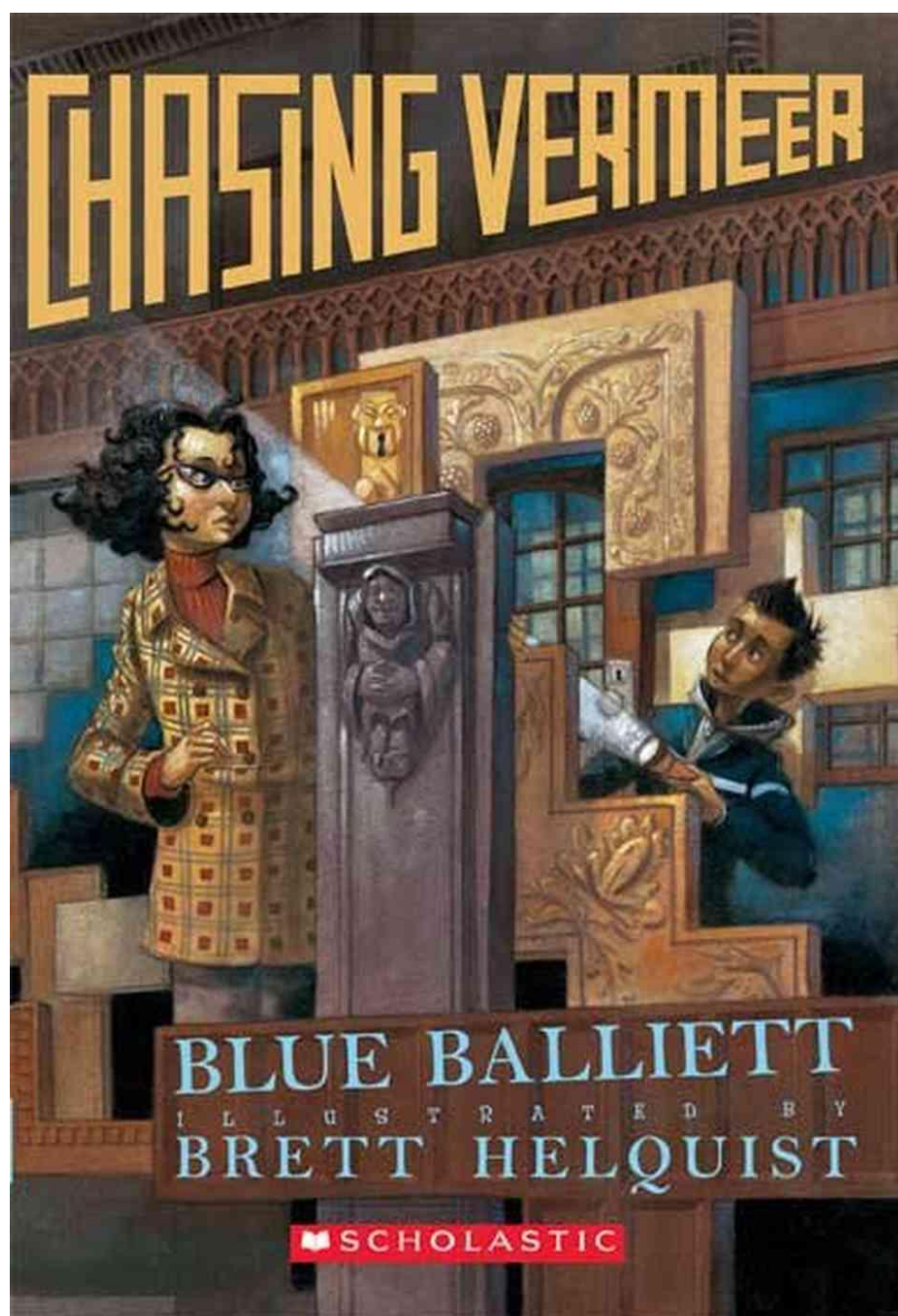


About the book...



