"Can we just have a little break from being terrified?" or the Dangerous Invention of Secret-Keeping: Review of Eden Unger Bowditch's *The Atomic Weight of Secrets*

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Eden Unger Bowditch, *The Atomic Weight of Secrets or The Arrival of the Mysterious Men in Black*
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Eden Unger Bowditch's *The Atomic Weight of Secrets, or The Arrival of the Mysterious Men in Black*, Book One of her planned *The Young Inventors Guild* trilogy, is not, strictly speaking, neo-Victorian as it opens in the autumn of 1903. Nonetheless, the book has a distinctly neo-Victorian flavour about it from the outset. Not least, the enigmatic dust jacket of a dreaming child features smoking chimney stacks that recall the Industrial Revolution, while the floating cogs and wheels are reminiscent of steampunk gears. The shadowy figure in black on the back cover sports a bowler hat, popularised during the Victorian era and, not coincidentally, *The Young Inventors Guild* which the protagonists (re)form was apparently first set up in 1872 by their parents. Similarly, the narrative is prefaced by a 'Note to Reader' from Bowditch herself, beginning with the 'Dear Reader' convention so strongly identified with nineteenth-century novels (at least in the popular imagination), while chapters titles employ the deliberately antiquated convention of supplementary or alternative subtitles, as in Chapter 3: 'A MODEST PROPOSAL or How Lucy Came to Bite Her Nails'. Furthermore, there seems to be a discernible Arts-and-Crafts-like interest in the book as a material object. Though this is not a fully illustrated novel, the chapters' title pages incorporate small pictographs related to the

plot developments, and the book cover in William Morris green is impressed with twelve oblong silhouettes in gold print (some of them duplicated as chapter pictographs) of the child protagonists, some of their parents and, revealingly, a rabbit, presumably intended to represent the White Rabbit of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865, see below). Together with the idiosyncratic choice of font styles, these features serve to make *The Atomic Weight of Secrets* a visually interesting and pleasing as well as readable book. As such Bowditch's novel might be compared to Lemony Snicket's (aka Daniel Handler's) *A Series of Unfortunate Events* saga (1999-2006), which has no specific temporal setting but is infused with paratextual elements, tropes, plot-lines, and narrative devices from nineteenth-century literature, especially Gothic and sensation fiction, which Bowditch also draws on. Indeed, Snicket's amateur inventor, the fourteen year-old Violet Baudelaire, one of his three child protagonists, might well have provided some of the inspiration for Bowditch's intrepid band of five exceptionally gifted child scientists and maverick inventors.

The Atomic Weight of Secrets tells the story of these five children jettisoned from their comfortable lives, circumscribed by their parents' love, and brought together at Sole Manner Farm, an isolated residential school outside Dayton, Ohio. The only pupils under the guidance of a single motherly teacher, who quickly recognises their superior knowledge of all things mathematical and scientific, the children are often left to their own devices to conduct experiments and draw up plans for ever more complex inventions (or at least their formal daily lessons, so far as there are any, are not described in much detail). At the weekends the children are allowed out, but only to their new nanny-supervised 'homes' from which their parents are conspicuously and permanently absent, the journeys there and back accomplished via horse-drawn carriages driven by ominous taciturn characters in ridiculous and bizarre all-black costumes (including beaver hats, bunny ears, and turbans). These same figures, the children eventually discover, permanently police the boundaries of both the farm and their residential neighbourhood, rendering escape virtually impossible – unless they quite literally learn to fly. Understandably, in spite of their relative freedom and the unconditional love (and copious amounts of mouth-watering food) received from their new carers, the children struggle with feelings of anxiety, abandonment and anger at their parents' apparent

desertion of them. In limbo and terrified of they know not quite what, the child heroines and heroes fear not only for themselves but for their parents also, who they suspect may have been kidnapped.

For all intents and purposes, Bowditch's protagonists have been 'orphaned', 'kidnapped', and 'adopted' out of the blue, with the novel recycling common tropes of nineteenth-century children's literature and fiction about children, as highlighted in many of the critical contributions to this special issue: "they did indeed feel like captives, or castaways, trapped on an island of sorts" (p. 10). There are, however, some crucial differences from nineteenth-century versions, as all the children come from highly privileged and apparently wealthy backgrounds, their own parents being important scientists or else great artists, such as a world-renowned opera singer. Nor are the children ever subjected to physical hardships and, even when suffering emotional distress, they have each other or substitute parental figures, like their beloved teacher Miss Brett (herself, incidentally, orphaned at fourteen), to provide ready comfort; that is to say, after their arrival at Sole Manner Farm, they are never completely alone, isolated or self-reliant. (Faith, which for many children at the turn of the century might have offered another source of solace, goes wholly unmentioned in the novel.)

