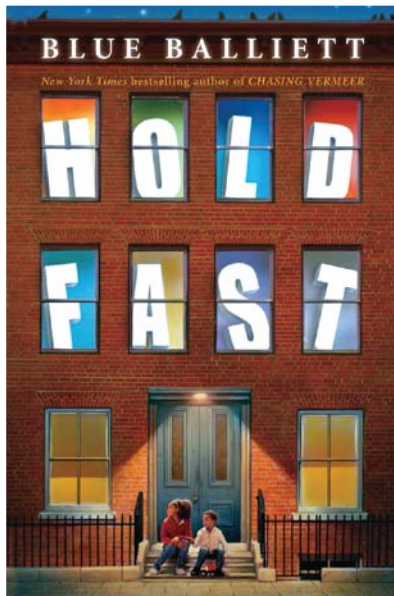
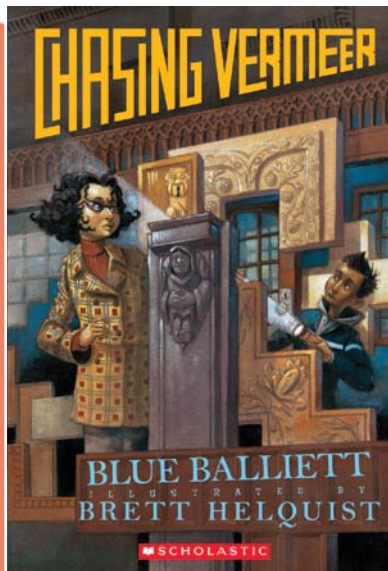


GRADES 4-8

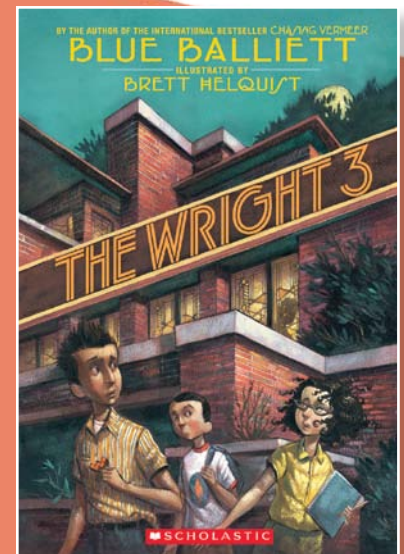
# Discussion guide to the novels of BLUE BALLIETT



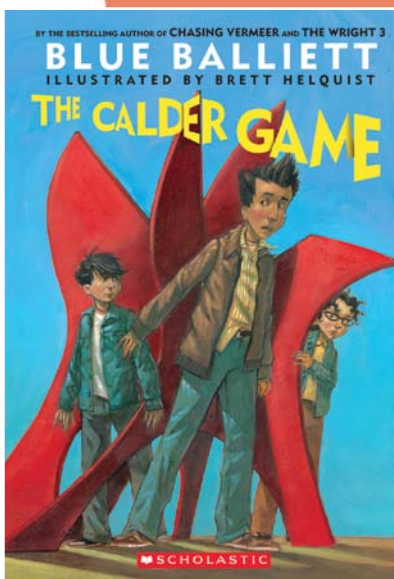
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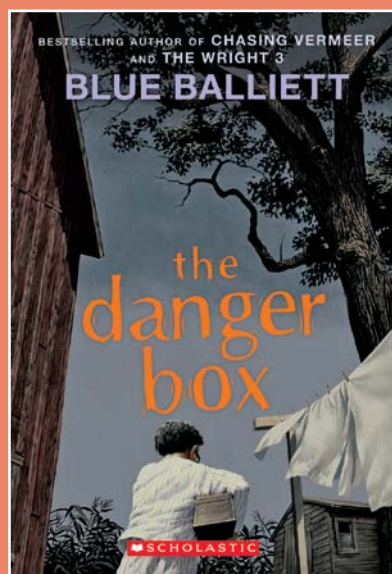
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**Teach the  
Common  
Core State  
Standards  
— see inside!**



**“Balliett offers readers new ways to think.” –*Booklist***

**If you’re looking for an exciting 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 mystery, Balliett’s books explore not just mysteries but friendship, art, individuality, and social issues. These fast-paced mysteries ask readers to break codes, follow puzzles, and crack open the links between widely disparate disciplines. Your students will love spending time with Balliett’s characters as they discover what happens to a priceless Vermeer painting, help save an historic Frank Lloyd Wright house, find connections to Calder sculptures that are strategically placed around the world, or solve the disappearance of a devoted dad. *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!



