still out there. In the cryptic finale to the novel, "the Serpent's Chain Society is back," Bridgman signals a sequel to the serpentine fantasy.

From the children of Narnia to modern heroes like Harry Potter or antiheroes like Artemis Fowl, fantasy has captured children's imaginations. The remarkable success of the Harry Potter books and movies and the release of the Narnia movie show that marketers are well aware of children's interest in tales of magic. *The Serpent's Spell* sets fantasy firmly in Winnipeg, and young readers will undoubtedly appreciate the familiar setting. Bridgman's fantasy, however, lacks the intensity of Rawlings' tales although, like Harry, Wil is a 10-year-old orphan, attends a magic school, longs for a family unit, has adventures, makes friends i.e. his cousin, and is intelligent, shy, brave yet afraid, and develops a growing awareness of the life's complexities. Numerous secondary characters bear suggestive names like Egbertine of Musee des Ouefs, Blancheflour, Sly, Adderson, Heese, Skelch, and Peeping Peerslie. Bridgman creates a secret city with abundant serpentine symbolism: serpents at the secret entrance to MiddleGate, the Brimstone Snakes at Grunion Square, two stone serpents at MiddleGate library, the Portia/Portius heads with long braids/beard of snakes at Gruffud's, snake tattoos, snake idioms and curses like "snake's alive," "serpent's blood," "snake's pox," for "serpent's sake," the snakes of Narcisse, to name a few. The plot incorporates threads of the world outside MiddleGate woven with the intrigue within, but the connections are sometimes puzzling. Although Bridgman introduces the black medallion associated with the mysterious Serpent's Chain Society early in the novel, Bridgman fails to clarify its source or the vague menace associated with a secret society "forced to disband" during the Middle Ages because of "heresy and immorality" charges. Nevertheless, fans of fantasy will undoubtedly delight in the magic, engaging protagonists, talking statues, a mischievous library ghost, unique school activities, an ophidiophobic Minister on the Status of Magical Creatures, cops called Firecatchers, the bullying Sly twins, and the other minutiae of daily life in MiddleGate.

While working at a Winnipeg high school, I assiduously avoided supervising students on annual field trips to Narcisse, and so I admit to sympathizing with Minister Sketch and his aversion to snakes when he shudders, "Grotesque creatures - no eyelids, no ears, no legs - always creeping low to the ground." The story develops in 52 chapters, some only a few short paragraphs in length, many merely two or three pages - short chapters that tend to interrupt the narrative flow. Each chapter is titled, each features an original Bridgman pen and ink drawing with a snake motif and a descriptor, and each begins with a proverb in Latin with an English translation. Two introductory full-page pen and ink drawings, a MiddleGate map and the entry house, accompany a short section about snakes to introduce the novel.

### **Recommended.**

*Darleen Golke lives and writes in Abbotsford, BC.*

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