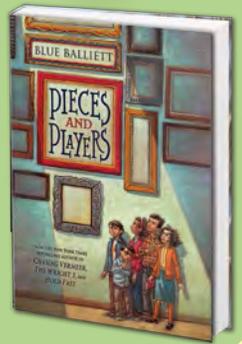
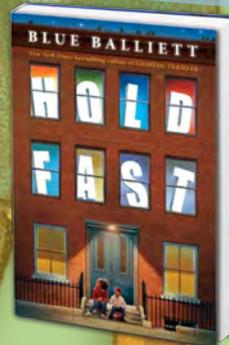
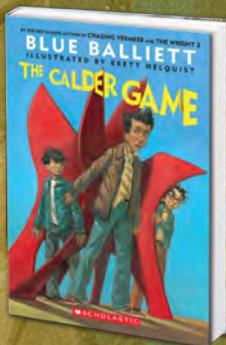
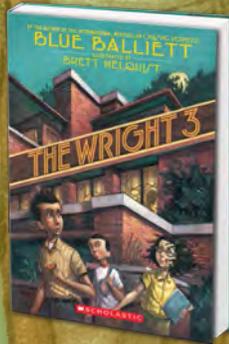
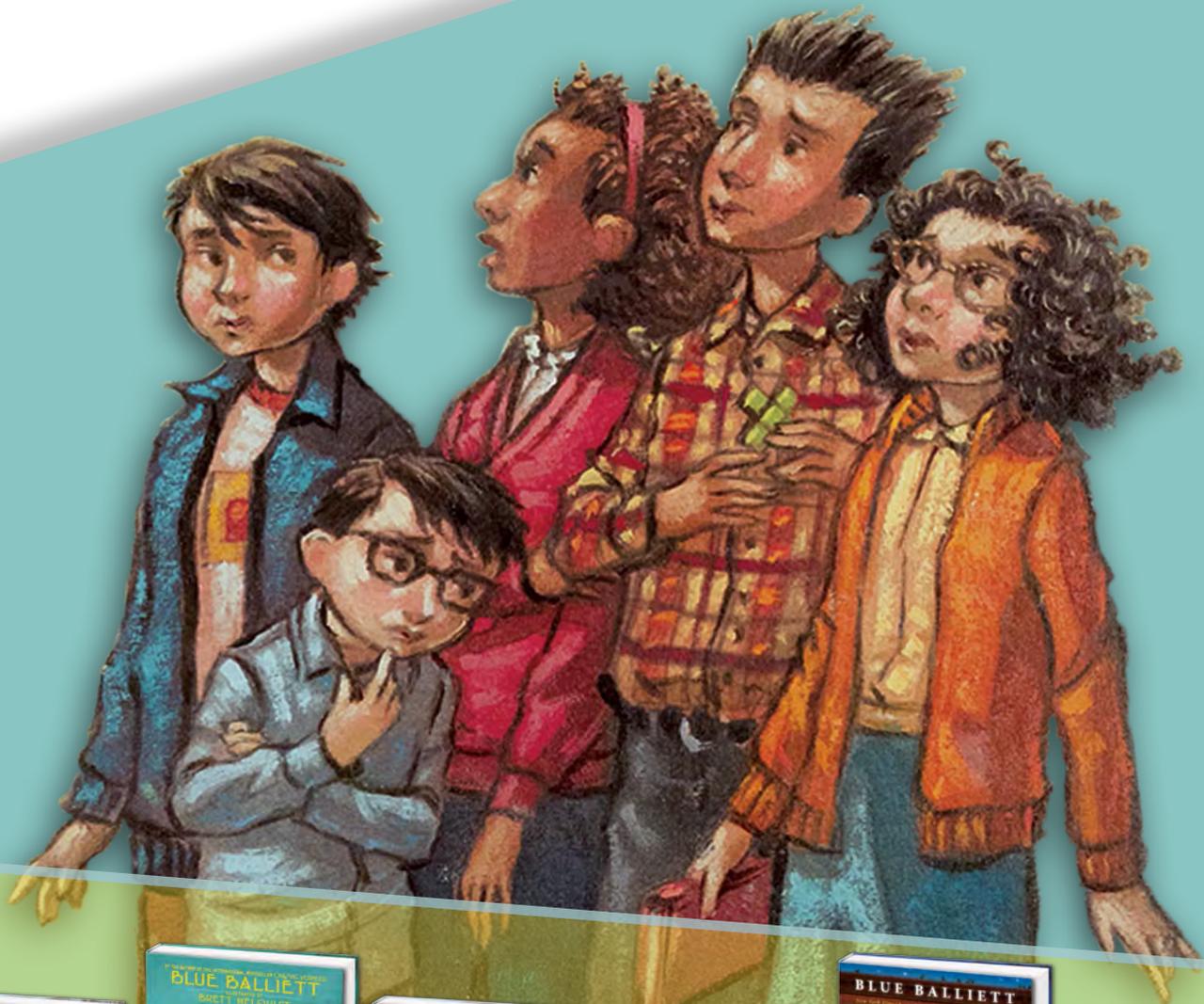


