
Insights from Illinois Authors

Ronda J. Brown

About This Column

Welcome to a column devoted to informing readers about children's authors and illustrators who draw inspiration from their Illinois roots. "Insights from Illinois Authors" presents interesting facts about authors and their books, along with other relevant information such as their availability for author visits and their e-mail addresses. We hope this column serves as a resource for author studies and other literacy activities.

A Conversation with Blue Balliett

Blue Balliett was born and raised in New York City. After studying art history at Brown University, she lived in Nantucket, where she got married. When her children started school, the family moved to Chicago, and she taught 3rd grade for 10 years at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools before becoming a full-time writer. In 2004, she published her first bestselling mystery, *Chasing Vermeer*, which is now published in over 35 languages. This was followed by *The Wright 3*, which has been featured on NBC's Today Show. Her third novel, *The Calder Game*, was featured on ABC's Good Morning America as a "sizzling summer read." Her fourth novel, *The Danger Box*, is her latest book. All of her books are set in real places and focus on paintings, sculpture, and architecture. She and her family now live in Hyde Park. She has a daughter, son, and stepdaughter.

Ronda Brown: *Will you talk about growing up in New York City?*



Blue Balliett

Blue Balliett: I have scars on both knees from roller-skating and playing ball in the streets when I was growing up. My sister and I went to and from school on public buses, bus pass of the month in hand. Most kids got to school the same way, on public transit, and I think it taught us to be aware of our surroundings early on—when it was okay to stare, when to ignore someone, when to run! Stories are everywhere if you're part of a crowd in an unselfconscious setting.

RB: *I heard that your real name is Elizabeth. How did you get the name Blue?*

BB: Although it's Elizabeth on my birth certificate, I've had the name Blue since day two, after the color of the sky. I haven't met many other Blues—most seem to be dogs.

RB: *When did you know that you wanted to be an author?*

BB: By the time I was 8 I had dreams of glory and could easily imagine a real book with my name on the cover. I was actually very shy, so I have no idea how or why I thought that might happen. I did start my first book in 4th grade and got about half of a spiral-bound notebook filled with chapters and illustrations. Predictably, I ran out of steam. My mother kept the notebook and gave it back to me a few years ago. I was truly embarrassed to see the back cover. I'd cut out all the terrific reviews from the back of a real book jacket and glued them onto my notebook. *Touching . . . funny yet smart . . . you get the idea.* Maybe I thought that would speed up the process and eliminate a few steps.

RB: *What inspired the transition from 10 years of teaching 3rd grade at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools in Hyde Park to writing?*

BB: I wrote *Chasing Vermeer* as a classroom read-aloud, truly never dreaming it might make its way into the world. That's why it's so filled with tools and details from my classroom, like the pentominoes, the quotes on the wall, Ms. Hussey's assignments. The book is truly more fact than fiction and feels to me like a very personal story. It's my world, the characters are combinations of people I know, and the ingredients are all both mysterious and familiar, like Charles Fort's book *Lo!* and Vermeer's paintings.

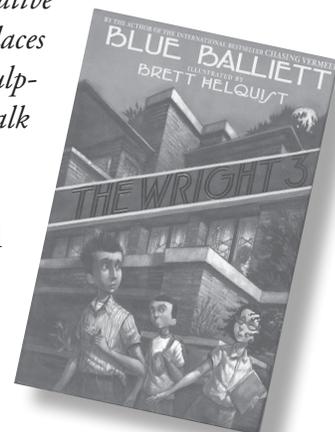
RB: *I think it is exciting how, Chasing Vermeer, The Wright 3, and The Calder Game are all tied to Hyde Park. It's very creative how your books are set in real places and connected with paintings, sculpture, and architecture. Will you talk about that?*

BB: I wrote the book I wanted as a teacher but knew I would have latched onto as a young reader. When I was a kid, I loved mysteries set in real places, and I liked the tickly, prickly feeling of an unsolved problem or an unanswered question, maybe because there was still real thinking to be done. I'm also someone who loves puzzling over art and unusual creations of all kinds. Kids have taught me, over the years, a deep respect for their ability to make connections and understand big ideas, so I try never to bore them. Or anyone of any age who picks up these books . . .