*When a priceless painting by Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer goes missing, police and private investigators alike are baffled by its disappearance, even when the thief begins to leave clues in the local newspaper. But the local cops don't have the same passion for Vermeer's artwork that 11-year-old Petra Andalee and her new friend Calder Pillay have - and the young sleuths are sure that they will be able to solve the mystery that no one else can solve. Soon the thief is threatening to destroy the painting, and Petra and Calder must use every clue available to them to solve this mystery.*

**-Books & Authors**

## About the Author...



Many of us have passions that started in childhood - sometimes I think we are who we are right from the beginning. I was a watcher. I loved disappearing into books. I wanted to be a writer by the time I was eight; as a kid, I played with words in my head, turning them this way and that as if they had color and sparkle. The puzzle was always to allow words to shine singly yet also fit together in combinations that felt just right. I'm still working on it.

I was born and grew up in New York City, in a long, thin apartment near Mt. Sinai Hospital. My name has always been Blue, although it's Elizabeth on my birth certificate. My sister and brother and I played ball, rode bikes and roller-skated on the street. I took two public buses to get to school. As a teenager, I discovered that you could hang out with friends at museums like the Metropolitan, the Frick or the Guggenheim, which were then just

about free for kids, instead of going right home after school. That's how I became so comfortable around art, and got to know two of my favorite artists -- Johannes Vermeer and Alexander Calder. Sometimes I think my books go back a long, long way.

I graduated with an art history degree from Brown University. I then spent years writing poetry and making word mobiles (more playing with words!); I also waitressed, became a not-great grill cook, ran an art gallery, and researched old houses.

We have a big and busy family, and always at least one bossy cat. I met my husband Bill Klein on Nantucket, and we lived there for a number of years with our three kids. Then we moved to Chicago, to the Hyde Park neighborhood where we still live. I taught at The University of Chicago Laboratory Schools for ten years, and the kids and I walked to school together every day. I wrote my first mystery, [\*Chasing Vermeer\*](#), as a classroom teacher. Then came [\*The Wright 3\*](#), [\*The Calder Game\*](#), and [\*The Danger Box\*](#). All of my books are set in places I've lived in or visited, and lots of our family discoveries and secrets are tucked inside

them. These mysteries are fiction, but also not – they're filled with details from my everyday world.

Balliett's books have now appeared in 34 languages. Warner Bros. Pictures has acquired the film rights to *Chasing Vermeer*.

For more information about this author visit:  
<http://www.blueballiettbooks.com/>

## **Writings**

- [\*The Calder Game\*](#), Scholastic Press (New York), 2008
- [\*The Danger Box\*](#), Scholastic Press (New York), 2010
- [\*The Wright 3\*](#), Scholastic Press (New York), 2006

## **Awards**

- *Chasing Vermeer*: Chicago Tribune Prize for Young Adult Fiction, Parents'Choice Silver Honor Book, and New York Times Notable Book.

## **Reviews**

### *Booklist*

[\*The Westing Game\*](#), [\*The Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler\*](#) - how exciting to find a book that conjures up these innovative, well-loved titles.

That's exactly what Balliett does in her debut novel, which mixes mystery, puzzles, possibilities, and art. The story is set in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood at the University of Chicago's Lab School, where Balliett was a teacher. There, outsiders Petra and Calder become friends as they try to find out what happened to a missing Vermeer painting. That's really all the plot one needs to know. More important are Balliett's purpose in writing and the way she has structured her story. The former seems to be to get children to think - about relationships, connections, coincidences, and the subtle language of artwork. To accomplish this, she peppers her story with seemingly random events that eventually come together in a startling, delightful pattern. The novel isn't perfect. It glides over a few nitty-gritty details (how did the thief nab the picture), and occasionally the coincidences seem more silly than serendipitous. However, these are quibbles for a book that offers children something new upon each reading. Adults who understand the links between children's reading and their developing minds and imaginations will see this as special, too. Helquist, who has illustrated the Lemony Snickett books, outdoes himself here, providing an interactive mystery in his pictures.