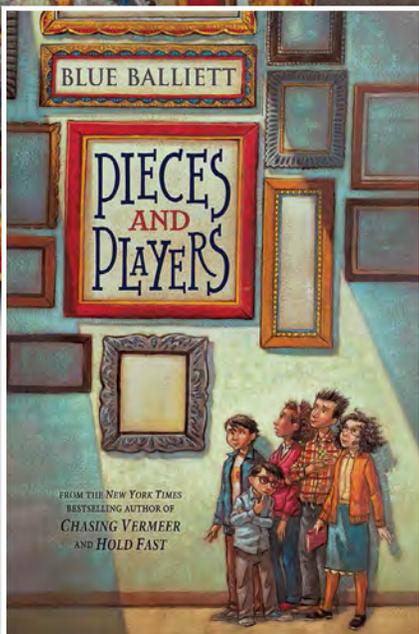
Grades  
3-7

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

The novels of **BLUE BALLIETT**



Meets Common Core and Other Standards—SEE INSIDE



# PIECES AND PLAYERS

## ABOUT THE BOOK

In *Pieces and Players*, the main characters from each of Blue Balliett's books come together to solve the ultimate art heist.

When priceless art goes missing from a Chicago museum, Petra, Calder, Tommy, Early, and Zoomy form a team to solve the mystery. Together they follow clues around the city and piece together the intricate puzzle. Will their different talents and new friendships be enough to save the museum and its art—and satisfy its ghost?

## PRE-READING DISCUSSION

Read through the table of contents. Based on the chapter titles, predict what the book might be about and what its tone might be. Use specifics to make your case. After reading the book, reread the chapter titles and discuss how close you were in your predictions.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the book's title. What is the game aspect of the novel? What are the pieces and who are the players? On page 234, the author uses the phrase "game-changing messages." What does she mean by that? Reread the first paragraph on page 288 and discuss what it suggests about the title.
2. Ms. Hussey encourages the five children to act as a team, telling Tommy, "Remember that prime numbers—like five—are only divisible by themselves and one." What does she mean by that? What strengths does each of the five bring to working together and solving the mystery?
3. Petra and Early start a friendship in this book. What do they like about each other? Compare and contrast their personalities, families, and homes. Find dialogue between the two and analyze what it shows about their friendship.
4. Tommy and Zoomy also enjoy each other's company. Describe them both, including their backgrounds. What do they have in common? How are they different? What does each boy admire about the other?
5. Tommy compares the changes of adolescence to being "stuck in a foreign territory" (p. 3). Give some examples throughout the book of these changes and why they feel foreign. Mrs. Sharpe says to the children, "Perhaps, at this stage, you've been too busy trying not to be what you are and disguising things as opposed to revealing them" (p. 18). What does she mean? How do her comments relate to what Tommy is feeling?
6. Examine the last line of each chapter and discuss the purpose it serves. For example, does it leave the reader hanging and create suspense? Does it wrap up an issue or event in the chapter? Consider, too, its relationship to the first line of the next chapter. Pay special attention to the final line of the book and what it contributes to the whole.
7. Talk about Sarah Chase's book *The Truth about My Art*, the role it plays in the plot, and the significance of its title. Discuss these lines from her book and how they apply specifically to this story: "We never see all that we know is there. Art keeps us wondering, and while we wonder, we're not alone" (p. 56) and "Great art will live, given a chance" (p. 58).
8. How omniscient is the third-person narrative voice in this book? Does it relate the thoughts of one or more characters? Does the narrative follow more than one character? What is the function of italics in the narrative? Why do you think the author chose this point of view?
9. Mrs. Farmer is a key character because of actions she took in the past and her apparent actions as a ghost. Describe her personality, how she treated people, and what she valued. What actions—from when she is alive and as a ghost—affect the plot?
10. Eagle is mysterious for much of the book. When he appears in the bookstore (p. 51), what does he do? Why do the five children distrust him? Discuss his relationship with Mrs. Sharpe and how it leads to confusion about who he is. On page 212, Eagle refers to "the hunter in me" and says he can't "resist the comfort of a scare." What do these comments reveal about him?
11. "Eagle" is just one of the interesting names in this story. On page 111, Tommy talks about the names of the trustees and "how violent all these last names sound," such as Crunch, Hurts, Cracken, and so on. The names are part of the wordplay that characterizes this mystery. Discuss why the author might have chosen these names and how they affect your feelings about the trustees.
12. Consider the role of coincidences, such as what's revealed about Eagle's biological father. Discuss, too, the role of the supernatural. Why do you think the author includes these elements instead of writing a strictly realistic mystery?