RB: *Brett Helquist did a fabulous job illustrating all three of the books! How did he become familiar with Hyde Park, and how did the decision to hide a coded message in the illustrations of each of the books come about?*

BB: I'd never met Brett before he agreed to illustrate *Chasing Vermeer*. When he did, he came to Hyde Park and walked all over and took tons of photographs. Before getting to work on *The Wright 3*, he came again, this time to spend hours in the Robie House. *The Calder Game* was also done from photographs. His illustrations for these three mysteries are all paintings, and hiding a coded message in each was his idea. He did amazing work and added so much dimension; I was thrilled.

RB: *What type of research did you have to do to write Chasing Vermeer?*



BB: I'd studied Vermeer at school, and I've seen the five paintings of his that are in New York City. But when I decided to make him a part of this mystery, I read everything I could find about his life and work. Doing research for these books has given me a great excuse to dive into a subject headfirst, which is a luxury when you've been out of school for so long. Combing for the details that become a part of plot and structure is a joy—it's a challenge and truly feels like a treasure hunt.

RB: *It has won numerous awards and there was talk about it coming out in a movie. Is this still going to happen?*

BB: Warner Brothers optioned the rights with Plan B, Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston's production company, in 2004. Everyone worked very hard to make it come together—it went through a number of screenplays and directors—but a combination of factors came together to put it on hold. I'd love to see it happen one day.

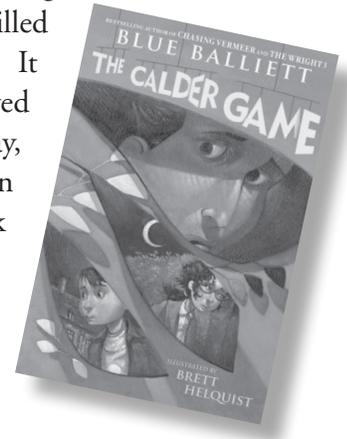
RB: *Calder and Petra, along with Calder's friend Tommy, solve another mystery involving a Frank Lloyd Wright architectural masterpiece, the Robie House, in your second book, The Wright 3. Did you visit the house often while writing the book?*

BB: I must have visited the Robie House a hundred times while working on the book. It's an amazing, haunted, inspiring building and oddly difficult to remember in detail. The internal space twists and turns, echoes in detail are everywhere, and when you add in 147 art glass windows . . . well, it's alive!

RB: *How did your fascination with Alexander Calder's mobiles lead to The Calder Game, a mystery that begins in Hyde Park but moves to Woodstock, England?*

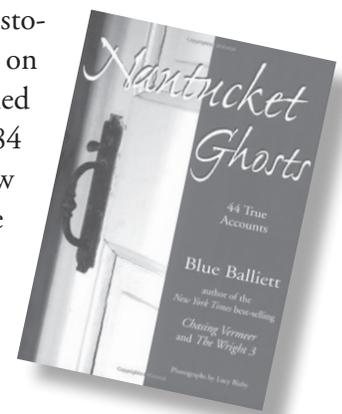
BB: I think I first saw Alexander Calder's mobiles in a huge show at the Guggenheim

Museum in New York City when I was about five. At that time you were allowed to touch the mobiles, and everything was moving, the air filled with dings and bonks. It was magical. I've loved his art always, from way, way back. When I was in England for a 2005 book tour, I stumbled on the town of Woodstock and couldn't stop wondering what might happen if someone gave a large, valuable Calder sculpture to this thousand-year-old community. And I couldn't stop imagining my Chicago characters in that setting. . . . I had to make it happen.



RB: *The Ghosts of Nantucket: 23 True Accounts is a well-written oral history of the interviews with year-round and summer residents of Nantucket Island who have actually experienced ghosts. What was this experience like as you listened to the residents' stories?*

BB: My two oral histories, written ages ago on Nantucket and published by Down East Books (1984 and 1990), have now been combined into one volume, *Nantucket Ghosts* (2006). Collecting those interviews was an absolutely fascinating experience, and I wish I could have filmed [the interviews] instead of taking notes. Watching a person relate a personal ghost story, when they're not sure what to make of it, is fascinating. Nantucket has a bizarre subculture of paranormal activity that is now somewhat accepted, but at the time I was recording the stories in the first book, it was very difficult to get people to share.



RB: *Your latest book, The Danger Box, is set 70 miles from Chicago in the small town of Three Oaks, Michigan. What inspired you to create a story based on one of Charles Darwin's missing notebooks?*



BB: This is a book I truly felt I had to write. When I found out that the notebook that is possibly Darwin's most famous one, his Galapagos field book, was stolen and is still missing . . . well, I couldn't get rid of the dream that it might be found by a kid. That led me to a very, very small town in the Midwest, one where such a notebook might never be recognized. And if a kid does find and identify this notebook one day, well, I'll be ecstatic!

