

= Chasing Vermeer =

Chasing Vermeer is a 2004 children's art mystery novel written by Blue Balliett and illustrated by Brett Helquist. Set in Hyde Park, Chicago near the University of Chicago, the novel follows two children, Calder Pillay and Petra Andalee. After a famous Johannes Vermeer painting is stolen on route to the Art Institute of Chicago, Calder and Petra work together to try to recover it. The thief publishes many advertisements in the newspaper, explaining that he will give the painting back if the community can discover which paintings under Vermeer's name were really painted by him. This causes Petra, Calder, and the rest of Hyde Park to examine art more closely. Themes of art, chance, coincidence, deception, and problem @-@ solving are apparent.

The novel was written for Balliett classroom intended to deal with real @-@ world issues. Balliett values children's ideas and wrote the book specifically to highlight that. Chasing Vermeer has won several awards, including the Edgar and the Agatha. In 2006, the sequel entitled The Wright 3 was published, followed by The Calder Game in 2008, .

= = Inspiration and origins = =

Chasing Vermeer is Blue Balliett's first published book. Its original purpose was a book to read to her class for fun. She realized that a mystery about "real" art issues had not been written since E.L. Konigsburg's From the Mixed @-@ Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler and desired to write what she wished to read. Chasing Vermeer took about five years to complete, as Balliett was also a teacher and parent. She compared writing the book to weaving, as she first wrote mainly about art, but then incorporated the pentominoes and classroom scenes, creating many different levels to read on. She admits that it ended up more complex than she had thought it would be.

Balliett used art and blank plates as inspiration for the characters' names. Calder Pillay is derived from the artist Alexander Calder and Petra Andalee was inspired by the architecture in Petra, Jordan. The names were meant to be different, which Balliett considered "fun for a child." Balliett felt that she could capture the attention of reluctant readers if they related to characters who enjoyed writing and math. Calder and Petra's teacher, Ms. Hussey, was inspired by an old name on Nantucket Island and the old @-@ fashioned word hussy. Balliett compares herself to Ms. Hussey, stating that "[we] think a lot alike." Some of Ms. Hussey's assignments and dialogue even came from Balliett's classroom. She chose the setting of Hyde Park, Chicago, where she currently lives, because she considered it full of secrets that children could discover.

= = Plot summary = =

The book begins with a mysterious letter that is delivered to three unknown recipients, two women and one man. The letter tells them they are of great need to the sender, but begs them not to tell the police.

Sixth @-@ graders Calder Pillay, who enjoys puzzles and pentominoes, and Petra Andalee, who aspires to be a writer, are classmates at the Middle School in Hyde Park, Chicago. Their young teacher, Ms. Hussey, is very interested in art and teaches them in a creative way. Through her pressing questions, they discover the artist Johannes Vermeer and his paintings, especially A Lady Writing and The Geographer. Petra also finds a used book called Lo!, written by Charles Fort, at the local Powell's Books, owned by a man named Mr. Watch. They also meet an elderly neighbor, Mrs. Sharpe, who is also a fan of Vermeer and Fort. Calder receives letters from his best friend Tommy Segovia, who is currently living in New York City with a new stepfather.

The children learn that A Lady Writing was traveling from The National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. to Hyde Park. The next day there is a story in the paper of how the painting mysteriously disappeared. A letter from the thief appears in the newspaper, telling the public that he will not give back A Lady Writing until they prove which Vermeer paintings were truly painted by him. This sparks worldwide uproar. Calder and Petra investigate as their friendship grows. Mrs. Sharpe requests police protection and it is revealed that she and Ms. Hussey were two of the three

recipients of the thief 's letter . Calder and Petra eventually conclude that the painting is hidden in the local Delia Dell Hall , and they sneak out and find it . They barely escape from the thief , who is later found dead from a massive heart attack on the train by the police . They learn that the man is Xavier Glitts , also known as Glitter Man , who was posing as Tommy 's stepfather under the name Fred Steadman . A known art thief , he was asked to steal the painting and sell it for sixty million dollars . The other recipient of the letter is revealed to be Mr. Watch .

