



Would I ever write again? And if I did, what did I have to write about? Suddenly, one dark, wintry afternoon, I knew. I knew, and it was all around me. I'd write for my kids, all of them, and I'd write about what they had taught me.

SOCIAL SCHOLARS

Blue Balliett

I am a writer who is lucky enough to have spent the last twenty-five years with children—my own three, and the hundreds of kids I taught at an old progressive school on the south side of Chicago. The challenge I set myself in writing *Chasing Vermeer*, *The Wright 3*, and *The Calder Game* was to stick to what I knew was true and meaningful, and to what I had learned from kids themselves.

For ten years I was a third-grade classroom teacher. It's a terrific age—everything still bubbles to the surface, and boys and girls can still become plain old friends. At my school, I had no assistant. I took the kids out for recess every day, and then we all had lunch together in the classroom. In retrospect, those unscheduled times with my classes were among the most fascinating and valuable, as those were the times when I could be a quiet, almost-invisible witness. I saw friendships rise and fall; I saw acts of great kindness, in which kids whose brains

worked in dissimilar ways learned from each other; I saw diplomacy in many situations. Food was shared and examined; rules and games were invented; family tangles were discussed. I was interested to find—as many parents do—that kids often seemed more responsible and showed greater skills in conflict resolution when they thought they were out of the range of adults.

At the end of the school day, after my class had gone, I usually found myself re-washing the desks, and picking mashed bread or potato chips off the bottoms of my sneakers. Lunch in the classroom has its drawbacks: juice boxes love to squirt, salami slips out of sandwiches, and jelly escapes mysteriously from peanut butter. Standing in a darkened room with my rubber gloves on and holding yet another tired sponge, I sometimes wondered what had become of my life. Before having my own kids and becoming a teacher, I had been a

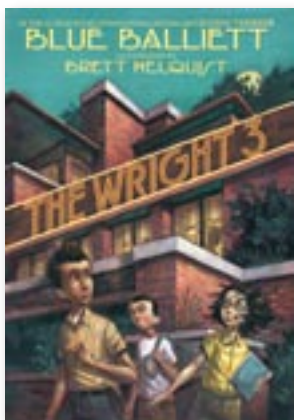


writer. Would I ever write again? And if I did, what did I have to write about? Suddenly, one dark, wintry afternoon, I knew. I knew, and it was all around me. I'd write for my kids, all of them, and I'd write about what they had taught me.

When I set out to write *Chasing Vermeer*, and then *The Wright 3* and *The Calder Game*, I knew I wanted my characters to come directly from my experiences as a teacher and a mother, and they did. The differences between Calder and Petra and Tommy are absolutely

real; I knew boys who were socially-awkward mathematical whizzes, and who did things with their pentominoes that Calder then did. I also knew girls who were loners but confident thinkers and writers, and who dreamed, as Petra does, of a setting with fewer demands and interruptions. I knew kids like Tommy who weren't good at paying attention in school, but who could dazzle when in charge of their own adventures. As I worked out the plots for these books, I realized that I wanted to give these characters opportunities, over and over, to grapple with adult dilemmas—I wanted to show what extraordinary problem-solvers kids can be. With that in mind, I gave these three disparate kids complex issues within the art world and more questions than answers. I chose the art world not only because I love to think about art myself (will we ever really know what art is?), but also because there is so much ongoing controversy within museums. I gave my characters what I knew they could thrive on—a chance to really think, to work collaboratively, and to reach a desperately-needed solution.

When given the opportunity and the need, children instinctively pool their strengths; I've seen it happen over and over, both in and out of the structured classroom environment. Plus, I've noticed that if you give a mismatched group of kids a burning reason to build on each other's problem-solving skills, kids who don't easily relate to one another will do just that. The trick is to find a common goal that drives them out of habitual behaviors and away from



known territory—to set up a situation in which they become co-conspirators in tackling a problem. The more a part of the real world that problem is, and the more troublesome it is to adults, the more interested kids will be—they have an uncanny ability to sense when you really want to find out what their ideas are. And, of course, the possibility of outthinking adults is thrilling. Unfortunately, the current test-driven pace in many schools leaves teachers and students little time for the kind of learning experience I describe. This, I hope, is where my books come in.

Within the context of a fast-paced story Calder, Petra, and Tommy learn many things, but only because they need the information to solve the mystery: they learn about Johannes Vermeer's mysterious life; they learn about the tragic and puzzling history of Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House; and they learn about Alexander Calder's magical sculpture, an old English community, and the complicated relationship between a piece of art and where it is seen or placed. Most kids have amazing brains that display many kinds of excellence; I wanted my characters to shine as thinkers. In my books the three kids are faced with extraordinary circumstances that require creative collaboration and every bit of critical reasoning they can muster. Each comes at the problem from a distinct perspective, and the respect they learn for each other's ideas is genuine and hard-won.



I believe that the challenges my characters grapple with are similar to real-world issues that surround kids in urban, suburban, and rural communities in many parts of the world. I hope my books help kids to see themselves as the powerful thinkers they truly are, and to believe that their ideas can make a difference. I do get many letters from boys and girls who tell me that the books inspire them, and sometimes even that these books have changed the way they see and what they do with their friends. That makes me very happy. After all, who knows what global problem-solving our kids will tackle if they learn early on that three brains are better than one?

Blue Balliett, author of *Chasing Vermeer*, *The Wright 3*, and *The Calder Game*, knew she wanted to be a writer when she was eight years old, but before publishing her first book, she did many other things. Growing up in Manhattan, she spent a lot of time wandering through museums, especially 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 lived on Nantucket Island for a while, working as a cook, waitress, art gallery curator, and, of course, writer. However, the author says that while she “tried to sit down and be a writer at twenty-one,” she had a hard time finding her voice, and that she could not have written *Chasing Vermeer* “without all the living that preceded it.”