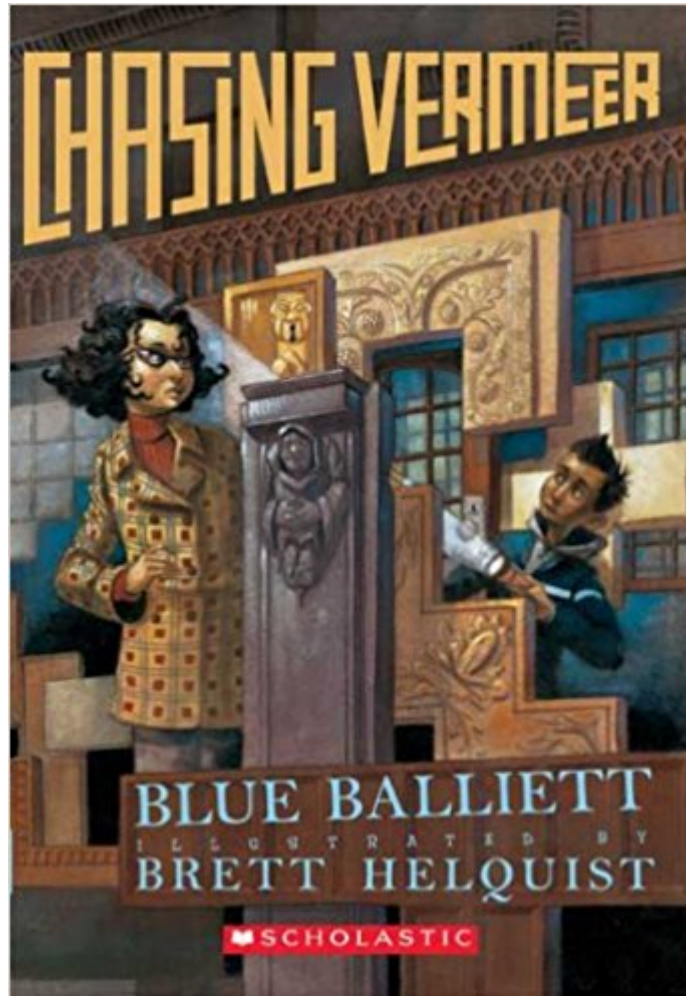




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# Chasing Vermeer



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## Synopsis

This bewitching first novel is a puzzle, wrapped in a mystery, disguised as an adventure, and delivered as a work of art. When a book of unexplainable occurrences brings Petra and Calder together, strange things start to happen: Seemingly unrelated events connect; an eccentric old woman seeks their company; an invaluable Vermeer painting disappears. Before they know it, the two find themselves at the center of an international art scandal, where no one is spared from suspicion. As Petra and Calder are drawn clue by clue into a mysterious labyrinth, they must draw on their powers of intuition, their problem solving skills, and their knowledge of Vermeer. Can they decipher a crime that has stumped even the FBI?

## Book Information

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Age Range: 8 - 12 years

Grade Level: 3 - 7

## Customer Reviews

In the classic tradition of E.L. Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, debut author Blue Balliett introduces readers to another pair of precocious kids on an artful quest full of patterns, puzzles, and the power of blue M&Ms. Eleven year old Petra and Calder may be in the same sixth grade class, but they barely know each other. It's only after a near collision during a museum field trip that they discover their shared worship of art, their teacher Ms. Hussey, and the blue candy that doesn't melt in your hands. Their burgeoning friendship is

strengthened when a creative thief steals a valuable Vermeer painting en route to Chicago, their home town. When the thief leaves a trail of public clues via the newspaper, Petra and Calder decide to try and recover the painting themselves. But tracking down the Vermeer isn't easy, as Calder and Petra try to figure out what a set of pentominos (mathematical puzzle pieces), a mysterious book about unexplainable phenomena and a suddenly very nervous Ms. Hussey have to do with a centuries old artwork. When the thief ups the ante by declaring that he or she may very well destroy the painting, the two friends know they have to make the pieces of the puzzle fit before it's too late! Already being heralded as The DaVinci Code for kids, Chasing Vermeer will have middle grade readers scrutinizing art books as they try to solve the mystery along with Calder and Petra. In an added bonus, artist Brett Helquist has also hidden a secret pentomino message in several of the book's illustrations for readers to decode. An auspicious and wonderfully satisfying debut that will leave no young detective clueless. --Jennifer Hubert --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

