

What secrets do the Narcisse snake dens hold?

Books by University Staff

BY DALE BARBOUR
The Bulletin

From Adam and Eve on down, snakes have gotten a bad rap in Western society.

But with her new book *The Serpent's Spell*, city planning professor Rae Bridgman is putting a new spin on snakes.

"I have a small mission in the book. I want to reinterpret snakes as not evil," Bridgman said. *The Serpent's Spell* was released earlier this spring. It's not Bridgman's first book; she's written extensively in the field of urban anthropology. But *The Serpent's Spell*, published by Great Plains Publications, is her first endeavour in the area of fantasy. With six children of her own, trying her hand at writing a children's book seemed a natural move.

"My husband often reads to the children at night, so we'll have the family sitting around reading and I thought one night I would enjoy writing a book for the kids," Bridgman said.

But to write a fantasy novel you need a world to base it in. Bridgman started putting that world together with pieces from her own experience – a medallion and gold ring found in an old chest on the family farm when she was a kid formed the core of a mystery. But it was an encounter with snakes in Manitoba that would inspire the heart of the book.

"When we moved here from Toronto in July of 1998, one of the first trips we took was to go out and see the snake dens at Narcisse. I was just amazed at seeing the thousands and thousands of snakes," Bridgman said. The garter snakes stay in the Narcisse dens during winter and when spring comes the area is alive with writhing masses of snakes. But how much more interesting would it be, Bridgman thought, if those dens held a secret society focused around the serpent.

"There really is a hidden city there because there's miles of tunnels under the fields of Narcisse so it's a great chance to play the 'What if game.' What



Photo by Dale Barbour

City planning professor Rae Bridgman spins a tale involving snakes, secret societies and magic in her new book *The Serpent's Spell*.

if there really was magic and what if there was a whole society that revered snakes?" Bridgman said. "The story follows from these sorts of questions."

Bridgman also found architectural designs of snakes tucked in buildings throughout Winnipeg, including the Kelly House on Adelaide Street next to the Exchange District. The house was designed and built by Michael Kelly, and is regarded as a heritage building. But from Bridgman's perspective the lonely house, now surrounded by warehouses, forms the entrance to the mystical world

of MiddleGate, home of Sophie Isidor and Wil Wychwood – the two young sorcerers that are the protagonists for *The Serpent's Spell*.

For Bridgman, making the jump from academic writing to fantasy writing has been a challenge and a pleasure.

"I've always enjoyed writing experimental ethnographies," Bridgman said. But more often than not, scholarly writing is analytical and, by nature, a little bit dry.

Writing for kids, on the other hand, means ramping up the action and

Want to learn more?

Rae Bridgman's *The Serpent Society* has Winnipeg roots. If you're curious about the Kelly house and the colourful history of the Kelly family check out www.virtual.heritagewinnipeg.com/vignettes/vignettes_144W.htm#

Wondering about the Narcisse snake dens? Check out www.gov.mb.ca/conservation/wildlife/managing/snakes_narcisse.html

Bridgman's own site can be found at www.raebridgman.ca

dialogue. Bridgman's training includes degrees in anthropology and classics – both of which play a role in *The Serpent's Spell*.

Bridgman said anthropology is all about attempting to understand and navigate in other cultures – perfect training for trying to create a fictional culture of her own.

"When you're building a fantasy world, it has its own rules and the reader will hold you to those rules," Bridgman said.

As for the classics degree, Bridgman sprinkles Latin phrases and their translations throughout the book – tagging each chapter with a lighthearted Latin phrase. Bridgman has also included 55 pen and ink illustrations, of her own design, to head up each chapter.

If sorcery, snakes and young magicians all sounds familiar, blame J. K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter books. In many ways, Rowling is treading upon familiar ground with the Harry Potter book series – but the huge success of her books has cast a shadow over other writers trying to enter the field. Bridgman, who has no problem citing Rowling's books as an influence, says there's a lot of upside to that shadow.

"[Rowling's] work has set a standard for others to follow. She's developed an audience for this kind of writing. A lot of educators and librarians are very grateful because she's enticed a lot of people to read that might not have otherwise," Bridgman said.

Atkinson signs with Blue Bombers



Submitted photo

Former Bison Blair Atkinson has a shot at making the Winnipeg Blue Bombers.

The Winnipeg Blue Bombers announced the signing of undrafted free agent wide receiver Blair Atkinson on May 10. Atkinson has played the past three seasons with the University of Manitoba Bisons.

Atkinson, 25, had his best season with the Bisons during the 2005 campaign. He was the team's leading receiver in yards (445), first in touchdowns (6), second in receptions (31) and second in receiving yard average (14.4). He was the Canada West leader in receiving touchdowns and seventh highest in conference receiving yards. The 6'4", 210 lbs receiver had four catches for 45 yards in the 2005 playoff loss to Alberta.

Atkinson has already made an impact in the Bisons record book in his three seasons. He holds a share of the record for most receiving touchdowns in a game (3 - 2004), second highest TD total by a receiver in a season (6), second most receiving touchdowns in a career (12), fourth in receiving yard average in a career (14.8), seventh most receiving yards in a career (1143) and tied for seventh most overall touchdowns in a career (12).

Bison football head coach Brian Dobie stated, "I am happy for Blair and he is definitely deserving of this CFL signing with the Blue Bombers. He was one of four to five players who created interest among the CFL teams during the Canadian College Draft in April. Bombers Receivers Coach Bobby Dyce has spoken well towards Blair and we wish him well at the camp."

The Winnipeg Blue Bombers opened training camp May 21 at Canad Inns Stadium.

Sneaker Day

Sneaker Day is set to run June 14 at the Fort Garry campus and June 21 at the Bannatyne campus.

The Fort Garry campus will again be awash in silly costumes and goofy walks. Recreation services fitness coordinator Ulla Liljegren said they've changed some of the rules of competition this year to make it easier for the judges to judge costumes and easier for the competitors to know what the judges are looking for.

"We're also going to have more entertainment along the walk and Jay Oliver from 102.3 Clear FM is set to MC the event," Liljegren said.

One change that people will need to take note of this year relates to lunch – for the first time people at the Fort Garry campus are being asked to register for their Sneaker Day lunch in advance.

"We're doing it to avoid having extra food," Liljegren said.

"People can buy their lunch tickets at the Answers booth in University Centre or at the main desk in Frank Kennedy Centre." The deadline for buying the lunch tickets is June 12.