## PROJECTS WRITING

The author evokes vivid comparisons with her frequent use of figurative language. Choose a chapter and write down ten metaphors and similes. Then create a graphic organizer like the one below and fill it in by listing the figure of speech, specifying what's being compared, and explaining the effect of the comparison, such as creating a picture, evoking a smell, adding humor, and so on.

Figure of speech (page #)	What's being compared	Effect on reader

## ART

One of the themes of the novel is that the people in the paintings are alive in some way. Research other paintings by Vermeer, Rembrandt, Degas, Manet, and Flinck, and choose a painting with a person in it who intrigues you. Write three paragraphs about the painting. In the first paragraph, describe what you imagine the person's background and life might be. In the second, relate what the person might be thinking and feeling in the picture. In the first two paragraphs, include the elements in the painting that inspire your ideas. In the final paragraph, explain what intrigues you about the painting.

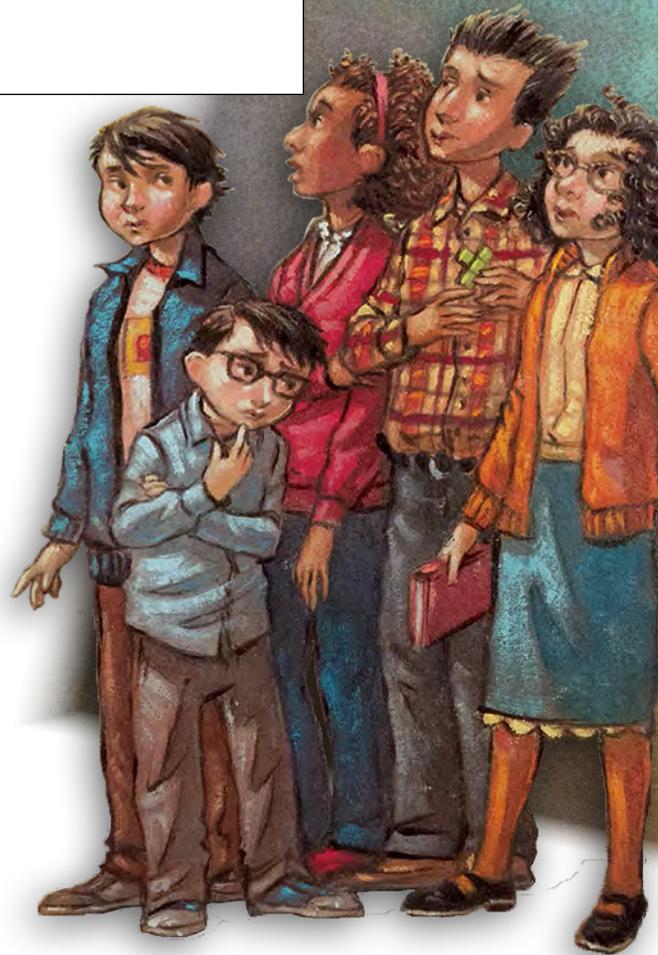
## ART HISTORY

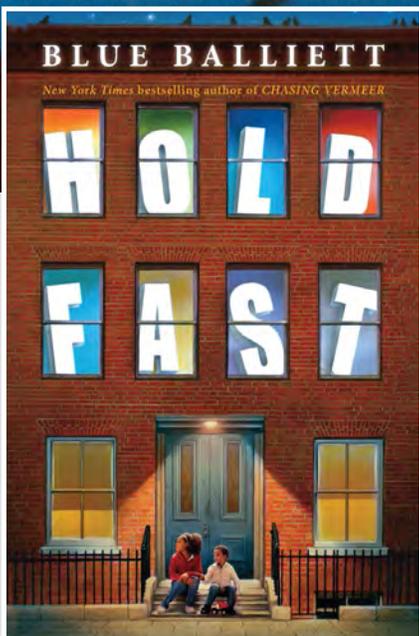
The FBI says of art theft, "It's like stealing history." The agency considers the theft at the Isabella Gardner Museum one of the Top Ten Art Crimes. The FBI website ([http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/vc\\_majorthefts/arttheft](http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/vc_majorthefts/arttheft)) lists nine other major art thefts in the United States. Research one of these art thefts and prepare a multimedia presentation showing the stolen art, explaining when and where it was stolen, and giving the current status of the case.

