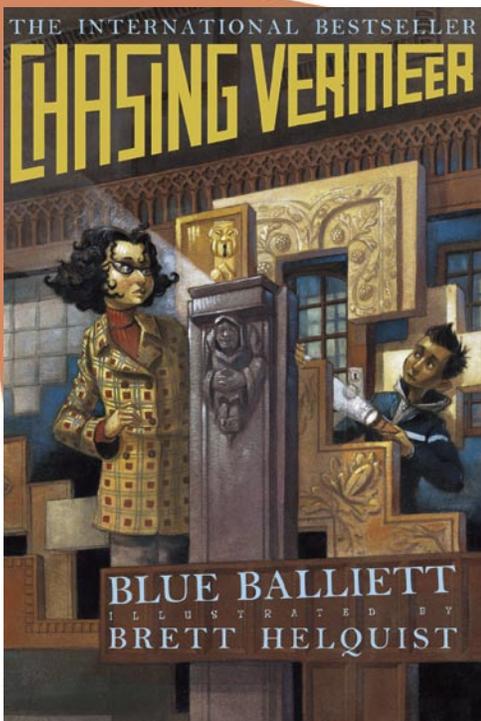
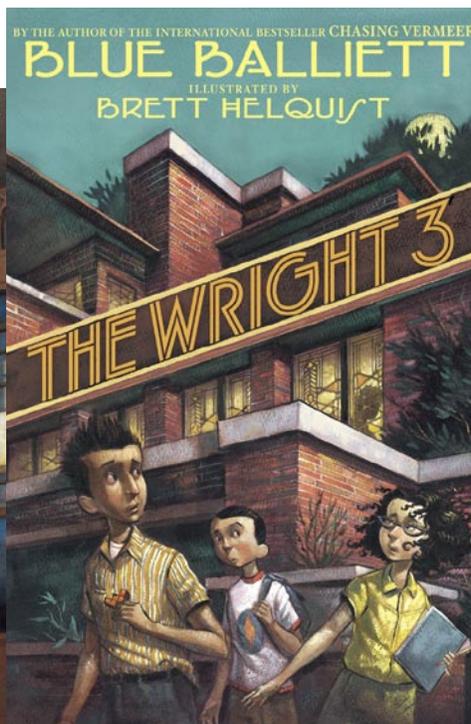


Discussion guide to the novels of BLUE BALLIETT

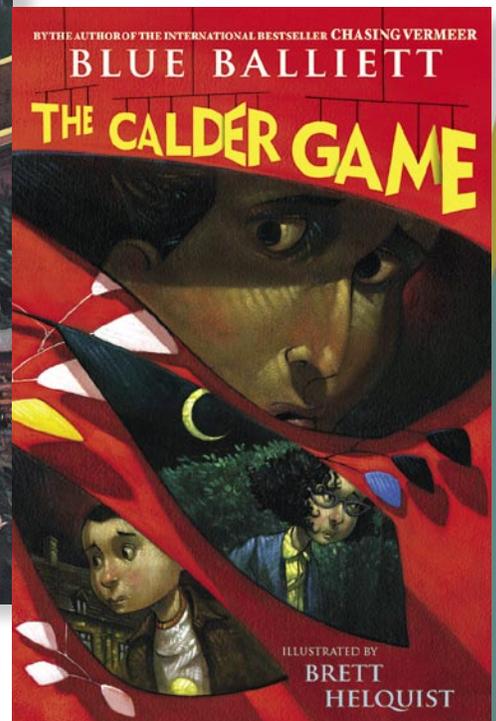
If you're looking for an exciting new voice in children's literature and a way to connect a variety of disciplines across the curriculum, then explore the novels of Blue Balliett. Respecting children's innate sense of wonder and curiosity, Balliett's books explore not just mysteries but friendship, art, and individuality. These fast-paced intellectual art mysteries invite readers to break codes, follow puzzles, and crack open the links between widely disparate disciplines. Your students will love spending time with Calder, Petra, and Tommy as they discover what happened to a priceless Vermeer painting, help save a historic Frank Lloyd Wright house, and find the connections between Calder sculptures that are strategically placed around the world. *Newsweek* called *Chasing Vermeer* "A Da Vinci Code for tweens." These bestselling books deserve a spot in your classroom library and on your must-read list!