### *Kirkus Reviews*

Art, intrigue, and plenty of twists and turns make this art mystery a great read. Petra Andalee and Calder Pillay set out to find the connection between their teacher (a freewheeling constructivist teacher), the eccentric woman in their neighborhood, the bookstore owner, and an international art thief. Balliett intersperses fascinating information about Johannes Vermeer and his paintings throughout the two friends' quest to solve the mystery - a mystery layered with pentominoes (a mathematical tool consisting of 12 pieces), puzzling clues, and suspicious strangers. Helquist's detailed black-and-white chapter illustrations hold hidden messages, clues related to the pentominoes, and more puzzles. Fans of E.L. Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* or Ellen Raskin's *The Westing Game* will find equal pleasure in this debut by a talented writer.

### *Publishers Weekly*

Puzzles nest within puzzles in this ingeniously plotted and lightly delivered first novel that, revolving around the heist of a Vermeer painting, also touches on the nature of coincidence, truth, art and similarly meaty topics. Petra Andalee and Calder Pillay become friends in sixth grade at a school operated by the University of Chicago

(Balliett taught at the University's Lab Schools), both of them independent thinkers excited by their maverick teacher, Ms. Hussey. For reasons unknown to her students, the teacher asks her class to ponder the importance of letters (the epistolary sort) and to mull over Picasso's ideas about art as "a lie that tells the truth." Readers have the edge on the characters, being privy, to an enigmatic letter sent to three unidentified persons outlining a centuries-old "crime" against a painter's artistic legacy. These mysteries deepen exponentially when someone steals a Vermeer masterpiece and holds it hostage, demanding scholarly redress for misattributions within Vermeer's small oeuvre. The art mystery and the crisp intelligence of the prose immediately recall E.L. Konigsburg, but Balliett is an original: her protagonists also receive clues through dreams, pentominoes (math tools with alphabetic correspondences), secret codes (including some left to readers to decipher) and other deliberately non-rational devices. Helquist (the Lemony Snicket books) compounds the fun with drawings that incorporate the pentomino idea to supply visual clues as well. Thick with devilish red herrings, this smart, playful story never stops challenging (and exhilarating) the audience.



## *Horn Book Review*

"Dear Friend: I would like your help in identifying a crime that is now centuries old." Sixth-grade classmates Petra Andalee and Calder Pillay are drawn into the mystery: a claim that some of the works attributed to Johannes Vermeer were not, in fact, painted by that seventeenth-century Dutch artist. Their investigation - fueled by the enigmatic behavior of their favorite teacher, a shared interest in unexplained phenomena, and a few mystical experiences of their own - uncovers a series of coincidences and connections that, like the pentomino set (a puzzle-like math tool) Calder carries in his pocket, fit together in often-unexpected patterns. And when Vermeer's 'A Lady Writing' disappears while in transit from the National Gallery to the Art Institute of Chicago, Petra and Calder end up hunting for the missing painting right in their own neighborhood. The protagonists are smart and appealing, the prose style is agreeably quirky, and fans of puzzle-mysteries will enjoy cracking the codes presented within the text and hidden in Helquist's stylish black-and-white illustrations. But they may also be frustrated that such a heady, elaborately plotted novel comes to a weak resolution, as the answers to the mysteries are explained away in a too-hasty summation - and the villain turns out to be an

offstage figure. The conclusion may be disappointing, but the chase to the end is entertaining.

## **Discussion Questions**

(<http://www.multcolib.org/talk/guides-vermeer.html>)

1. The Laboratory School at the University of Chicago is a real school where the author, Blue Balliett, taught while writing *Chasing Vermeer*. Would you like to go to school at a school like the Laboratory School? Have you had a teacher like Ms. Hussey? Would you like to have a teacher like her?
2. Petra and Calder are assigned to ask an adult about a letter they will never forget, a piece of mail that changed their life. Have you ever received a piece of mail you will never forget? Ask an adult if they have.
3. What do you think makes an object a piece of art? Do you have anything at home you consider to be a piece of art?
4. Calder is an only child and Petra has several siblings. How does this difference make their home lives different? Do you have siblings?

Would you rather be an only child or have many siblings?

5. Do you know anyone like Mrs. Sharpe?

6. Calder and Petra put a lot of faith in coincidences and dreams. Do you think truth can be found in dreams and coincidences, or are they just coincidences?

7. What would you have done if you received a letter like the three that were mailed out?

8. Do you think the painting was stolen for a good reason? Is it possible to do something which seems wrong, (or even against the law), for a positive outcome?