## WRITING & GEOGRAPHY

One way the author moves the plot forward is by having the children go to different places to investigate the mystery. Fill out a chart (see below) or use a map with pins to show where the children went in Chicago. Note what they expected to find there (if anything), what they did find, and what actions they took based on what they found.

Place visited	What they expected	What they found	Action taken





# HOLD FAST

## 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
- ★ “A moving story of homelessness, family, and the love of words and books... Enthralling.” — *Kirkus Reviews*, starred review
- ★ “Balliett paints a vivid picture, a literary composition reminiscent of an Impressionist painting... Excellent.” — *School Library Journal*, 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?
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?
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 lead to Early, Jubie, and Sum having to move into a shelter. What is the most difficult part of their new life? 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?
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 best accept “shelter kids” into their learning community.
11. List the steps Early takes to solve the mystery of her father's disappearance. Rank each step on a scale of most to least helpful. Discuss your list and rankings in small groups.
12. As the main character, Early is the focus of this story about her family and their tragic separation. How would it be different if Jubie were the main character? Dash? Summer? Why do you think the author chose to focus on Early?
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?

## 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

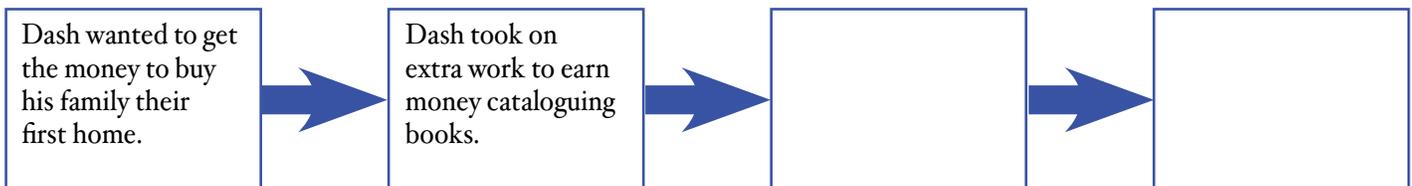
Create a collage or sculpture based on the theme of home. You can use any medium you prefer but explain your piece in a brief artist's statement. Before you begin, think about what home means to Early and other homeless children and how it might feel if you were suddenly among the homeless. Perhaps the 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 the plight of homeless children.

### 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). The Pearls even collect them in a notebook, since words are both "free and plentiful." Create your own journal of important words. For each word entry: define it, find its origin, list any synonyms and antonyms, use it in a sentence, and draw a picture to help you remember it. Start your list by adding the words that the Pearl family collects, or include words from *Hold Fast* that you didn't know before. Add at least ten new words every month! Try to use a new word each day as you write or speak.

### 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.



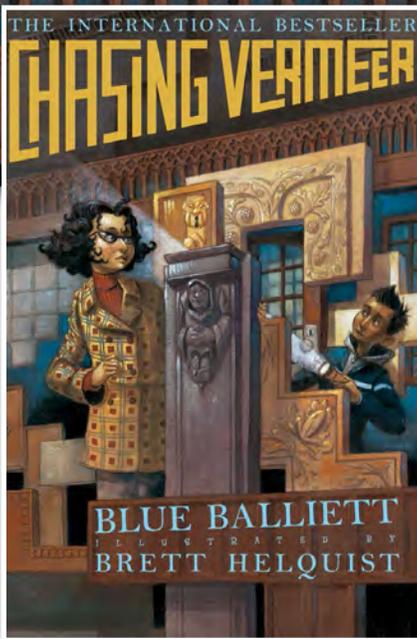
The Anchor Standards used in this section of the guide apply to all grades and cover Reading Literature (RL) and Writing (W): RL.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6; W.1, 3, 7

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

Create a chart like the one below and 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		





# CHASING VERMEER

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 Da Vinci Code for tweens.” —*Newsweek*

- A *New York Times* Bestseller
- A Book Sense Book of the Year Award Winner
- A Book Sense Bestseller
- A *New York Times* Notable Book
- An Edgar Award Winner
- *Chicago Tribune* Prize for Young Adult Fiction
- An Agatha Award Winner
- *Booklist* Editors' Choice

