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The Serpent's Spell

by Rae Bridgman

Ages 9-12 208 pages Great Plains Publications April 2006 Paperback

Meet Wil (that's with one "l") Wychwood, a new grade five student at the school for witches and wizards known as Gruffud's Academy in the town of MiddleGate, Manitoba, Canada. This Hogwarts-style castle in *The Serpent's Spell* by author Rae Bridgman is in its 494th year of educating young magic users, having originally been located in England. When Wil's grandmother dies in a suspicious fire, he travels to his cousin Sophie's house to live with her, their Aunt Rue and Aunt Violet, all of whom are witches.

His grandmother has brought Wil up believing there's no such thing as real magic, but he soon discovers she was wrong. She gave Wil a birthday present before she died, a mysterious black medallion and a gold ring:

The black medallion was a coin-sized disc hanging from a crescent moon. On one side of the disc, the tiny gold symbol of a snake shimmered on the dull black surface, surrounded by the outline of a silver arrow. On the other side of the medallion, the simple outline of a silver triangle glimmered.

Fans of J.K. Rowling's and Harry Potter's will likely enjoy this book, though it's geared to perhaps a slightly younger audience. There are many fun magical elements that the author includes in this book, such as a mischievous ghost called Peeping Peerslie that likes to haunt the library of the school and alter the student's homework; the teacher of Verbology, Mage Terpsy, who mixes the first letters of words up making Spoonerisms (which the students call *tipsy-terpsies*), like saying *clop in the tass* instead of *top in the class*; a two-headed living stone snake named Portia and Portius that is the Gatekeeper of Gruffud's; and a Minister of the Secretariat on the Status of Magical Creatures and former student of Gruffud's, Erro Skelch, who seems to turn up everywhere and has a role in everything that happens at the Academy.

Snakes are important to the plot of the novel. Wil has a pet snake, Esme. The residents of MiddleGate lace their speech with liberal references to serpents, as well, making comments such as "Snakes alive, girl," and "for serpent's sake." There's snake-dancing, snake cakes, the Brimstone Snakes, and someone is killing and skinning the snakes of the caves of nearby Narcisse and leaving their bodies to rot. These are just a few of the many snake references; the most crucial ones involve the secret society known as the Serpent's Chain.

Can Wil and his cousin Sophie find out who is behind the terrible, tragic deaths of the snakes? What is the secret behind Wil's medallion, and how does it link him (pun intended) to the Serpent's Chain? Who or what is killing the snakes of Narcisse, and why? Wil is determined to discover the answers to these questions, and to who murdered his grandmother. The adventures he and Sophie have result in his eventually being kidnapped. The pace is fast, the chapters are short, and the quotes in Latin at their beginnings are a nice touch that add to the overall fun (and educational value) of the novel.

Schools of magic have been written about long before J.K. Rowling wrote the bestselling Harry Potter books, and I'm sure they'll be written about for a long time to come. Is *The Serpent's Spell* as good as the Potter novels? It's difficult to compare the two; while both follow certain set parameters for this sub-genre, surface comparisons are about all that can be made. They're written for different age groups, though people of any age can enjoy both Bridgman's and Rowling's books. I like Rowling books more, but Rae Bridgman has, with *The Serpent's Spell*, written a fun, entertaining book in what will be a very good series.

Amber Ambrosia is the second book of the series, already out, and I'm looking forward to reading that and learning more about the marvelous hidden world of MiddleGate. Harry's adventures appear to be (for now, anyway) over, with the seventh book of the series, *The Deadly Hallows*, out, while Wil Wychwood's and Sophie Isidor's are just beginning. I urge anyone who likes the Harry Potter novels, and stories about fantasy, magic, and adventure to check out *The Serpent's Spell*.

Douglas R. Cobb/2007 for *curl'd up with a good kid's book*

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