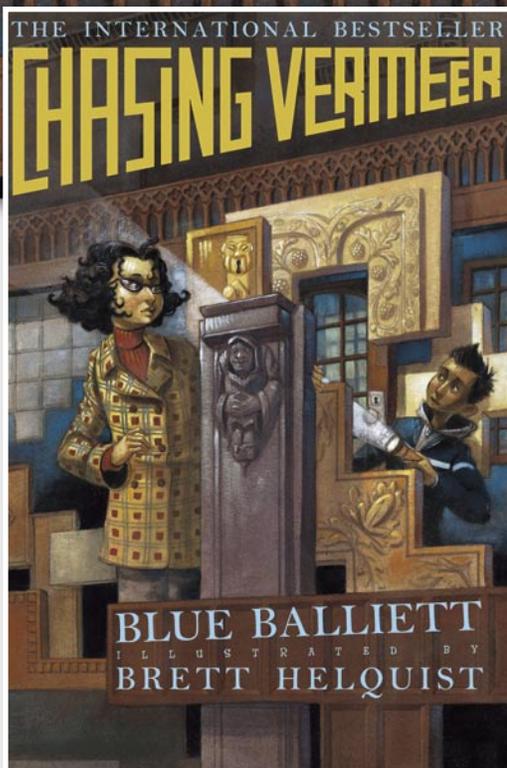
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CHASING VERMEER

by Blue Balliett
Illustrated by Brett Helquist

ABOUT THE BOOK

When a book of unexplainable occurrences brings Petra Andalee and Calder Pillay together, strange things start to happen: seemingly unrelated events connect, an eccentric old woman seeks their company, and an invaluable Vermeer painting disappears. Before they know it, the two find themselves at the center of an international art scandal, where no one—neighbors, parents, teachers—is spared from suspicion. As Petra and Calder are drawn clue by clue into a mysterious labyrinth, they must draw on their powers of intuition, their problem-solving skills, and their knowledge of Vermeer. Can they decipher a crime that has left even the FBI baffled?

- A *New York Times* Bestseller
- *Book Sense* Book of the Year
- Edgar Award Winner
- *Booklist* Top 10 Youth Mysteries
- *Chicago Tribune* Prize for Young Adult Fiction

PRE-READING DISCUSSION:

The author warns the reader before the opening of chapter one, “Don’t be fooled by ideas that seem, at first, to fit easily. Don’t be fooled by ideas that don’t seem to fit at all.” What do you think she means by this? Why do authors try to “fool” their readers at all? Do you think this is an indication that this book is a mystery? Is there anything in particular to keep in mind while reading a mystery compared to other types of novels?

DISCUSSION GUIDE:

1. How do you think the three deliveries will be joined by the end of the book? How do the recipients of the letter feel about it? What would you do if you received it?
2. Describe Petra, Calder, and Ms. Hussey. How are they alike? How are they different? Would you like to be in Ms. Hussey’s class or not? Why?
3. What do you think of Picasso’s quote about art: “Art is a lie, but a lie that tells the truth.” Or do you prefer Calder’s version: “Art is the truth that tells a lie.” Do the assignment Ms. Hussey gives her class, that is, find a piece of art in your own home. Then discuss the items the following day.
4. Would you like to read *Lo!* by Fort? Do you agree that, “Depending on how you looked at things, your world could change completely.” (p.45) How can we learn to look at things with fresh eyes? Find something extraordinary in your own neighborhood or home.
5. Tommy and Calder communicate through their own secret code. Why do you think they decide to use this instead of just writing a traditional letter? Write a letter to a friend using Calder’s code. Can you create a new code?
6. Petra and Calder are both intrigued by the number of seeming coincidences that lead them on their quest. Make a map of the connections they make between people, events, and ideas. Do you believe things are more connected than they seem? Do you believe in the idea that, there are no coincidences?
7. Make a list of everything you’ve discovered about Petra and Calder, just like the list they create of what they learned about Vermeer. Add to the list as you read the novel. Think about the ways a reader comes to know a character: what they say, what they do, what they think or feel, and how other characters see them.
8. What does the thief of *A Lady Writing* say is the reason for the robbery? The thief urges people to, “...trust your own instincts. Do not be afraid to go against what you were taught, or what you were told to see or believe.” Are kids or adults better at going against the obvious? Why? Do you think the thief was justified in stealing the painting, or not? Why? Is it ever right to go against the rules? If so, when?
9. Petra and Calder admire Fort because he is “a fearless thinker.” Are Petra and Calder fearless thinkers as well? Are you? How do you think you develop this skill? Does your school prepare you to be a fearless thinker or not? What makes you say this? Do you think this is what Mrs. Sharpe admires in the kids? Why?
10. Suspicion is a major theme of the novel. Who do the kids suspect of being involved in the crime? Why? How do they prove or disprove their suspicions? Have you ever had misguided notions about someone? How did you resolve them?
11. What steps did Calder and Petra take to solve the mystery? What guided them the most in their quest? Would you have taken similar risks? How did Petra and Calder change by the end of the novel? What makes a character change?
12. Did you enjoy trying to decode the messages and looking for the hidden clues in Brett Helquist’s illustrations?