## 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 might mean by this? Why might authors try to “fool” their readers? Based on this line, what genre do you think the book will fit into? 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. Explain what Picasso meant by his statement: “Art is a lie, but a lie that tells the truth.” Explain Calder’s version: “Art is the truth that tells a lie.” Which do you prefer? Do the assignment Ms. Hussey gives her class; find a piece of art in your own home and 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 find 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. Include 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? How do you think one develops this skill? Do you think this is what Mrs. Sharpe admires in the kids? Why?
10. Suspicion is a major theme of the novel. Identify who the kids suspect of being involved in the crime and provide evidence from the text. How do they prove or disprove their suspicions?
11. What steps do Calder and Petra take to solve the mystery? What guides 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?

## 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 read (text-to-text connections), they think about how the book relates to their own personal life or memories (text-to-self connections), and they think about 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 costumes 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.

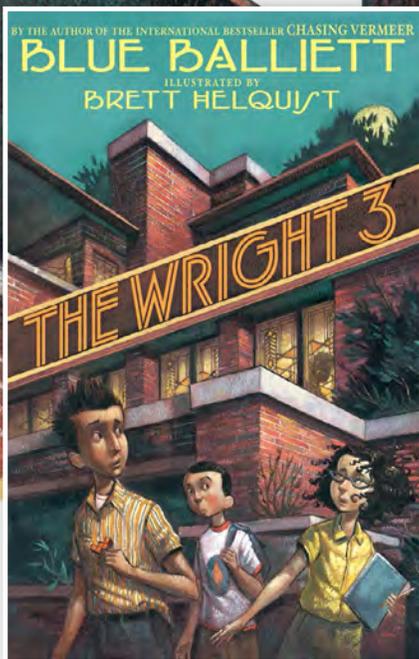
### SCIENCE AND ART

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 in which one of your characters discovers that something has gone wrong.





# THE WRIGHT 3

## 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 21<sup>ST</sup> 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 result of this decision?
5. Discuss the reasons why Petra, Tommy, and Calder are having a difficult time with one another. Who do you feel the most compassion for? Why? 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), *The Invisible Man*, Fibonacci numbers, and the movie *Rear Window*? Can you make any connections between your life and these topics? Are kids more attuned to connections than adults? Explain your answer.
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. 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?
11. 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 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. 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 Number	Prediction	Evidence (Facts, opinions, ideas from characters, examples, story knowledge, etc. Provide an explanation for your prediction.)
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 sequence 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, consider the following elements: horizontal or vertical orientation, materials used (traditional or unusual), 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 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:

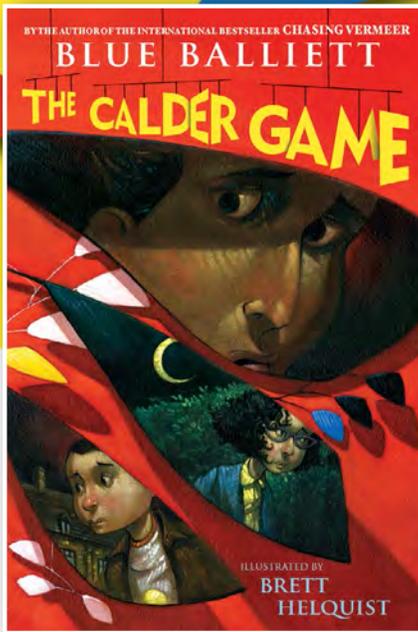
[www.wrightplus.org](http://www.wrightplus.org) (Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation)  
A 3D design studio!

[www.pbs.org/flw/](http://www.pbs.org/flw/) (*Frank Lloyd Wright* by Ken Burns)

[www.memory.loc.gov](http://www.memory.loc.gov)

The Library of Congress American Memory Site (search Architecture for Robie House)





# THE CALDER GAME

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

“Balliett successfully combines art history, historical locations, suspense, and intrigue . . . This is Balliett at her best.”—*School Library Journal*, featured as SLJ’s “Hot Pick”

- A *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 predict as they read but are not always right!

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. 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? Which character's reaction do you most identify with? Why? How can art change a person?
2. 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?
3. 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!?
4. Explain the town of Woodstock's reaction to the Calder sculpture that they received as a gift. 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.
5. 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?
6. 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?
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? 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. Petra and Tommy are called in to help with the investigation. What can they bring that no one else could? Who would someone trying to find you call? What surprising facts might they learn? How do Tommy and Petra help uncover the truth?
9. What adds to the suspicion that Calder could've fallen into the hands of people with bad intentions? What clues are given about his whereabouts? Did you believe he was in danger or simply on an adventure? Why?
10. Although Tommy finds something very important, he is willing to give it back to make an important wish. Who else in the book makes wishes? What is the most important wish you have ever made? Do you believe in wishes? Why or why not?
11. 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?
12. Balliett changes point of view frequently in the story. First, we follow Calder along on his adventure, and then 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 the most over the course of the novel? Why?
13. 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 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.