## Common Core State Standards for Literature you will teach when you use this guide

### Reading Standards for Literature

#### *Key Ideas and Details*

- RL 5.1. Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
- RL 5.2. Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.
- RL 5.3. Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text.

#### *Craft and Structure*

- RL 5.5. Explain how a series of chapters, scenes, or stanzas fits together to provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem.
- RL 5.6. Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described.

#### *Integration of Knowledge and Ideas*

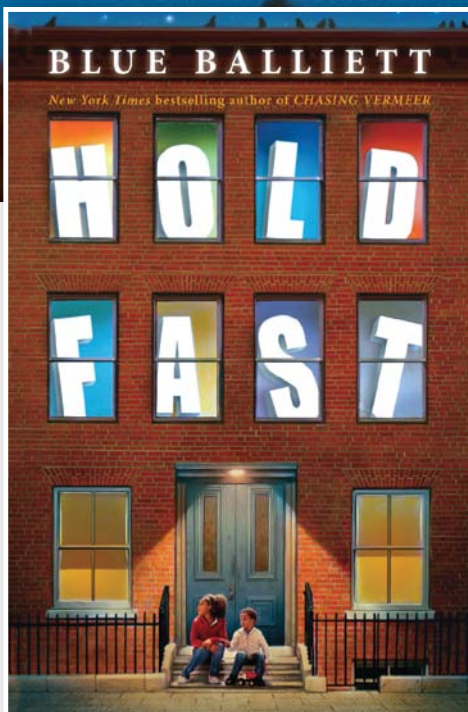
- RL 5.9. Compare and contrast stories in the same genre (e.g., mysteries and adventure stories) on their approaches to similar themes and topics.

### Writing Standards

#### *Text Types and Purposes*

- W 5.1. Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.
- W 5.3b. Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, description, and pacing, to develop experiences and events or show the responses of characters to situations.

Note, these Standards are examples from the fifth grade. If teaching another grade, you may want to visit the Common Core State Standards website ([www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)) to locate the equivalent standards for your grade.



# HOLD FAST

by Blue Balliett

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Where is Early's father? He's not the kind of father who would disappear. But he's gone...and he's left a whole lot of trouble behind. As danger closes in, Early, her mom, and her brother have to flee their apartment, and are forced to move into a city shelter. Once there, Early starts asking questions and looking for answers—because her father hasn't disappeared without a trace. There are patterns and rhythms to what's happened, and Early might be the only one who can use them to track him down.

With her signature, singular love of language and sense of mystery, Blue Balliett weaves a story that takes readers from the cold, snowy Chicago streets to the darkest corner of the public library, on an unforgettable hunt for deep truths and a reunited family.

★ “Wonderful...will pierce all readers.”

