

INTERVIEW WITH AN AUTHOR



Rae Bridgman is proof that not having enough time to write is a pretty lame excuse for wannabe writers.

She's Associate Dean (Research) in the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Manitoba, has published numerous academic studies and is the mom of six kids. Where did she find the time to become an author? Her first novel *The Serpent's Spell* was published last spring by Winnipeg's Great Plains Publications. It's a children's fantasy based on Manitoba's own Narcisse red-sided garter snakes and set in Winnipeg's historical Exchange District. Her second book, *Amber Ambrosia*, is being launched this spring.

Would this very busy woman even have time to answer my questions? I thought I'd at least give it a try and be prepared to be understanding if she said no.

Hi Rae. Would you have a few minutes to spare?

"Fire away."

Thanks. First of all, congratulations on getting another book out this spring. When exactly will your second book be out?

Amber Ambrosia is coming out in April and the book launch is being held at McNally Robinson (Grant Park), Wednesday, April 25th at 8 p.m. (All are wel-

come!)

Without giving too much away, does *Amber Ambrosia* continue where your first book left off?

Yes!

You must be a very disciplined person to be able to find the time to write novels with all the demands of a career and parenting. How do you manage your time? Do you have a favourite time of day to write? Do you write every day? Do you give yourself a daily minimum?

I manage time in bits and pieces is the short answer. I try to write or illustrate a little each day, whenever I can. I don't wait for a favourite time, but seize the moment. No daily minimum, as I found that just lead to frustration. Instead, I think about accomplishing at least one thing a day. That one thing can be one page written, one drawing designed, an idea for a chapter, a phone call or email to promote the books... I also keep a daily log (no more than a sentence or two) of what's been accomplished.

How does your family feel about your writing? Do they give you the space you need or must you set firm boundaries?

My family is very supportive. Everyone offers help in various ways from first read on a completed manuscript, editing, brainstorming on plot, passing along humorous anecdotes from the day (fodder for a scene?), reviewing website for format and content, moral encouragement. As I work in and around the family, spatial and temporal boundaries are not an issue. I do have a studio, but everyone comes and goes while I work. The family is part of the whole project! Kids love to contribute to what you're doing.

What advice can you give to other parents who want to write and lead busy family lives?

Keep a notebook with you at all times so you can jot down ideas and not lose them amidst "We're late," the dishes are mounting, there's a deadline at work. Ac-

complete one thing a day (however you define that one thing) towards your long-term goal. After a year, you will have taken 365 steps towards that goal.

You are obviously a talented visual artist as well as writer. What comes first when you craft a book—the visual image or the written word?

The illustrations for *The Serpent's Spell* were executed after the book was completed. I had not drawn before; my years of work as a visual artist involved sculpting or working with materials directly. But I was reading Cornelia Funke's *Inkheart* one day and enjoyed her small end-of-chapter pen-and-ink line drawings and thought to myself, I want to draw small illustrations for my book too. So, I pulled out my old quill pen that I still had from grade six, bought a new bottle of India Ink and started drawing! The Amber Ambrosia illustrations were executed in tandem with writing; for the third book, the illustrations are being done first.

When you are writing do you know how the book will end? Do you use an outline?

Yes, to both questions. I write a detailed chapter-by-chapter, scene-by-scene that outlines illustration idea(s), scene question, scene function, the who, where, when, weather and viewpoint. Snippets of dialogue and description may come as I'm outlining and those are all recorded. So I'm never faced with that proverbial blank page. That said, when it comes time to write, the outline may be substantially revised, if new ideas pop up.

Do you develop characters to go with the plot or vice versa?

Characters grow as the plot unfolds. I really enjoy exploring different voices—each character is driven by their own peccadilloes.

What would you say is your biggest challenge in the writing process?

Challenge: Just sit down and write. Write/right now! Sometimes I trick myself and say, I'm going to sit down for five minutes and write. Five minutes isn't so much, is it? Surprisingly, though, the five minutes turns into ten, and then fifteen. Spaghetti needs stirring. Someone needs help finding their wallet. Back to writing. Thirty minutes have gone by. There's a knock at the door and two phone calls. But I just have to finish that sentence I was in the middle of. Look, an hour has gone by, and a whole page is gleaming before your eyes. It is a huge boon to get a first draft done and then revise and refine it. Getting that first draft done, though, can sometimes seem endless, impossible, unachievable.