RB: *How do you hope teachers use your books in the classroom?*

BB: I write books I would have loved to have as a teacher, as well as books I would have been inspired by if I'd found them on my own as a kid. My hope is that both in and out of the classroom, the books will be a springboard for projects and adventure. From what I hear, happily, that is often true.

RB: *What advice do you have for aspiring authors?*

BB: My advice for aspiring authors is to read lots of good writing, try to figure out how a book you love was put together, and be patient with yourself. Hold onto your dreams and questions, keep a notebook in your pocket, and you're on your way.

RB: *Readers should go to your fabulous website, blueballiettbooks.com! I love how you have photos*

of all of the places where your books take place. Will you tell readers about it?

BB: I'm so glad you like my website! I wanted to build a site that was inviting to both young readers and us older ones . . . and I love the way Denise Biondo, my designer, put it all together. I also loved having a chance to share photos of the real places and ingredients that are so integral to these stories, and some of the scenes of me in the midst of it all.

RB: *What is a typical day like for you?*

BB: I work in my laundry room at home because it's small, bright, and right in the middle of our old house. I start work with a cup of coffee while still in my pajamas; and if I'm at the manuscript stage, [I] might not manage to get dressed until hours later. Depending on whether I'm doing research, which might mean either time in a library or getting to know a location, or writing, I'm in and out. But procrastination is never a problem for me. It's such a luxury to be a full-time writer at this age and stage. I always have a million ideas that I'm hungry to explore.

RB: *What are you working on now?*

BB: I've just finished *Hold Fast*, a mystery that will be out in January 2013. It's set in Chicago and begins in one of the poorer neighborhoods on the South Side. Among the ingredients are a Langston Hughes book on rhythms, the Chicago Public Library's huge downtown branch, a family of four that find themselves in the midst of a spiraling nightmare, and the 2003 Antwerp Diamond Heist, the biggest in history and one from which no stones have been recovered. Hold on for *Hold Fast*! I can't wait to see it come out.

RB: *Thank you for sharing your time. Please tell readers how they can learn more about you, your books, and your availability.*

BB: The best place to find out what I'm up to and where I've been is my website, *blueballiett-books.com*. I do enjoy school and library visits, in addition to conference events, and try to say "Yes" to as much as possible.

Books and Awards by Blue

The Danger Box (Scholastic Books, 2010)

A Junior Library Guild selection
Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award Master List

The Calder Game (Scholastic Books, 2008)

Friends of American Writers Literary Award Winner
Publishers Weekly Bestseller
Indie Bound Bestseller

The Wright 3 (Scholastic Books, 2006)

Chicago Public Library 21st Century Award Winner
Great Lakes Book Award Finalist
Gamepuzzles Annual Excellence Award
New York Times Bestseller
USA Today Bestseller
Book Sense Bestseller
Child Magazine Best Book of the Year

Chasing Vermeer (Scholastic Books, 2004)

New York Times Bestseller for over 30 weeks
New York Times Notable Book for 2004
Publishers Weekly Bestseller
Book Sense Book of the Year Award Winner
Book Sense Bestseller
Edgar Allen Poe Award, Mystery Writers of America,
Best Juvenile Novel
Agatha Award Winner
Chicago Tribune Prize for Young Adult Fiction
Great Lakes Book Award Winner
Booklist Top Ten Youth Mysteries
Booklist Editor's Choice
Borders Original Voices Award
Midwest Booksellers' Choice Award for Children's
Literature
Finalist for the 49th Bancarellino Prize, Italy
Finalist for the Sheffield Children's Book Award, UK,
2006
Child Magazine Best Children's Book
Parents' Choice Silver Honor Book
A Texas Bluebonnet Award Nominee
Al's Book Club for Kids Selection, NBC Today Show,
2008

Nantucket Ghosts: 44 True Accounts (Down East Books,
2006)

About the Author

Ronda J. Brown is a professor at Millikin University. She recently graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with an Ed.D. in Education. Brown is past president and currently a regional director of the Illinois Reading Council and president of the Macon County Reading Council. Her research interests include interviewing children's authors and illustrators and studying nontraditional teachers. She can be reached at rbrown@millikin.edu.