

Portraits of Chicagoans of the Year 2010



Blue Balliett is a dangerous woman. If, however, you spot her strolling the streets near her Hyde Park home, do not feel as if you must immediately call the Chicago Police Department or Homeland Security. Instead, call your kids. Sit them down with copies of Balliett's four novels for young adults. Once they start reading these intricate, challenging — and exhilaratingly fun — stories about kids solving puzzles and getting to the bottom of vexing questions about art and science, they'll be transformed. Once they get a feel of the fizzy lift that comes with exercising their minds, there will be no stopping them. That's why Balliett is so dangerous. After reading her books, your kids will be pestering you with questions, suggesting projects, leaping from one inspired notion to another. — Julia Keller

Balliett broadens young horizons

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Sit them down with copies of Balliett's four novels for young adults, either "Chasing Vermeer" (2004), "The Wright 3" (2006), "The Calder Game" (2008) or her latest, "The Danger Box" (2010), all published by Scholastic. Once they start reading these intricate, challenging — and exhilaratingly fun — stories about kids solving puzzles and getting to the bottom of vexing questions about art and science, they'll be transformed. Once they get a feel of the fizzy lift that comes with exercising their minds, there will be no stopping them.

Next thing you know, your kids will be pelting you with questions about paintings and sculpture and the ideas of Charles Darwin and the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright — all subjects which come alive in Balliett's novels. They'll be requesting trips to the Museum of Contemporary Art or the Art Institute of Chicago or the Wright-designed edifices in the Chicago area — all locations that show up in her stories.

That's why Balliett is so dangerous. After reading her books, your kids will be pestering you with questions, suggesting projects, leaping from one inspired notion to another.

Which is exactly what kids — and adults, too, for that matter — ought to do, she believes.

"I think it feels good to go out of your comfort zone," Balliett said over a recent lunch near her [home](#). "It's what we're meant to be doing."

She sets her novels in real-life places, she said, to help kids realize that interesting things can be found in their own backyards. Her first three books are set in the Chicago area; "The Danger Box" takes place in Three Oaks, Mich.

"I want children to look around at their lives and see the imagination in what's familiar," she said. "Looking carefully at one place gives me that neat feeling. It wakes up my brain." When children write fan letters to her, Balliett added, they often mention that they enjoy finding real places in their fiction. "Kids say, 'There are mysteries in my neighborhood! I never knew that!'"

Balliett, 55, taught third grade at the University of Chicago Laboratory School before resigning in 2003 to write full time. She was born and raised in New York City; her father, Whitney Balliett, was the longtime jazz critic of the New Yorker. After graduating from Brown University, Balliett moved to Nantucket to write. There she met her husband, Bill Klein, a city planner. They moved to Chicago in 1991, when Klein took a job with the American Planning Association. They have three adult children.

Her books brim with intriguing information about subjects such as art history and, in the case of "The Danger Box," the life and ideas of Darwin. "But I don't want it to feel like work," she said. "It's an adventure."

"The Danger Box" is the first of her novels to employ a first-person narrator: A young boy named Zoomy, who has a physical condition that impairs his eyesight. But "vision" has all kinds of meaning in a Balliett novel.

As Zoomy notes, "I'll bet most people don't know how interesting everyday stuff is if you look closely. The only reason I do is my different kind of seeing."

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