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.). 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

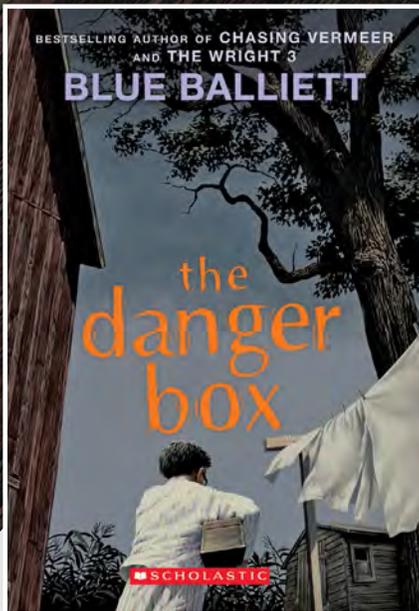
Make plans for a trip to a Calder sculpture (or show) somewhere in the world. First, make a prediction as to what your budget would be for the trip. Then, figure out how much it would cost to travel and stay nearby for at least a week. Don't forget to estimate money for food and souvenirs! Compare your initial prediction with your actual projected costs after your research. Then, draft a letter as if you were writing to Art Wish to ask him to send you on your trip, telling 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 being described? What colors are used in the description? How does the scene described 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. 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 and make revisions as needed.





# THE DANGER BOX

by Blue Balliett

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Zoomy, who lives in a small town with his grandparents, can't see well, but that doesn't keep him from tackling a puzzle about a mysterious—maybe priceless—notebook. Helped by his new friend Lorrol, a.k.a. Firecracker Girl, and his warm-hearted grandparents, Zoomy confronts danger, expands his world, and surprises himself with his new strengths.

- Parents' Choice Award, Silver Honor

## PRE-READING DISCUSSION

At the beginning of the book, the author's note titled "Opening the Box" says, "Every book that shares secrets is a Danger Box." What kinds of secrets can a book share? What do you think a Danger Box is? What would you put in a Danger Box?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe Zoomy's personality using details from the story. What role do lists play in his life? Discuss how he changes during the story and what makes him change.
2. "I don't know how anyone else sees the world, and no one knows exactly how I see the world," Zoomy says on page 23. Discuss what he means literally and metaphorically. What difference does his poor eyesight make in his daily life? How does it shape who he is?
3. Zoomy sees his grandparents as people who "change directions without any fuss" (p. 17). What does he mean? Do you agree? Describe each of his grandparents based on evidence from the novel. What are some of the problems in their lives? What gives them joy?
4. Why does Zoomy compare Lorrol to a rare beetle (p. 31) and later call her "Firecracker Girl" (p. 117)? Describe Lorrol's personality, her friendship with Zoomy, and how they complement each other.
5. Explain what roles *The Gas Gazette* and Darwin's notebook play in the story. Describe what happens with the notebook at the end and Zoomy's interaction with Darwin's descendants.
6. Zoomy has "sprinklings of worries" that Gam calls "worry crumbs" (p. 58). What does Zoomy worry about? How does he try to cope with his worries? Discuss what kind of worries Buckeye creates for Zoomy and his grandparents.
7. Zoomy creates a list of streets in Three Oaks named after trees (pp. 12–13). At the library he imagines the computer search box as a huge tree. Find other examples of trees and tree imagery in the novel, including in *The Gas Gazette*. Discuss what trees can stand for and why they are important in this story.
8. One of the epigraphs is from the picture book *Harold and the Purple Crayon*: "His hand holding the purple crayon shook." Read the book and discuss what it has in common with *The Danger Box*. Why do you think the author included that quote as an epigraph?
9. "My life has many kinds of secrets," Zoomy says on page 29. What are some of his secrets? How does the secret about the notebook affect the plot? Zoomy also thinks, "Secrets are only good when you want to keep them" (p. 147). What makes him say that? Discuss if you agree or not, and why.