—*Booklist*, starred review

## PRE-READING DISCUSSION

Home is defined before the opening chapter as “a place to live by choice, sometimes with family or friends; a haven; a place of origin, comfort and often of valued memories.” Which part of this definition best describes your home? What do you most enjoy about your home? The author continues with this startling fact, “By the end of the 2012 school year, an estimated thirty thousand children in the city of Chicago were without a home.” Were you shocked by how large this number is? What does it mean to be homeless? How do you think the homeless can best be helped?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe the setting of the story and find a key quote that best represents it. How does the setting impact the conflict of the story?
2. Compare the Pearls' family home to your own. What do they have in common? How are they different? What do the Pearls dream of having one day? What does your family dream of? What's important to the Pearl family? What's important to your family?
3. Which author is an honorary member of the Pearl household? Which author would be your family's choice?
4. The Pearls collect words like some families collect movies. Why are words so important to them? How does Early learn new words? How do you?
5. What was Dash contemplating when he disappeared? Which clues do you think might be important to solving the mystery of his disappearance? How do you know when something is an important detail in a text?
6. After Dash disappears, Early feels lost without him. With him around, she realizes that, “Everything felt valuable. Important. Lucky. Ripe with dreams. Worth experiencing, whether it was a poem or a neighborhood—each day mattered” (p. 43). Describe a time in your own life when you felt this way.
7. Summarize the steps that led to Early, Jubie, and Sum having to move into a shelter. How do you think most families find themselves in need of a shelter? What is the most difficult part of their new life inside it? Compare their old apartment to life in the shelter.
8. How does *The First Book of Rhythms* by Langston Hughes become such a touchstone text for the Pearl family, especially for Early? What does it remind Early of? Are there any books that are this important to you? Why do you think some books speak to us?
9. Describe the kids that Early meets in the shelter. Why don't we know the end of their stories? How does their absence in the book mimic their absence in the shelter? What do you think the author is trying to show us?
10. Create a blog post or journal inspired by Early's experiences about how schools could accept “shelter kids” into their learning community in a way that would not make a difficult situation that much worse.
11. Create a list of steps that Early takes to solve the mystery of her father's disappearance. Then, rank each step on a scale of most to least helpful. Discuss your list and rankings in pairs or small groups.
12. Early tells the story of her family and their tragic separation. How would this story be different if Jubie was the narrator? Dash? Summer? How does the point of view of a novel determine what you know and understand about the events in it?
13. In the end, what happens to the Pearl family? How does Early help solve the mystery? What becomes of those who separated them for so long? Who most helps Early on her quest?
14. Compare this novel to the other novels by Blue Balliett. What elements are similar? What is different about this piece? Which novel is your favorite and why?



PROJECTS  
WRITING

In the novel, Early starts a letter campaign to let important people know about the plight of homeless families in Chicago, a place where many vacant homes exist. Research the resources available to families that are homeless or living in poverty in your own community. Using Early’s letter as inspiration, write your own persuasive letter to someone who could make a difference — a mayor, sheriff, or even the editor of the local paper.

ART

Create a collage or sculpture based on the theme of home. You can use any medium you prefer but explain your piece in a brief artist’s statement. Before you begin, think about what home means to Early and other homeless children and how it might feel if you were suddenly among the homeless. Perhaps the art pieces could even be auctioned off to raise money for the local homeless shelter, or displayed in a public location to raise awareness of their plight.

VOCABULARY

Words are an important commodity to the Pearl family. “They’re for choosing, admiring, keeping, giving. They are treasures of inestimable value” (p. 6). They even collect them in a notebook. Because words are both “free and plentiful” create your own journal of important words. Add at least ten new words every month! Try to use a new word each day as you write or speak. For each word entry: define it, find out its origin, list any syllables and antonyms, use it in a sentence, and draw a picture to help you remember it.

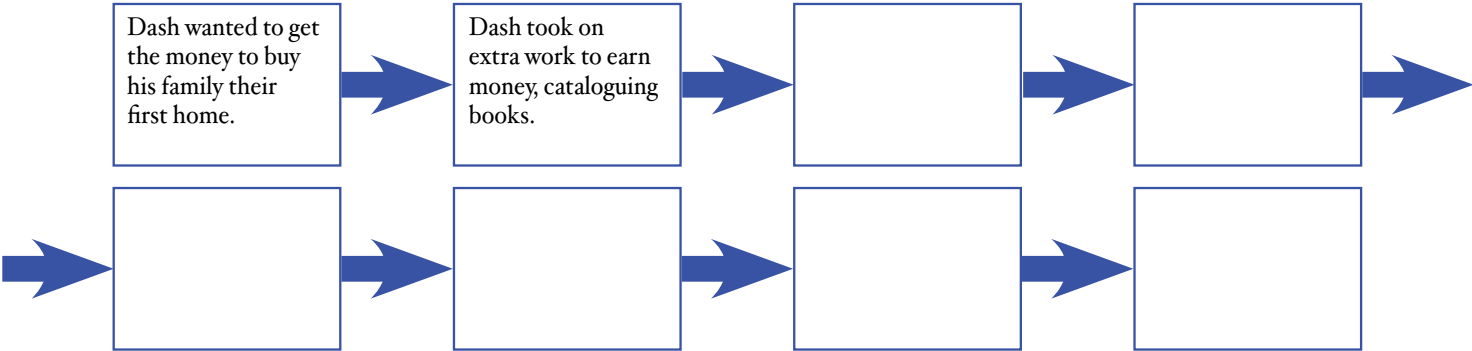
READING: Defining Character, Evaluating Relevance of Evidence from the Text