What Bowditch seems most interested in exploring, then, is not primarily children's experience of the world as an unpredictable and potentially perilous place, but rather children's creation of their own quasi separate world within or alongside the grown-up world, though always emphasising the intimate interconnections between the two and the ways they risk impacting on one another. The book focuses on the anxiety and distress that grown-ups' seemingly incomprehensible actions – and refusal to explain themselves – can have on children's psyches, emotional equilibrium, and confidence. So too parents' and other adults' (blinkered) determination to protect children from harm by keeping them all unknowing: ignorance, the novel impresses on its readers, is no guarantee for innocence or safety, as well as constituting an insult and unnecessary frustration to children's intelligence. Bowditch is keen to emphasise that same instinctive intelligence, as well as children's seemingly 'natural' resourcefulness and resilience, providing vulnerable and sometimes self-doubting but still empowered and courageous role-models for her readers. Her protagonists are children who are determined to *enjoy* being children –

but not on adult terms imposed upon them without their consent. Hence also the titular epigraph from halfway through the novel, where one of the children insists:

> I want to bowl and play and not worry about what miserable crazy things we may or may not be facing. […] Can we just have a little break from being terrified? Can we just enjoy the beautiful afternoon? In the houses we call home right now, with the nannies who care for us, with the friends we are? (p.158)

It thus seems somewhat strange to employ an evidently adult, if sympathetic narrator, rather than granting the child characters their own narrative voices and first-person viewpoints. Bowditch's technique also has the slight disadvantage of somewhat limiting the degree of individualisation between characters in spite of their differences in age, gender and family circumstances, with one boy, for instance, being a semi-orphan, having lost his mother some years before. The protagonists represent various ages for both child and Young Adult readers to identify with: twelve-year-old Jasper Modest and his six-year-old sister Lucy, nine-year-old Wallace Banneker, twelve-year-old Noah Canto-Sagas, and thirteen year-old Faye Vigyanveta. Yet apart from Lucy's sometimes childish language – as when she describes a barn and weathervane as a "the twirly-twisty-birdy-boxy thing" (p. 296) – and the 'young love' interest that develops between Jasper and Faye, the children differ little in how they react to situations and face up to danger.

Also, while Bowditch allows them to express anger against excessive adult supervision and arbitrary control over their lives, that anger is never permitted to erupt into violent retaliation, even when an identifiable villain emerges for its focus. (Judging from the opening pages of the sequel, included at the end of the novel, Book Two of the *The Young Inventors Guild* may prove somewhat darker in its representations of violence.) Even if admittedly the plot does not require any more realistic violence, for today's children, accustomed to violent action-packed video games, pelting someone with apples may seem distinctly too tame and falsely 'innocent' – doubly so since, from the outset of the novel, the protagonists are shown to be self-consciously aware of the artificial association of childhood with

innocence, which they strategically and performatively employ against the adults in positions of authority:

> They looked like any ordinary group of school children, taking a break from study while innocently basking in the afternoon sun. That had been the plan, after all – to appear innocent. It had been the plan to look, for all the world, as if they had not a care, not a worry, no concern other than who would get to hold the jump rope or who got the last cream cheese and jelly sandwich. (p. 3)

A few times, Bowditch seems to momentarily forget her primary audience. Child readers, for instance, may not necessarily be impressed by their heroines and heroes being expected to share bedrooms with their parents rather than having rooms of their own (see pp. 335-337). Some oversights seem attributable to the writer's evident love of language and the sheer pleasure of words. While some explanations of terminology are provided – "'My father plays the sitar,' Faye said [….]. 'It's an Indian string instrument, for those of you who don't know.'" (p. 92) – others are not, particularly in the extended celebration of the botanical delights of the gardens at Faye's Indian family estate. I must admit to being unfamiliar with "bael trees"; nor do I have the fainted idea of what "balsam" and "brinjal" plants might look like, and I suspect that many more of the itemised shrubs, flowers, and herbs – only "tulsi" is translated as "(basil)" – would be utterly mysterious to my own grandchildren, less acquainted with nature than with mobile phone technology (p. 72). That, however, may be exactly the point of Bowditch's novel, namely to inculcate a fascination for nature as well as, more obviously, for hands-on scientific knowledge and experimentation, with much of the children's activities taking place outside in meadows and fields. This arguably constitutes one of the novel's great strengths: akin to the magical education of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter and friends, it shows learning to be *fun* rather than boring and tedious and depicts applied imagination, problem-solving and invention as making up "the real magic" that everyone can access ('Note to Reader'). There is arguably something didactic, if never obtrusively so, about Bowditch's wholesome 'back-to-the-farm' advocacy of a more holistic or rounded childhood, deliberately balanced on the cusp of (post)modernity, when the innocent Victorian 'babe

in the woods' increasingly recedes into the distance to make way for a more complex and conflicted concept of the child.

Equally, Bowditch invites resistance to a false hierarchy between the Sciences and Arts and Humanities, stressing the importance of literature, particularly classics of children's literature, to the developmental process. For as the children come to realise under Miss Brett's tutelage, while their scientific knowledge may far exceed that of their more ordinary peers, in other areas they are utterly ignorant. Not only do they lack basic skills such as cooking and baking but, still more crucially, most of them are wholly unfamiliar with "stories and songs and rhymes written especially for children" (p. 89), leading to the sense of a gift withheld. Only Noah, through his opera singer mother, has been previously introduced to the pleasures of imaginative literature, including nineteenth-century classics like Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* (1844), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and Arthur Canon Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (1887).