= = = Code = = =

As stated in the preface , there is a code hidden in the paintings throughout the book . This was an idea of Brett Helquist and Balliett 's editor , Tracy Mack . The code involves images of pentominoes and frogs , which is a recurring theme in the book . To decode the code , one must count the number of frogs in every other illustration , as well as find the hidden pentomino . Once these facts are collected , you are to use the same code presented in the story that Calder and Tommy use in their letters in the book . For example , the first code in the book is V : 2 @.@ this means T when decoded with Calder and Tommy 's decoder . When the message is decoded , it spells out " The Lady Lives " .

= = Genre = =

Chasing Vermeer is classified in the mystery genre , although it was described by Liz Szabla of Scholastic as " a puzzle , wrapped in a mystery , disguised as an adventure , and delivered as a work of art . " Scholastic 's teaching website additionally added suspense due to the surprise ending .

= = Themes = =

Some of Balliett 's " real @-@ world ideas " in Chasing Vermeer were " Do coincidences mean anything ? " and " What is art and what makes it valuable ? " Balliett says her " central message " is " kids are powerful thinkers , and their ideas are valuable , and that adults don 't have all the answers . "

A book by Rita Soltan entitled Reading Raps : A Book Club Guide for Librarians , Kids , and Families analyzed Chasing Vermeer 's themes as follows :

Deception and problem solving are central themes in this novel as both the thief and the central adult players use a variety of ways to hide the truth while the children employ a series of mathematical and problem @-@ solving concepts to piece together the clues to the puzzle . In addition , Calder and Petra develop a special friendship and certain respect for the value of art .

As the thief gains publicity by challenging the community to figure out which paintings claimed to be Vermeer 's were indeed painted by him , everyone starts to look at the depth in art . Sondra Eklund , who writes a book review blog , noted that the reader was left with the impression to study Vermeer 's paintings and art more closely . In the book , Ms. Hussey challenges her class to the question , " What is art ? "

Other themes include chance and coincidence . During Chasing Vermeer , Charles Fort 's book , Lo ! , inspires the children to list and pay attention to coincidences as they realize that they are more than what they seem and explore the concept that they make up one unexplained pattern . Balliett stated that she wanted to convey how coincidences were noticeable and felt meaningful , and how they could matter even if they were unexplainable .

= = Audiobook = =

The audiobook for Chasing Vermeer , read by Ellen Reilly , was released on November 27 , 2007 from Listening Library . It runs about 4 hours and 47 minutes . AudioFile magazine praised Reilly 's voices and pace , but noted that , " Once the mystery is solved , however , the ending seems tacked

on , falling flat . "

= = Critical reception = =

Chasing Vermeer received generally positive reviews . The New York Times praised the description and mystery . It was also listed as one of their " Notable Books of 2004 " . Kirkus Reviews awarded it a starred review with the consensus that " Art , intrigue , and plenty of twists and turns make this art mystery a great read . " Children 's Literature reviewer Claudia Mills gave generally positive comments , calling the novel " engrossing and engaging " . The website Kidsreads compared the book to classic mysteries such as The Westing Game and said , " Chasing Vermeer deserves a spot alongside many well @-@ loved children 's books . It 's that good . " A reviewer of The Trades website called it " an entertaining read that manages to serve several purposes in one concise novel " and found the characters " unusual yet likable " , but felt that " the disappointing bit of this novel is that the solutions always arrive through a series of disconnected events that just lead the kids to think in certain ways . " Kadon Enterprises , a game puzzle company , reviewed the book , praising the writing style and puzzles .

= = = Awards = = =

= = Film = =

Warner Brothers bought the rights to a film of Chasing Vermeer in June 2004 and Brad Pitt 's production company Plan B Entertainment planned to produce it . P.J. Hogan was slated as director and the novel was adapted by Matt Nix . However , when asked about the film in August 2010 , Balliett answered ,

" It ? s been fascinating , watching this whole process , because Plan B did a wonderful job . They went through two screenwriters , and they ? ve gone through two directors . It ? s sort of like a house of cards . I have rights again . If they get it all together again , they ? ll jump on it . But they don ? t have exclusive rights anymore . "