



## Chasing Vermeer

By Blue Balliett

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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?

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## Chasing Vermeer By Blue Balliett Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

### Amazon.com Review

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*

### From [Booklist](#)

\*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 Cooper*  
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### Review

Voice of Youth Advocates

December 1, 2004

Mix classic artworks with crime? It seems to be a popular plot that makes its way here to a thriller for young readers. Two eccentric sixth graders at the University School find themselves in the middle of a major art theft. Who was Vermeer? What does Charles Fort have to do with it all? (He was real.) And why do Petra

and Calder get clues about what has happened? Petra sees images that relate to the picture of the lady, and Calder's favorite game pieces, from pentominoes, give him clues. Their teacher, Miss Hussey, seems to be involved, as does elderly Mrs. Sharpe, and perhaps Calder's father. And then there is something odd about Mr. Watch from Powell's Bookstore. Calder's friend Tommy sends coded messages and then goes missing. Plenty of clues, wrong directions, speculation, and good guesses lead Petra and Calder on a sequence of adventures to find the art work before it is destroyed. This exciting romp will appeal to middle school readers and make them think about clues and even art. The adults are given good characterizations although the young people do not know whom to trust and perhaps get in a little deeper than they should. The ending comes a bit too quickly without enough evolution and there are a number of loose ends, but most readers will overlook this flaw for the fun. The illustrations by Helquist, of Lemony Snicket fame, contain hidden messages that present challenging puzzles to the reader.-Patricia Morrow.

Horn Book Magazine

July 1, 2004

(Intermediate) "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. Copyright 2004 of The Horn Book, Inc. All rights reserved.

School Library Journal

July 1, 2004

Gr 5-8-Fans of Ellen Raskin's *The Westing Game* (Dutton, 1978) and E. L. Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* (Turtleback, 1967) will welcome this novel about two classmates determined to solve the mystery of a missing painting. Brainy 12-year-olds Petra Andalee and Calder Pillay attend the University of Chicago Laboratory School where their teacher's unorthodox methods make learning an adventure. When Vermeer's *A Lady Writing* disappears on its way to exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, the two overcome their adolescent awkwardness and let their friendship bloom, pooling their talents to rescue the masterpiece and expose the thief. Many elements play a role in unraveling the secrets surrounding the crime: Calder's set of pentominoes; his encoded correspondence with his friend Tommy about a missing boy named Frog; and

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### **From reader reviews:**

#### **James Stumbaugh:**

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### **Christopher Levi:**

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### **Wendy Cort:**

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