None of the protagonists are familiar with Carroll's characters from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* – the madcap transformations of which arguably inform Bowditch's narrative of the five children's lives turned upside down and the 'curious' whacky figures of multiplying and substituting men in black. When Miss Brett, daunted by the children's scientific expertise, asks, "Has anyone else ever felt like Alice trying to chase the White Rabbit?", she merely encounters "a sea of blank faces" (p. 86). Not coincidentally, the copy of Carroll's text, the reading of which becomes a ritual of communion, is one that Miss Brett's mother owned and read to her as a child, which the teacher now proceeds to share with her charges. (She also introduces them to L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* [1900] and Edith Nesbitt's *Five Children and It* [1902].) From one point of view, the children's literary education takes on aspects of a missionary project, with love of literature functioning as the novel's substitute religionism, so to speak, standing in for the absent discourse of faith.[1] In exciting the children's imagination, Miss Brett also rekindles her own sense of childhood magic, as when she "hold[s] off on the final chapter" as she had done as a child herself while re-reading the dog-eared text, because "[s]he had not wanted the story to come to an end" (p. 174). Unsurprisingly, the figure of Alice becomes a vital point of identification for the children (and Bowditch's readers) and a means of trying to make sense of their experience and confusion, for instance by rendering the men

in black not so much threatening as ridiculous: "The children certainly saw themselves in the stories she read them. They were, in so many ways, on some crazy adventure with nonsensical characters who offered no answer to the mysteries at hand" (p. 177).

Yet there is also a slight tendency in *The Atomic Weight of Secrets* to over-simplify the potential risks of both science and literature. When at one point, Jasper paints the numbers on his watch face with phosphorus (see p. 39), what sprang immediately to my mind were Victorian match girls dying agonising deaths of phosphorus poisoning or 'phossy jaw'. Yet the substance's toxicity goes unremarked, as does any implication of less savoury readings of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in terms of Carroll's possible paedophile tendencies. Indeed the risks of sexual exploitation and violation of any kind, but especially of children, are elided altogether. The villain's attack on Miss Brett, for instance, never includes the threat of sexual force, nor does his interaction with Faye make reference to it, though her exotic beauty might reasonably have rendered this a viable avenue to coerce the other children's cooperation. In this, Bowditch's novel is distinctly *un*-neo-Victorian, since both neo-Victorian adult and Young Adult fiction generally foregrounds sexual/paedophile threats, for example through the trope of child prostitution as in Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), Anthony Horwitz's *The House of Silk* (2011) and Philip Pullman's *The Tin Princess* (1994), or incest as in Linda Newbery's *Set in Stone* (2006). It also tends to impute sexual agency even to its young characters, such as the titular heroine of Pullman's Sally Lockhart series (1985-1990).[2] The closest Bowditch comes to hinting at something like this is Jasper's oblique and truncated warning when the children plan their getaway to go in search of their parents: "The city is not a children's nursery [….] We may find ourselves in worse danger than –" (p. 145). Again, however, these darker strains are ones Bowditch may choose to develop as the trilogy progresses and her protagonists mature correspondingly. Other themes that might be complicated further include those of race and gender, for it seems rather unlikely that in 1903 America female and/or mixed-race scientists would have encountered no discrimination whatsoever.

Some child and adolescent (as well as adult/parent) readers may also find the protagonists' essential goodness – and desire to be/do good, even to the point of selfless sacrifice of their joint invention – somewhat unrealistic, not to say unconvincing. Bowditch's heroines and heroes are, in many ways,

ideal rather than 'real' children who might step off the page or whom young readers might temporarily 'become'. Nonetheless, they are all in their own ways engaging and appealing, perhaps in part because they make a refreshing change from the frequently more Alice-in-Wonderlandesque horrid or beastly 'real' thing. There is a sense in which Bowditch's novel, according to each reader's predilections, may be viewed as a laudable effort to counter prevalent sensationalist depictions of child endangerment in Young Adult fiction, as in the Snicket series or Suzanne Collins' (non-neo-Victorian) *The Hunger Games* (2008), or, conversely, as part of a backlash against this same phenomenon. But perhaps Bowditch's intrepid child inventors will become more 'real' as the series develops, so that, like their "frightfully thrilling" adventures (p. 269), they might eventually prove a little more *frightful* as well as likeably and delightfully thrilling.

Notes

1. I am not, of course, suggesting that Young Adult fiction *must* or *should* address issues of faith, but since science is often viewed as antithetical to religion, the omission seems a curious one in the case of Bowditch's novel. No reference is made to either the children or their nannies (one of whom is Irish and hence quite likely Catholic) attending church on Sundays, for instance, and though the children marvel at nature, they never discuss or debate evolutionary theory and/or 'intelligent design', as they might be expected to do.
2. Although the *The Tin Princess* recycles some of the characters from Pullman's earlier Sally Lockhart novels, Sally herself only features briefly at the outset, so that arguably the text should not be viewed as part of the series.