What do you enjoy most in the writing process?

I like every stage of writing. I love having an idea for a book. I love working out an outline. I enjoy writing a funny scene and taking on the voices of each of the characters in turn. What is Aunt Violet going to say next? What is Wil really thinking right now, even though he's not saying it? I relish having a first draft to work with and then revising and editing.

Before you become a seasoned pro, is there anything you'd like to share with us about what surprised you in this first full year as a published children's writer?

a) about yourself

I am surprised by my own tenacity. Be careful what you wish for—in my case, "I am going to write a book for children, a fantasy book" and "I want to illustrate it too." It took 5 years, 3 months and 5 days from writing the first sentence of *The Serpent's Spell* (a sentence that then changed many times) to holding the book.

b) about the publishing world

You may approach your writing as a calling (an art). Know that you may spend years writing and illustrating without any hope of being reimbursed for your time and your expenses—it's a wonderful labour of love. Very few authors earn a sustainable income

The Collective Consciousness

purely from their writing. Publishing, however, is a business where the bottom line is the dollar. The two worlds intersect miraculously in a book. When an editor says, “We’re interested” and “We want you to cut 15,000 words,” say “No problem.” (The original manuscript for *The Serpent’s Spell* was 70,000 words and I cut it down to 55,000 in three weeks. Funny, I didn’t miss a word.) On the business side, fewer words, lower production costs. And long-term, in terms of foreign rights, translations to another language are often considerably longer than the original English, increasing production costs. I won’t deny that cutting 15,000 words seemed daunting at first, but it was true...my original [and what I had thought was perfect!] manuscript was verbose.

c) about the reading public

Kids really do love to meet a “real” author. The questions bubble over. Where do your ideas come from? Do you really have a black medallion? Why do you use Latin in your book? Is your book going to be made into a movie? How do you do your illustrations? How long did it take you to write your book? What books do you like to read? Have you ever met someone like Aunt Violet? And many times, adults will say (with a glimmer of envy in their eyes), “I’ve always wanted to write a book.”

d) about book promotion

Writing is only half the job; promotion is the other half. Always carry a copy of your book with you, as you never know when you’ll have the chance to tell people about it. A website really helps to promote your work year-round. Research other authors’ websites (some have websites up and running before their first book is published). The publisher concentrates its publicity machine on the book’s release. The author keeps up the momentum after that and a website can help.

So, since time is obviously not the necessary ingredient for becoming a writer, what DO you consider the necessary ingredient for landing that first book contract?

Lots of ingredients in this recipe. Main ingredient: persistence. Keep good records about your submissions history. Learn from every submission. Keep polishing your work. Continue your professional development—take workshops, meet other writers and professionals. (I took a copy-editing last year through Ryerson University’s online publishing programme. Hardest course I’ve ever taken in all my years of university and the best; it strengthened my writing beyond measure.) Although I have not participated in a writers’ group, many people praise them. Sign on to email lists in your field and develop your network of contacts beyond the local. Make your own luck. Talk to everyone you know that you’re looking for a publisher for your book manuscript. *The Serpent’s Spell* was published as the direct result of a conversation with my neighbour up the street who knew the publisher and provided an introduction.

Any other advice that can you give beginning writers?

I’ve read that it can take a minimum of seven years to get a book published—that’s according to postings on the Children’s Writers e-list, which has 2,000 subscribers, most of them based in the US. If you’re not yet published, think long-term! And a very small, concrete bit of advice—leave instructions for yourself at the end of each session (however short or long it is). Next time you pick up pen or start up computer, read your instructions-to-self. There’s no lag time and you can leap right in with the next task.

Thanks so much for your time, Rae. We look forward to the launch of your new book and wish you much success.

Thank you...here’s to writing!

Find out more from her website:
www.raebridgman.ca