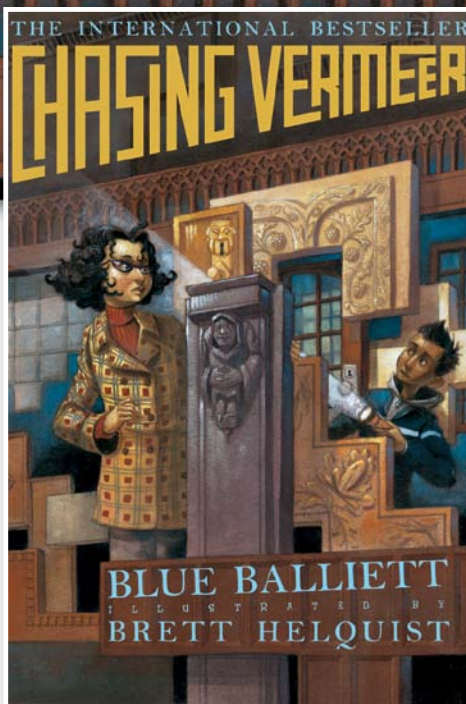
Find a key quote which best represents the following characters from the novel and explain why you picked it.

Character:	Quote that best represents them:	Why this quote is best:
Dash		
Summer		
Early		
Jubie		
Mr. Pincer		
Mr. Waive		
Mr. Aslip		

READING: Cause and Effect

Create a cause and effect chart that identifies the major plot points as they unfold. Model your chart on the example below.





# CHASING VERMEER

by Blue Balliett

Illustrated by Brett Helquist

## ABOUT THE BOOK

When an invaluable Vermeer painting disappears, Petra and Calder find themselves at the center of an international art scandal. 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?

★ “Smart...playful.” —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“Suspenseful, exciting, charming, and even unexpectedly moving.” —*The New York Times*

- A *New York Times* Bestseller
- A *New York Times* Notable Book
- Edgar Award Winner
- Agatha 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 QUESTIONS

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.

### 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 (search "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.

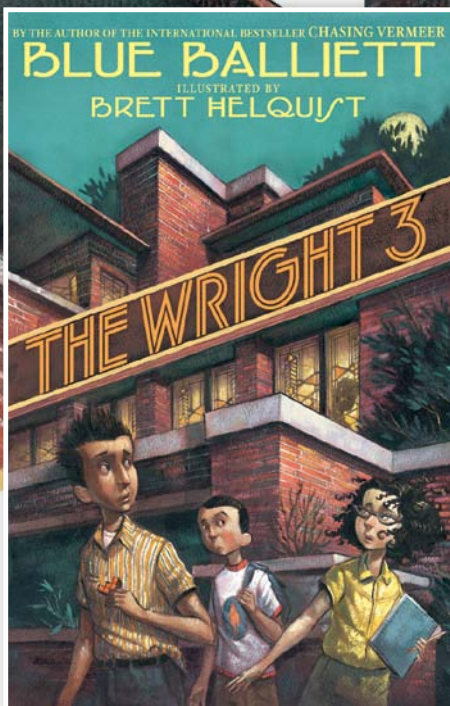
### SCIENCE AND ART

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.

### 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.





# 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.

Soon they 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?

★ **“Another tour de force blending art, math, philosophy, history, and literature.”** — *Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

**“Fans will emerge energized by the invitation to explore.”** — *Booklist*

- A *New York Times* Bestseller
- A *USA Today* Bestseller

- Chicago Public Library 21st Century Award

- A *Child Magazine* Best Book of the Year

## 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 family’s 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: Facts, opinions, ideas from characters, examples, story knowledge, etc. Explain what makes you believe this.
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?