**\*Starred Review\*** Gr. 5-8. 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 to 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. Ilene CooperCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

I loved Petra and Calder and their adventures! But I didn't like was trying to read this book in kindle

format. So annoying! I couldn't decipher the code without either recopying it (which I couldn't; because I was wedged in an airplane seat and couldn't reach my notebook/pen) or flipping back and forth between the key page which was hard to find. I ended up not even trying to decipher the last letter. Also it was hard to see the pictures on the kindle but perhaps useful because I could enlarge them. Some of the other graphic details like chapter headings also did not work on well on the kindle (at least with the black background). I know my 11yo son would have no patience for reading this on kindle because of those issues so I will have to check out paper copy from library. Plot-wise it wasn't super tight but I enjoyed the characters enough to overlook all that!

This is the third time I've used the Novel-Ties Study Guides, and it certainly won't be the last. The guide gently, but thoroughly, urges the student to probe into the deeper topics of the accompanying books. There are vocabulary pages, comprehension questions, discussion questions, and short essay questions. Throughout, there are prompts for the student to peel back the layers of meaning in the novel. The pages are perforated, so the guides can be used as consumable items, but they can be used for small groups, as well.

\*Disclaimer: This is from an adult's perspective. A young reader might have a very different reaction to this book. I was so excited by this book when I started reading it -- it sets up interesting characters, an exciting mystery, and a visual puzzle for the reader to solve through the illustrations in the book. I loved the initial character development of Petra and Calder, two smart young people who have very different ways of thinking. It was fun using the pentomino code to decode the letters in the book, and to try to solve the hidden puzzle in the pictures. And I loved that the mystery was based around art history. But as I read on, I became disappointed. The character development fell flat. The visual puzzle was not quite as challenging as I'd hoped (though still satisfying). And, most disappointing of all, the mystery was really not as exciting as initially promised (trying to turn the nitpicky art historical issue of painting attribution into a big international scandal just didn't work for me). Despite these disappointments, I still believe this book has something special to offer, with its unique approach, and its two main characters who really think about the world around them, and use all their intelligence and intuition to solve the mystery.

On paper (which I guess is a phrase that doesn't work quite as well in regard to books), the concept of this book thrills me! Geometric puzzles, art history clues, and natural phenomena? I love it all! And even when I first read this book, I was totally gripped by the story and all the layers of mystery

and curiosity. It was in my second reading that this house of cards flattened out on me. This book frustrated me much in the same way that Harry Potter has. The author just takes too many liberties to allow the reader to feel part of the story. It feels unfair when an author gets to have a surprise hidden panel in the wall at the end of the story. I don't know if this is so much true for all genres. A mystery, however, should be tight. It needs to feel like a completed puzzle at the end - either leaving you feeling satisfied that you called it right, or amazed at how well it all came together. When it feels like a jumble that nobody could have pieced together except the author (and even appears that the author took pains to make it more complicated than necessary) it just doesn't work. In some cases of literature (and art!), when you think "I could have made that," it is a compliment on how easy the creator made it look. In the case of Chasing Vermeer, and knowing full well my limitations as a writer, thinking "I could have written that" is not a good thing. For a book club book, I think this will still be a delight to young readers. If the club is given all the extra ingredients to completely lose themselves in a world of mathematical and artistic mystery, fall in love with Chasing Vermeer. I have only read this book aloud with students. To independently read it as a book club, students would probably need to be older and have strategies for figuring out the references the book makes.

not very interesting except for the descriptive parts about Chicago - premise of story not clear, end result not clear

I teach elementary art, and I loved this clever little book. The art history connection was fun. For me, it was a delightful quick read that reminded me somewhat of the Lemony Snicket books (it does have a little bit of the fantastic in it) with an art connection. I'm trying to carve out time to read it to some of my upper elementary kids at school, but our art classes are so short, I am afraid they would lose the thread of the mystery. I would gladly endorse it as family bedtime reading!

This is a delightful story for its age group, and the puzzles, in addition, add to the adventure. But most of all, I am delighted that it brought attention to the "real" arts, in this case a particular work of Johannes Vermeer. I think I may have had more fun creating my lesson plans! A few years ago I also enjoyed an adult fiction by Tracy Chevalier about the same artist and another of his famous paintings, Girl with a Pearl Earring. It was later made into a beautiful "art" film starring the very handsome and tremendously talented actor Colin Firth. It is always a pleasure to shed light (no pun intended) on the work of a great master artist.

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