PROJECTS:

READING:

Great readers make connections while they read in at least three important ways. They think about connections between the book they are reading and others they have already read (text-to-text connections), they think about how the book relates to their own personal life or memories (text-to-self connections), or how it reminds them of something from the larger world, like issues in the news or something that is happening in their own neighborhood (text-to-world connections). As you read *Chasing Vermeer* create a chart like the one below and keep track of the connections you make. Keep this graphic organizer in your book as a bookmark and fill it out as you go along.

Text-to-Text Connections	Text-to-Self Connections	Text-to-World Connections
Ex: <i>Lo!</i> reminds Petra to take notice of what is around her each day.	Petra created a costume from a dream. I never buy a costume either...	Vermeer's painting <i>A Lady Writing</i> is all over the news

WRITING:

Petra and Calder are interesting characters to follow on their quest for the Vermeer painting. Brainstorm a list of qualities characters in a mystery of your own might possess. Decide the following: What do they look like? What are their favorite hobbies? What are their best subjects in school? What do they struggle with at school, home, and with other people? What are their favorite foods? Write a brief scene where one of your characters discover something has gone wrong.

ART:

Inspired by Brett Helquist's illustrations, draw a scene from the novel (with or without the main characters) and embed clues about the mystery. Frame them with black construction paper (or create fancy frames with interesting hand-drawn carvings on brown construction paper) to create a mystery gallery. Hang in the hallway or use as a bulletin board display.

ART HISTORY:

Study the art of Johannes Vermeer (google Vermeer and WebMuseum to see most of his masterpieces online). Choose your favorite painting by Vermeer and explain in a journal entry why this piece is your favorite. Discuss the following elements of the piece you chose: the subject, the palette, the light, and the texture. Are there any Vermeer paintings that you feel the thief might have been right about, that don't fit with the rest of the artist's work? Explain what makes you think this.

SCIENCE AND ART:

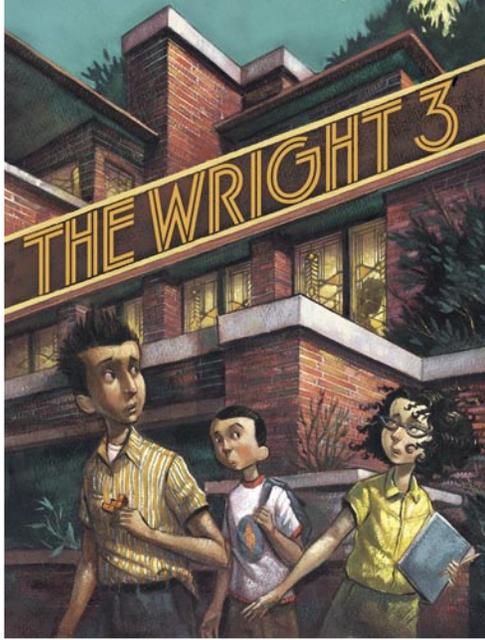
Calder loves the Vermeer painting *The Geographer* and the idea of mapmakers. "Mapmaking was a respected profession, something between a science and an art." (p. 74) Create your own map of your neighborhood using the science of geography and your own artistic ability. Make it a map that is useful to you and your family and don't forget the important details.