## PROJECTS

### GEOGRAPHY

The Galapagos Islands are home to many species found nowhere else on earth. Research an animal that lives on the Galapagos, using at least one print and one Internet source. The Galapagos Conservancy lists these animals ([galapagos.org/about\\_galapagos/biodiversity](http://galapagos.org/about_galapagos/biodiversity)). Write down your findings, then prepare a short multimedia presentation to share with the class.

### WRITING

Inspired by *The Gas Gazette*, do research to create a newsletter about another scientist or famous historic figure. Include at least ten interesting facts about them but do not reveal their identity. Share the newsletter with your classmates and have them guess the subject's identity.

### READING

Zoomy has several characteristics in common with Charles Darwin. Create a Venn Diagram and, based on the text in *The Danger Box*, write characteristics of each in the individual circles and shared traits in the overlapping part of the circles. Post these on a classroom bulletin board along with other students' Venn Diagrams. Identify how your diagram differs from those of your classmates.

### SCIENCE VOCABULARY

Make a list of the scientific words Zoomy and Lorrol learn, some of which are on pages 143, 155, and 176–179. Choose five of the words related to science. Research their definitions and other information about them, and share it in a class discussion.

# BLUE BALLIETT'S BOOKS: ACROSS THE BOOKS



Get pulled into a puzzle—and so much more!—in Blue Balliett’s rich, suspenseful mysteries. At the heart of each novel is a question: Who took the missing paintings? Where did the mysterious notebook come from? What happened to the famous sculpture? Each story revolves around kids who explore an intriguing topic—and usually an important historic figure—from the arts or sciences.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Each of the books starts with an epigraph, a quote related to the book’s content and theme. Discuss the role epigraphs play for readers. Take one of the epigraphs and discuss its relationship to that book, referring to specifics in the story. Or take epigraphs from different books and compare their source, meaning, and role in the book.
2. Blue Balliett writes about books, libraries, and/or bookstores in her novels. Find examples of these in one or more of her novels, and describe what you believe the author’s opinion on these things is. Which of the characters value books, libraries, or bookstores, and how can you tell?
3. A famous artist, architect, writer, or scientist plays an important role in each of the books. Find two of these important people in one or more books and compare them. What do they have in common? How are they different? What did each of them contribute to the world? Discuss why you think Blue Balliett chose these figures to write about.

## PROJECTS

### READING

Take any two books and fill out this chart to demonstrate similarities. Add other elements of the book, such as more characters, if you like.

ELEMENTS IN THE BOOK	FIRST BOOK	SECOND BOOK	SIMILARITIES
SETTING (EXAMPLE)	<i>Chasing Vermeer</i>	<i>Hold Fast</i>	Set in Chicago. Characters visit important institution (Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago Public Library).
SETTING			
MAIN CHARACTERS			
SECONDARY CHARACTERS			
MYSTERY/PLOT			
THEMES/TOPICS			
FAMOUS PEOPLE/ITEMS			
ROLE OF ILLUSTRATIONS			

## MATH

Take a code from one of the books and use it to write a message about that book. Have a classmate decode the message and write it on a separate piece of paper. After the messages have been decoded, staple the note and its decoded message together with the coded one on top. Hang it from a line with clothespins so that other students can take the messages down, decode them, and check to see if they got it right.

## HISTORY

Most of Blue Balliett’s books feature an important museum or other institution such as the Art Institute of Chicago, Frank Lloyd Wright’s Robie House, the Chicago Public Library, and so on. Choose and research an important institution somewhere in the world that would make a good setting for a mystery. Write a brief history and description of the place, and identify a valuable item that could go missing in the story. Prepare a slide show with visuals and narrate it, explaining why the institution and item would work well for a mystery.

## WRITING

Each of Blue Balliett’s mysteries has an ending that would make a good newspaper story. Choose one of the books and write an article using the traditional journalism formula of “who, what, when, where, why, and how.” Make up quotes from some of the characters to include in the story. Create a document that looks like a newspaper with columns, headline, byline, photograph-like drawing, and a masthead with the newspaper’s name.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Blue Balliett's debut novel, *Chasing Vermeer* (2004), soared onto the *New York Times* bestseller list shortly after publication and garnered numerous awards. Additionally, Balliett has been awarded the *Chicago Tribune* Prize for Young Adult Fiction, Chicago Public Library Foundation's 21st Century Award, the Agatha Award, and the *Chicago Tribune's* 2010 Chicagoan of the Year for Literature. She has appeared twice on NBC's *The Today Show* and has garnered international praise and coverage for her mystery novels. Blue Balliett grew up in New York City and studied art history at Brown University. Balliett and her family now live in Chicago, within walking distance of Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House. She taught at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools before becoming a full-time writer.



