

Kingdom of Trolls

by Rae Bridgman

Sackville, NB: Sybertooth Inc., 2011, ISBN 978-0-9864974-1-4, 288 pp., \$15.00 paper.

(YA Fantasy)

RetroGirl

by T.D. Thompson

Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications Inc., 2010, ISBN 978-1-894717-57-1, 159 pp., \$14.95 paper.

(YA fiction)

Reviewed by Donna Gamache

Kingdom of Trolls is the fourth book in the MiddleGate/Serpent's Chain fantasy series by University of Manitoba professor Rae Bridgman. The series is intended for readers aged about 10–13, with the main characters being two orphan cousins, Wil Wynchwood and Sophie Isidor. The pair lives with Aunt Violet and Aunt Rue in Middlegate, a hidden city which is part of Winnipeg. Wil and Sophie attend a magical school called Gruffud's Academy (somewhat reminiscent of Hogwarts in the Harry Potter books).

Kingdom of Trolls begins with the school year winding down at Gruffud's just as Aunt Violet wins an all-expense-paid trip to Iceland from Perfect Products, a company that makes crystal balls. Several problems in Middlegate – the arrest of the school librarian, the hospitalization of a neighbour, and Aunt Violet losing the receipt she needs to claim the trip – make it uncertain whether they will actually go. Eventually the children and Aunt Violet begin the trip – and for me, that's where the story actually took off. The trip to Iceland via a flying Viking ship is exciting, and the various museums they visit – such as the Museum of Icelandic Witchcraft and Sorcery, the Phallogical Museum and the Sorcerer's Cottage – are interesting; especially so because many are actual tourist attractions. Details of Iceland's mythology and history are skillfully inserted. The visit to TRoLLHeLLiR, the Kingdom of the Trolls, is particularly exciting, and dangerous for Wil and Sophie.

Readers will enjoy the unusual characters in this series: purple-haired Aunt Violet, who is always misplacing things; Peeping Peerslie, the resident ghost of the school library; the huge eagle that checks for smuggled goods entering Iceland because he can see through everything; the lifelike mannequins of the Saga Museum; and the thirteen trolls the children meet. These “enormous . . . gigantic . . . colossal . . . monsters” have misshapen teeth and one eye orange and one green – except for the one with a third eye! The magic portals through which characters pass into other worlds are intriguing, as are the mysterious *takki*, transport keys that move them around in Iceland.

Bridgman begins *Kingdom of the Trolls* with seven pages that list and describe in detail the “Dramatis Personae et Creaturae” of the previous novels in the series. For those who have read the previous books, this serves as a good review. Those who have not might find a list of nearly 30 characters daunting. Perhaps as they read they should flip back for pertinent information as they encounter each character. Better yet, perhaps they'd prefer to read the books in order. Through various characters, Bridgman also summarizes some previous events – but these seem rather complicated and might only confuse first-time readers more.

Bridgman also does the illustrations for her books. Apparently she has plotted out more adventures in the series, so fantasy lovers should expect more from Wil and Sophie. The story concludes with Sophie realizing just how many puzzles remain to be solved, and fearing that the story might not have a happy ending! ❧

RetroGirl by T.D. Thomson has a more mature content and viewpoint, and is intended for those aged about 14 and up. The setting is a modern one, told in the first-person viewpoint of 15-year-old Ariadne, who prefers to be called Ari.

Ari, a single child, lives in an unnamed city with her parents, sort of modern-day hippies. Her mother makes a living doing readings as a psychic, because she can “see” things about people and pass on messages from those who have died. She is eager for Ari to stay connected with her own “guides.” Ari’s father’s main contribution to the family is making and selling elaborate works of origami.

Ari dreams of living in a “normal” family but at first her efforts to acquire friends and become “average” are rather impractical. Perhaps it is due to her unusual upbringing, but she seems naïve for a 15-year-old. She particularly wants to acquire as friends those whom she calls the G6 – the half-dozen most popular and gorgeous girls in school. However, Ari seems clueless when it comes to actually making friends. One of her first attempts is to invite the G6 for a sleepover – which, not surprisingly, they all turn down.

She finally manages to acquire a friend, a Métis student named Deena, a loner like Ari, but one who has lived in a series of foster homes until she connected with her Aunt Mel. Ari also develops a major crush on Deena’s friend Eric, an older Aboriginal fellow with a somewhat shady past who works at the drugstore, but he doesn’t seem particularly interested in her.

One interesting part of this novel is the blogging that Ari carries on with her English teacher, Mrs. Collins – a school assignment that continues even after the project ends. Young readers will no doubt enjoy this, and it’s a unique way for the author to reveal Ari’s thoughts. While I felt some adult frustration with Ari’s cluelessness, young readers will sympathize with her inner struggles and her attempts to gain Eric’s attention. Having to adapt to “weird” parents is something most teenagers will relate to, as is the desire to be accepted by the popular crowd.

Although she tends to be overly talkative, there are things to admire about Ari. She doesn’t think in terms of race at all when it comes to acquiring friends, and she gradually realizes the importance of family, even if they are different. “Family is what you make it,” Deena tells her. Ari also learns that even the G6 have problems, and that one needs to accept one’s own talents and gifts, no matter what they are. The book’s ending, is rather open-ended, something that might bother some teen readers.

Author T.D. (Twila Dawn, according to her website) Thompson lives in Edmonton. Her previous young adult novel was *Flight of the Wild Geese*, and plans are underway for her next two novels to be released in 2011 and 2012. ❧

Donna Firby Gamache is a writer/retired teacher from MacGregor, Manitoba. Her newest work is *Sarah: A New Beginning*, a novel for children, loosely based on the coming of her great-grandparents to Canada in 1891.

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