

Review by Donna Gamache, *Prairie Fire*
The Serpent's Spell by Rae Bridgman, Winnipeg: Great Plains
Publications, 2006, ISBN 1-894283-67-8, 191 pp., \$16.95, paper.

The Serpent's Spell, by University of Manitoba professor Rae Bridgman, is a fantasy in the vein of the Harry Potter series, but with a Manitoban setting. The main characters are two young cousins, ten-year-old Wil Wychwood and Sophie Isidor.

Wil's story begins in Toronto where he lived with his grandmother, who has recently died in a mysterious fire. Wil is being sent to Winnipeg to live with his aunts and cousin, relatives Wil had never even known existed. After an interesting train ride--during which Wil's pet snake escapes, and Wil manages to get locked in the washroom--he arrives in Winnipeg where he is met by Sophie and his aunts. What follows is something Wil had never anticipated: they pass through a mysterious gate, down a long stone tunnel lit by lanterns, and into the hidden city of MiddleGate, whose inhabitants have a special affinity with snakes and a long history of performing magic. Wil learns that his mother grew up here as part of this magical family. Soon he is attending school with Sophie at Gruffud's Academy, beginning his education as a sorcerer.

Before long Wil and Sophie become involved in several mysteries. One involves a strange black medallion with a snake symbol, which Wil's grandmother had given him on his tenth birthday, with instructions to keep it always with him. The other involves the garter snakes of Narcisse, which are being slaughtered by unknown people. The two cousins eventually discover a connection between these mysteries, and an ancient secret society called the "Serpent's Chain," which somehow is associated with Wil's medallion. Will they solve the mysteries and learn the truth?

There are many interesting features of MiddleGate that young readers will appreciate: phosphoworm lanterns; eyeglasses whose frames change colour; unusual sweet foods such as snakecake and chocolate toads; the "ditchball" game they play; and the school subjects they study (numeristics, verbology, cartology, botanicals, shadow-cutting). I like the way the author includes Manitoba features such as mosquitoes, cold winter weather, the Dragonfly Festival at Bird's Hill Park, and the Narcisse Snake Pits. At the same time many features of MiddleGate are completely different, such as the mysterious exploding blue eggs and the talking statues.

I enjoyed this book, but didn't feel it was as exciting as it might have been. The suspense and tension didn't reach the heights they could have. I also kept noticing ways in which the author seems to have been overly influenced by the Harry Potter series. Wil, like Harry, is an orphan unaware of his background. He has a strange pet and attends a special school for learning sorcery. He encounters ghosts and talking statues, and must fight against an evil foe. The conclusion of the book suggests that this could also be the first of a series.

Young readers who like to read fantasy will enjoy the chance to read one with a local setting. Perhaps this would be a good book to start with, before reading the Harry Potter series.