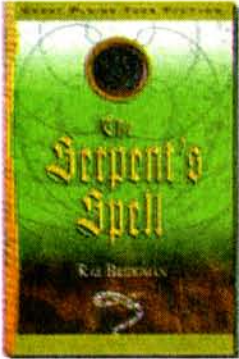


Ambitious fantasy weaves magic in Winnipeg



The Serpent's Spell
By Rae Bridgman
Great Plains Publications,
190 pages, \$17

Reviewed by Brenda Suderman

IN real life, Middle Gate is one of three streets in Winnipeg's historic Armstrong's Point, home to stately mansions, large estates and a storied public library.

In the teen fiction novel *The Serpent's Spell*, "MiddleGate" is transformed into a secret, magical pocket within Winnipeg. It can be reached only through a portal located in the back wall of an old brick house decorated with five-pointed stars.

Narcisse, famous for its pits of mating red-sided garter snakes, is a lot closer than a two-hour car drive from Winnipeg.

The Interlake wildlife conservation area can be reached through an even more secret portal within MiddleGate at Brimstone Monument.

Written and illustrated by University of Manitoba city planning professor Rae Bridgman, *The Serpent's Spell* is an ambitious first trip down a fantasy path that is already well-blazed by such notables as J.K. Rowling (Harry Potter), Eion Colfer (Artemis Fowl) and Jenny Nimmo (Charlie Bone).

Harry Potter fans will recognize many similarities in the story of 10-year-old William Wychwood, who is caught up in the mystery of slaughtered snakes at Narcisse

and the connection to a black medallion he received from his grandmother.

There's the orphaned boy who didn't know about his magical roots, a centuries-old school for young magicians, odd pets like snakes, ghosts in the library, schoolyard bullies, talking statues, a government department regulating magical creatures, a three-headed dog, and teachers and other adults who are more than who they seem at first glance.

Bridgman's premise of a secret magical community within Winnipeg is captivating, even more so for fantasy lovers who will recognize local landmarks and could enjoy reading a story set right here.

Unfortunately, she doesn't always rise to the challenge she sets out for herself. The book lacks the strong, gripping narrative of Rowling's series and instead suffers from the dual problem of supplying too much and too little detail.

For example, when Wil is plunged into magical studies at Gruffud's Academy (instead of the four houses at Hogwarts, these students are divided into grade levels and wear colour-coded sashes over their black robes), he is quickly overwhelmed by subjects such as numeristics, verbology, and botanicals.

"By mid-afternoon, Wil was quite sure he could not stuff anything more into his head," Bridgman writes of the youngster's

first day at school.

By mid-book, after being stuffed with various characters, a magykal (MiddleGate spelling) world, and a sometimes confusing plot, readers may feel the same way.

How is that too little detail?

Short chapters — some only a few paragraphs long, and many just two or three pages — may appeal to readers easily overwhelmed by long stretches of prose, but for the most part, they only add to the book's choppy, cryptic feel.

Each chapter includes Bridgman's pen and ink drawing with a serpentine theme and is topped by a proverb in both English and Latin.

Aided by his cousin Sophie, Wil solves the mystery of the dead snakes, unmask the real identity of the MiddleGate librarian, uncovers the existence of a secret society, and, like Harry Potter, realizes that some problems are bigger than he can handle at the tender age of 10.

The ending is open enough to allow for a sequel.

Despite its promising premise, this book leaves the reader wishing for a secret portal or two to a stronger and more original story.

Brenda Suderman is the Free Press's Child's Play columnist.

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