BY THE AUTHOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER CHASING VERMEER

BLUE BALLIETT

ILLUSTRATED BY
BRETT HELQUIST



THE WRIGHT 3

by Blue Balliett
Illustrated by Brett Helquist

ABOUT THE BOOK

Supersleuths Petra and Calder, along with Calder's old friend Tommy, have been cryptically drawn into another mystery—this time involving a Frank Lloyd Wright architectural masterpiece, the Robie House.

- A *New York Times* Bestseller
- *Child Magazine* Best Children's Book Award
- 21st Century Award Winner

When the kids' sixth-grade class attempts to save the Robie house from demolition, eerie events are reported: Voices float out from within, shadows shift behind the art-glass windows, even the roof moves. Soon Petra, Calder, and Tommy are involved in a frightening search for ghosts, hidden treasure, and a coded message left behind by Wright. Can they pursue justice and escape with their lives?

PRE-READING DISCUSSION:

In the opening pages before chapter one, the author reminds the reader, "Don't forget that sometimes little things can appear big, and big things little—and that what you notice first isn't always what you're looking for." Why is this important when reading a mystery? What else is important to remember when you're reading a mystery that might not be true with other genres?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Describe Petra, Calder, Tommy, and Ms. Hussey. What are the most important things to know about them? Who would you most like to be friends with? Why?
2. Why is Ms. Hussey so upset about the Robie House? How do the kids show their feelings about it to the outside world? Will the comparison between the arts work? Do you think they are similar or not? Why? Can a group of children make a difference about important things in their world? What makes you think so or not?
3. Explain what Tommy finds at the Robie House. Do you think he should keep it or not? Why? As a reader, how do you know when something small like this might become important to the story? Can you always tell the difference between a red herring and a real clue?
4. How does the fish Tommy found represent everything he's ever wanted? Tommy questions whether the Robie House is more important than his own families' needs. Which one do you think is most important? Why? Tommy ends up lying to his friends over his find. Is he justified or not? What is the effect of this decision?
5. Discuss the reasons why Petra, Tommy, and Calder are having a difficult time with each other. Who do you feel most compassion for? Why? Do you think it is more difficult to get along within a group of three than when the group has an even number of members? How does their friendship change over the course of the novel?
6. What is the history of the Robie House? Do you think it is important to save it? Are there historical buildings in your neighborhood or town that you think should be saved? Why? Do you know (or can you find out) the history of your home?
7. What connections do the kids make between Frank Lloyd Wright (and the Robie House) and *The Invisible Man*, Fibonacci numbers, and the movie *The Rear Window*? Can you make any connections between your life and these topics? Are kids more attuned to connections than adults, or not? What makes you think so?
8. Calder uses pentominoes to help him think about things, to turn ideas over in his mind. Petra uses her notebook and words. What does Tommy use? What do you use? How would you feel if, like Petra, you lost some important pieces of your work (art, a design, a story)?
9. Explain, in your own words, what the Fibonacci sequence of numbers does. Where is this often found in nature? At the end of the book, where do they find the Fibonacci sequence? Do you think Wright did this intentionally or not? Do you think it added to the pleasing quality of his designs?
10. Ms. Hussey and Mrs. Sharpe play important roles in helping the kids unravel the mystery. Create a list of facts or ideas that the two women aid the kids in learning. Who do you think is more important? Why? Do you think kids in Ms. Hussey's classroom learn more than kids in traditional classrooms, or not? Explain your answer.
11. What risks do the kids take to save the Robie House? Do you think they made wise or foolish decisions? What was the result of their discovery? How was Tommy rewarded for doing the "Wright" thing? In the end, was their risk worth the reward or not? If someone had gotten seriously injured by the culprits (or the process) would they still have been justified?

Why or why not?

12. Review the Wright Sandwich Code and the hidden codes inside Brett Helquist's illustrations. What do these elements add to the book? Can you develop a code with your own closest friends? How would you use it? Do you think their code saved The Wright 3's lives?