9. Were you able to decipher the message in the illustrations?

10. Would you be as brave as Calder and Petra in searching for the painting?

### **Read-Alikes**

Kaye Umansky, [\*The Silver Spoon of Solomon Snow\*](#) (2005)

Solomon Snow, left as a foundling in the small town of Boring, England, was raised by Ma Scubbins, a poor washerwoman with a lazy and worthless husband. As a baby, Solomon had a beautiful silver spoon, and when the Scubbinses hock this precious possession, he sets off for London to reclaim his spoon and search for his real parents. On the way, two other travelers join him: Prudence, whip-smart and prickly, and Rosabella, a spoiled performer escaping from her uncle's traveling circus. Each of the three has special talents, and they find the spoon, but only after being stolen to work in a local orphanage. A fellow orphan, Freddy, helps the trio find the owners of the spoon, a couple who are missing their son. With as many twists and turns as an old street in London, this adventure unfolds with humor, often aided by the author's asides to the "Intelligent Reader."

Elise Broach, [\*Missing on Superstition Mountain\*](#)  
(2011)

In this first novel in the Missing on Superstition Mountain Series by Elise Broach, the Barker family has moved from the exciting city of Chicago to a

tiny town in Arizona. There 11-year-old Simon, 10-year-old Henry, and 6-year-old Jack anticipate a dull summer until their wandering pet cat leads them into a dangerous mystery. When Josie the cat strays, the boys' search takes them to Superstition Mountain - a location that had been deemed off-limits by their parents. As Simon, Henry, and Jack look for Josie, they find a trio of human skulls. With help from their new neighbor Delilah, the boys investigate the mystery and dig up clues that include an abandoned gold mine and spooky local legends.

Dan Gutman, [\*The Genius Files: Mission Unstoppable\*](#) (2011)

Author Dan Gutman launches his Genius Files series for young readers with this adventure novel featuring 12-year-old twins Coke and Pepsi. Just a week before their 13th birthday, Coke and his twin sister, Pepsi, embark on an RV tour of the country with their parents. But this won't be an ordinary family adventure: The twins are members of The Genius Files - an antiterrorism organization made up of super-smart kids. As the McDonalds make their way to significant US landmarks like a candy

museum, an enormous ball of string, and a SPAM factory, Coke and Pepsi dodge villains and avoid such perils as poison darts, burning buildings, and deadly sandpits. Gutman supplements the book with photos, illustrations, and Internet map references.

Susan Runholt, [\*The Mystery of the Third Lucretia\*](#) (2008)

Meeting when they were enrolled in the same art class, Kari and Lucas have been friends since they were ten-years-old. United by their interest in art and their own talent as artists, the two often visit the Minneapolis Institute of Art. It is there they first notice a grumpy man painting one of Rembrandt's famous Lucretia paintings. Later when they accompany Kari's journalist mother on a business trip, Kari and Lucas spot the same man at the National Gallery in London now copying a different Lucretia. Noticing that he always tries to conceal his work from them and that he only paints Rembrandt's Lucretia, Kari is certain this man is more than just a painter interested in a famous artist. When the girls read of the discovery of a third Lucretia, they know immediately what's happened—but how are they going to prove it?

Frank Cottrell Boyce, [\*Framed\*](#) (2006)

In a quiet Welsh town, nine-year-old Dylan Hughes helps his family run the struggling Snowdonia Oasis Auto Marvel. Quirky characters populate the community, including Daft Tom, who has a decades-old obsession with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, cartoon characters named for Renaissance artists. One day a convoy of vans passes through town, headed to some abandoned slate quarry mines. Dylan learns that the convoy is transporting paintings taken from the National Gallery because of flooding in London (an incident based on a real art evacuation that took place during World War II). It isn't long before Dylan's own familiarity with the cartoon turtles results in a misunderstanding about his knowledge of art. Like the mutagen that transformed the Turtles, the presence of the paintings brings changes to Dylan's family and to the townsfolk. Harnessing the power of art, Dylan Hughes, the only boy in his town, must get himself out of hot water--with the help of his two pet chickens--and save the family business when a huge secret is exposed.



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