### 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.

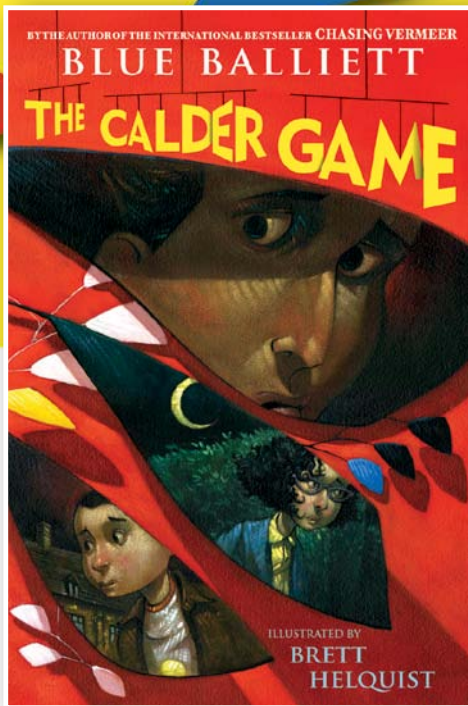
### INTERNET RESOURCES

To find great resources on Frank Lloyd Wright visit:

[www.wrightplus.org](http://www.wrightplus.org) (Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation) A wonderful 3D design studio!

[www.pbs.org/flw/](http://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

When Calder gets the chance to visit England, Petra and Tommy are both envious. But then Calder suddenly disappears along with a sculpture by the artist Alexander Calder for whom he is named. Is there a connection? Will Petra and Tommy be able to find Calder and the sculpture before it's too late?

★ “Balliett again offers readers new ways to think.”

— *Booklist*, starred review

★ “Sophisticated...Balliett outdoes herself.”

— *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“Intriguing, page-turning puzzles.” — *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

- *Publishers Weekly* Bestseller
- Friends of American Writers Juvenile Literary Award Winner

## 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 QUESTIONS

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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!?
5. 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.
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?
11. 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?
12. 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](http://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.





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## 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, where many of her stories are born.

### AUTHOR INTERVIEW

*Why do you like writing mysteries?*

I'm always looking for patterns in the world around me, and I love to make connections that might not seem likely, or that other people might have missed. Graphic patterns, especially those made up of symbols, have always fascinated me. 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!

*What inspired you to delve into the lives of the homeless? What do you think kids can do to help?*

There's been plenty of news coverage on adults losing jobs, suffering through foreclosure, struggling to meet basic costs – but hardly anything about the children who are also caught in this downward spiral. Who are these kids? What does it feel like to grow up in this way? I began visiting shelters in Chicago, working with an after-school tutoring group. What I discovered was that these kids were like kids everywhere – bouncy, ambitious, and determined to survive and help their families. They chatted about their dreams as they did homework, played games or drew pictures. That was when I decided that these kids needed their own mystery. And in *Hold Fast*, my character Early Pearl, who is eleven years old, not only solves a puzzle that has shattered her family but also comes up with a solution to homelessness that all kids can work on. My secret dream, of course, is that this solution will find its way out into the real world.

*How do you know when you've got an idea worth pursuing?*

Each one of my books is a kind of stone soup made up of many ideas and questions, vivid snatches of life that make me excited and curious. I stir these ideas around in my mind, sometimes for several years. Then one morning I wake up with an inevitable,

green-light feeling; I'm ready to jump in, to invite my characters and their ideas into a setting. Sometimes I'm nervous about doing that, but I feel writing should be an adventure, like life itself. The best adventures always include some risk and danger.

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

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.

*What have you learned about yourself by becoming a writer? What do you wish every kid knew about reading or writing?*

I've learned that you don't always know where you're going in life until you sit down and begin. That is, words can take you to places you might not get to on your own. Both reading and writing are powerful in that way, and I always try to share that with kids. You never know where reading a book will take you, once a story or the rhythms of language get into your head, and you never know where writing will take you, once you communicate by recording your ideas. Words are tools and dream-shapers!

*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.

*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.

**Visit Blue Balliett's website at [www.blueballiettbooks.com](http://www.blueballiettbooks.com)**

Blue Balliett's books are available from you local bookstore or usual vendor.

Teachers and librarians may order from Scholastic, P.O. Box 7502, 2931 East McCarty Street, Jefferson City, MO 65102

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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.

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