PROJECTS::

READING:

Good readers make predictions as they read a story. These predictions are based on facts and evidence and the understanding of what makes a good story. As you read *The Wright 3* create a chart like the one below. Remember: predictions don't have to be correct to be good predictions. In fact, reading would be pretty boring if we always knew what was going to happen next! Predictions are even more likely to be wrong when you're reading a mystery!

PREDICTION CHART:

Chapter:	Make a Prediction	Evidence:
Chapter One:	I think the mason who got hurt will be important to solving the mystery.	Because first chapters are always important in a story. Because it was weird how the building seemed to push him off it.

MATH + ART = BEAUTY

Design a piece of art based on the Fibonacci principle or the Golden Rectangle. You can be inspired by something from the natural world or use shapes and colors of your own imagination. It can be something that could be incorporated into a building, or not! Explain your process in a brief artist's statement that you include with the work.

ARCHITECTURE:

As a class, create a timeline of architectural styles throughout history. In your research compare the following elements: horizontal or vertical orientation, traditional materials used, balance and symmetry, cohesion with environment. Are there any buildings in your neighborhood that you think are works of art? Why?

Visit this guide to *The Wright 3* developed by the Frank Lloyd Wright Preservation Trust at:

http://www.wrightplus.org/programs/Wright3_Curriculum_Guide.pdf

ART HISTORY:

What makes an artist? Create a biography of a person who is famous in a field that you are (for now, at least) most interested in pursuing. Would you consider this person an artist in their field? Find or create a portrait of them and then on an index card answer the following questions: Who is this person? What field is their

work in? When did they get started? Where can a person see their work? Why are they important?

WRITING:

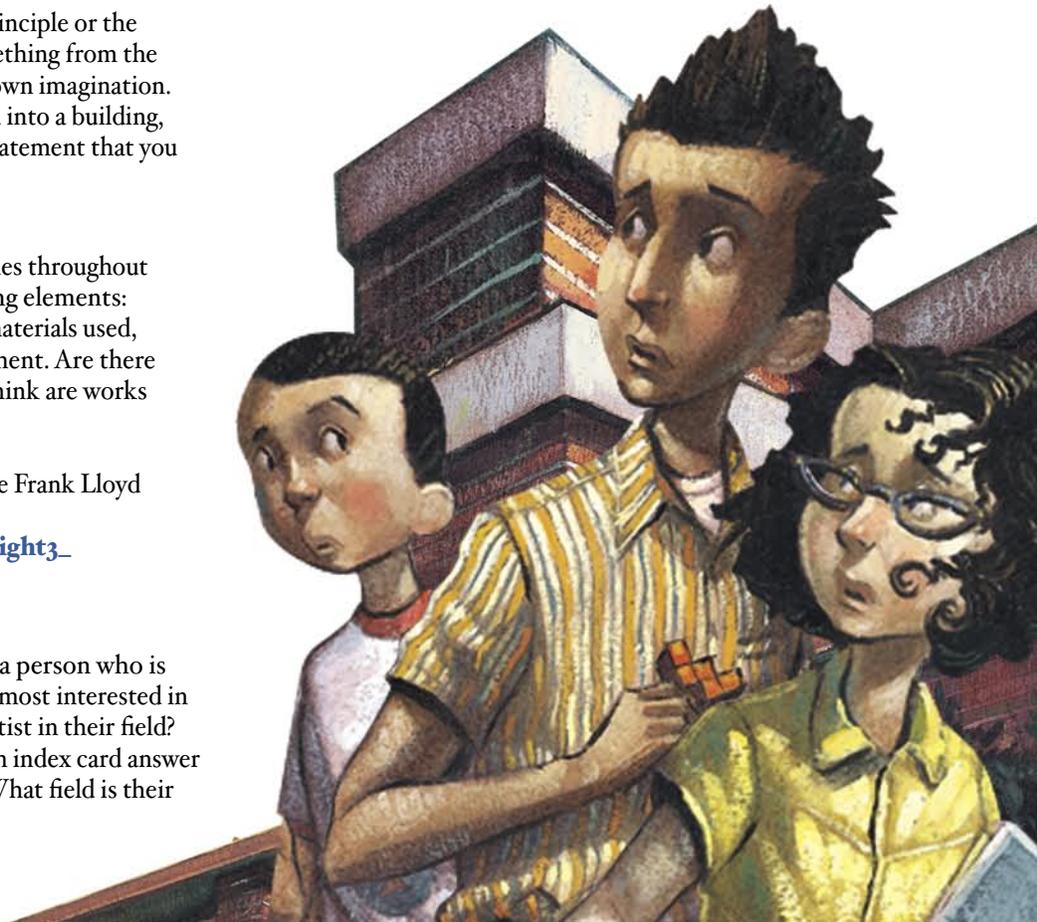
Did you notice how awkward things felt between Calder, Petra, and Tommy? One of the ways that Blue Balliett was able to accomplish this was through the dialogue among the three characters. Write a scene between three people where you reveal (remember to show, don't tell) some underlying conflict. Examples you might explore: jealousy, annoyance, envy, etc.