Photo © 2013 Bill Klein.

## 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!

*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 Ernest 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.

## 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.

## COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS ANCHOR STANDARDS

Below are the general Anchor Standards used in this guide, which apply to all grades and cover Reading Literature (RL), Writing (W), and Speaking & Listening (S & L).

### **Reading Literature: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7**

#### *Key Ideas and Details*

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

#### *Craft and Structure*

4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

#### *Integration of Knowledge and Ideas*

7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

### **Writing: 1, 2, 3, 7**

#### *Text Types and Purposes*

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

#### *Research to Build and Present Knowledge*

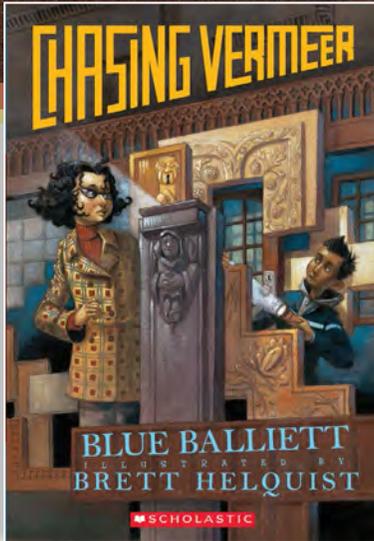
7. Conduct short, as well as more sustained, research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

### **Speaking & Listening: 4, 5**

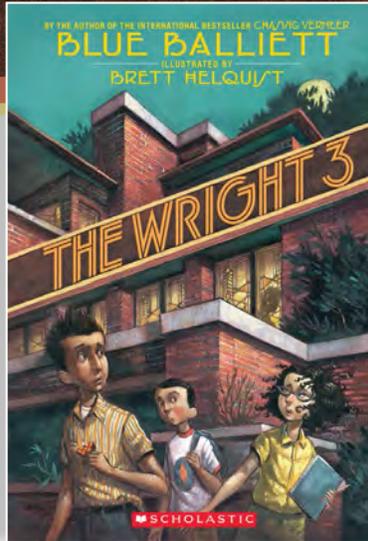
#### *Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas*

4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
5. Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

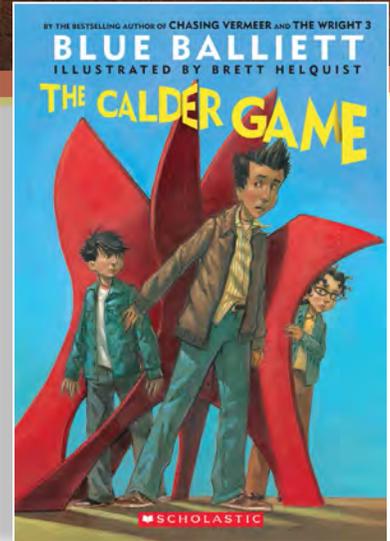
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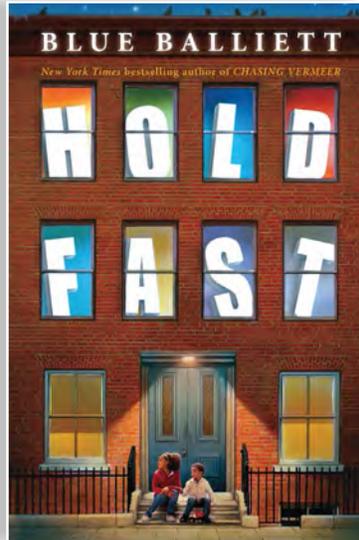
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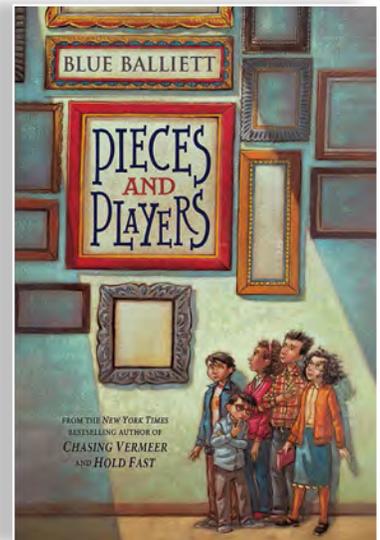
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This guide was created by [Tracie Vaughn Zimmer](#) and updated by [Kathleen Odean](#), who was a public and school librarian for seventeen years, and gives workshops for educators on new books for children and teens. She has chaired the Newbery Award Committee and served on the Caldecott Committee and Notable Children's Books Committee.

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