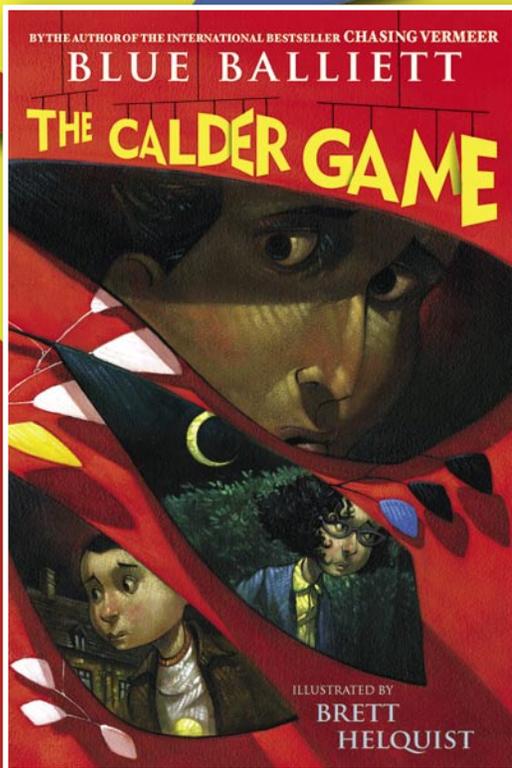
INTERNET RESOURCES:

To find great resources on Frank Lloyd Wright visit (google these sites and they should appear):

www.wrightplus.org (Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation) A wonderful 3D design studio!

www.pbs.org/flw/ (*Frank Lloyd Wright* by Ken Burns)
The Library of Congress American Memory Site (search Architecture for Robie House)





THE CALDER GAME

by Blue Balliett

Illustrated by Brett Helquist

ABOUT THE BOOK

Calder, Petra, and Tommy are miserable with their new teacher, and even a field trip to the museum to see Alexander Calder's amazing sculptures does not cheer the trio. So when Calder gets the chance to visit England, Petra and Tommy are both envious of his escape and wonder how they will get along without him. But when Calder explores the fascinating mazes near Woodstock, he suddenly disappears along with a sculpture by the artist Alexander Calder for whom he is named. Is there a connection? Petra and Tommy fly to England to try to retrace the thoughts and actions of their closest friend—but will they be able to find him before it's too late?

PRE-READING DISCUSSION:

Read the first chapter and then brainstorm a list of questions you hope the novel can answer. Remember that good readers always predict as they read but are not always right!

DISCUSSION GUIDE:

- The friendship between Petra, Tommy, and Calder has always been unbalanced. Why is this? Can groups of three be easy friends, or is someone always odd man out?
- Explore the art of Alexander Calder for yourself. How does it make you feel? How do the main characters in the book feel about Calder's art? With whom do you feel the most similar reaction? Why? Do you think art can change a person? How?
- How does the trip to the museum show the contrast between the kids' previous teacher, Ms. Hussey, and their new teacher, Ms. Button? How do you survive a year of school with a teacher who you feel is difficult?
- Ms. Hussey describes Calder's art as shouting, "HERE! NOW!" and reminds you that each second of your life holds its own world of experience." (p. 42) What experiences most shape the lives of Petra, Tommy, and Calder? What is your own HERE! and NOW!?
- Explain the town of Woodstock's reaction to the Calder sculpture that they received as a gift. Is it happily installed or has it caused controversy? Why? How can art stir trouble? Would art that caused no reaction be better than art that caused strong emotions? Why or why not? Do you think it's easier or harder to appreciate art that can be seen by anyone, art that isn't in a museum setting? Explain your thoughts.
- Do you think graffiti, which is rarely legal, can be art? If so, and if officials are instructed to remove it, should they? (This is a real-life problem faced by British officials who are unsure about what to do with some of Banksy's work.) Is there any graffiti in your neighborhood that you see as art?
- What are the five most interesting facts you learned about Woodstock and England while reading the novel? What would someone from England find fascinating about your town? Would you like to travel? What would you want to see? Would you, like Calder, have difficulty being an outsider for a while? How long do you think it would take for someone to feel they belong in your town? If Calder, Petra, and Tommy visited your neighborhood, what do you think each one of them would be most interested in? What would they notice first?
- In most mysteries, chapters are left with cliff hangers. Which chapters do you think are written with this technique? What can you learn about your own writing from studying Balliett's prose?
- Petra and Tommy are called in to help with the investigation. What can they bring that no one else could? Who would your parents call to best get ideas about you? What might they be surprised to learn? How do Tommy and Petra help uncover the truth?
- What adds to the suspicion that Calder could've fallen into the hands of people with bad intentions? What clues are given to his whereabouts? Did you believe he was in danger or simply on an adventure? Why?
- Although Tommy finds something very important, he is willing to give it back to make an important wish. Who else makes wishes? What is the most important wish you have ever made? Do you believe in wishes? Why or why not?
- Explain what happened to both Calder and the Calder sculpture. Who were the most important players in both disappearances? Describe Calder Pillay's ordeal. How did he survive it? Did the sculpture survive too?

13. Balliett changes point of view frequently in the story. First, we follow Calder along his adventure, and then it switches to Petra and Tommy. Why do you think she decided to write this way? What does it add to the story? Who do you think changes most over the course of the novel? Why?
14. How many mobiles can you find hidden in the book? Make a list.

PROJECTS:

READING: UNDERSTANDING CHARACTER

Create a chart like the one below, and as you read fill out each section. All characters have some type of problem and try to solve it. Use this chart for discussion.

Character Name:	Description:	Main Conflict:	Solution

ART HISTORY:

Study the life and work of Alexander Calder. (www.calder.org is a great place to start!) Direct your research to answer the following questions: How did he develop his unique style, what were his major influences? How has his work influenced other artists? What media did he use? Why?

ART:

Create a Calder-inspired mobile of your own. It can be a mobile made of anything you like, but it should be thoughtful and balanced. In a brief artist's statement included with your piece explain your process and what you learned as you worked on it. Also: Can you imagine a piece of sculpture that would fit in a public place in your neighborhood? What piece would you choose (pretend you could borrow it from anywhere in the world)? Describe why that piece would fit and where it should go.

DESIGN:

Design your own maze using pentominoes. Then create a three-dimensional model of your design using any materials you like (clay, legos, etc.). Students could vote on the best design or try to combine designs to create a master maze. Design a "symbolic" hedge maze on paper, using your own symbols. Create a key for the symbols. The Blenheim maze had symbols that celebrated a victory in war; what important event in your life would you celebrate with a symbolic maze?

MATH:

Plan a trip to a Calder sculpture (or show) somewhere in the world. First, make a prediction as to what your budget should be for the trip. Then, figure out how much it would cost to get to the piece and how much to stay nearby for at least a week. Don't forget that you'll need money for food and souvenirs! Compare your prediction with your actual projected costs after your research. Then, write Art Wish a letter asking him if he could send you on your trip, and tell him why you want to visit this particular piece or show. Remember to be convincing!

WRITING:

Setting is a really important aspect of all the adventures Petra, Tommy, and Calder take. In *The Calder Game*, the three sleuths travel to Woodstock, England, for their adventure. Find a paragraph where Balliett describes the town and answer the following questions: What is the page number, and what is being described? What colors are used to describe it? How does the description make you feel? Why? Does it add suspense or tension to the scene? How?

Next, write a paragraph of your own which describes a particular setting. But before you get started make a conscious decision about what emotion you'd like to invoke in your reader (fear, hope, defeat, victory, etc.). Use Balliett's work as a mentor text. Share with your peer editor.





photo © 2008 Bill Klein

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Blue Balliett knew she wanted to be a writer when she was eight years old, but before publishing her first book, she did a lot of other things. Growing up in Manhattan, she spent time wandering through museums, namely the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Frick Museum, both of which housed a few Vermeer paintings. After graduating from Brown University with a degree in art history, Blue worked as a cook, waitress, art gallery curator, school teacher, and of course, writer. She now lives in Hyde Park, Chicago, with her family, and is busy creating more adventures for Petra, Tommy, and Calder.

AUTHOR INTERVIEW:

1. *Do you, like Calder Pillay, “breathe patterns the way other people breathe air?” Or are you more like Petra who “asks a question that doesn’t have an answer?”*

Yes to both. I’m always looking for patterns in the world around me, and I love to make connections that might not seem possible, or that other people might have missed. And graphic patterns, especially those made up of symbols, have always fascinated me. I have lots of scarves with patterns, and maybe this is why. I’ve always been intrigued by real-life experiences or happenings that can’t be explained. I guess they make my mind feel completely awake. And of course, understanding mysteries is related to identifying patterns that the experts might not have seen. I’m definitely a collector of both patterns and questions!

2. *Can you share a bit about your writing process? For example, which element comes first to you—the conflict or the setting?*

I’ve tried planning out a book before I start, but that doesn’t tend to work for me. So I line up my ingredients, with a rough idea of how much of this or that will go in, and then I just get started, but sometimes that means I throw everything out and start over. The setting and the conflict have to fit together in my mind, kind of like the yolk and white of an egg, and it’s hard for me to remember which comes first—they are difficult to separate. I guess the conflict is the center of each book: the story must involve an intriguing tangle, or a compelling set of problems.

3. *What’s the best part of being an author for children? What’s the most difficult?*

Children are, I believe, the most important readers in the world because their minds are so open and quick and genuine. The most difficult part is that children won’t put up with being bored: every word must count.

4. *Of the three artists you explore in your novels, Vermeer, Wright, and Calder, who has had the most influence on your life and work? How? What other artists would you like to explore?*

Perhaps Calder has. I remember being introduced to many of his mobiles at the Guggenheim Museum in New York when I was very young. This was a show in which you were allowed

to touch his sculpture, and the place was filled with delicate clangs and gongs and dings. I have been intrigued by the idea of balance in art for a long, long time. About other artists... hmmm, I’m always learning and exploring, so who knows what I’ll get into.

5. *Friendship is an important theme in all your novels. Have you learned more about friendship by writing about it?*

I’m sure I have. When I’m writing, I’m sorting and cutting and pasting experiences, and when I began thinking carefully about threes, I realized I knew quite a lot. Threes, at any age, rarely work smoothly, but they do seem to crop up in all of our lives.

6. *Which authors have most influenced your own work? Besides mysteries, what other types of books do you like to read?*

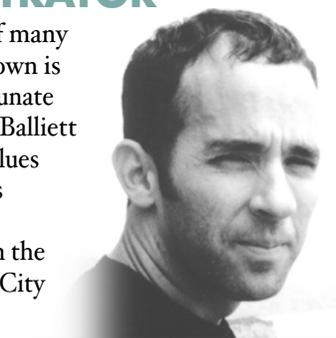
I like to read authors who use words with great care and who enjoy how they sound—for that reason, I like Hemingway and E. B. White and Roald Dahl and William Carlos Williams and Virginia Woolf.

7. *Which do you think is more difficult: the first chapter or the first week of school? Why?*

Oh, the first week of school! The first chapter is just you and your thoughts and your page, but the first week of school is you and all kinds of demands to fit in and pay attention to. That is much harder!

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Brett Helquist is the illustrator of many books for children, most well-known is his work with the Series of Unfortunate Events by Lemony Snicket. In the Balliett novels he has ingeniously hidden clues for the observant reader within his hallmark moody black and white illustrations. Though he grew up in the west, Brett now lives in New York City with his wife and daughter.



This guide was created by [Tracie Vaughn Zimmer](#), a reading specialist and children’s author. Visit her Web site to find hundreds of guides to children’s literature. www.tracievaughnzimmer.com


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