

A CONVERSATION

Blue Balliett

Questions & Answers

The Danger Box

Q: Describe what's in *The Danger Box*.

BB: *The Danger Box* is a mystery set in a very small, very quiet town in Michigan, one that could be almost anywhere in the United States. A worn, red notebook appears, one that might or might not have belonged to one of the most famous and controversial thinkers ever, a person who has been dead for over a hundred years—and whose name is known around the world. Dangerous sparks are struck...and soon a boy, a girl and a way of life are surrounded by flames.

Q: You're widely known for writing books about famous artists and visionaries – Johannes Vermeer in *Chasing Vermeer*, Frank Lloyd Wright in *The Wright 3*, Alexander Calder in *The Calder Game*, what made you decide to write a new mystery focusing on a world-renowned scientist?

BB: Science is filled with as much controversy and as many questions as art—especially the scientific ideas of this particular thinker. But the ideas that made this man's name a household word also hid who he was as a person. My hope in writing this book was to give kids more access to this inspiring, humble and often-misunderstood guy.

Q: You have said *The Danger Box* is a book you HAD to write. Can you explain that?

BB: When I stumbled on the fact that this one priceless notebook was missing, I was so excited—and the story practically told itself. Wouldn't it be amazing if this object were actually found one day by one of the kids who read my book? Stranger things have happened, and sometimes fact follows fiction...

Q: How did you choose the setting for *The Danger Box*?

BB: I knew I wanted a small community, and one within easy driving distance of Chicago, where I live. When I first saw Three Oaks, I fell in love with it—there's one main street with just a handful of local businesses, a train that runs through the middle of town but hasn't stopped there in fifty years, and endless fields of corn and soybeans. It almost feels like a small island buried in green.

Q: Can you talk about your research process for this book? Did you discover anything about this famous man that surprised you?

BB: I read lots about this man's life, which is often overshadowed by his ideas. I felt he could be an accessible and inspiring friend to all kinds of kids. He started out with lots of weaknesses and difficulties—anxiety, lack of success at school, compulsive collecting and list-making, to name a few—and yet somehow those qualities that tripped him up at first might not have been all bad, and perhaps they even became strengths that contributed to his work and fame.

Q: Do you still write in your laundry room? Describe your writing process.

BB: I do; I started out working in there when our kids were teenagers, as it's out of the way but still in the middle of the house. When I get stuck writing on my laptop I go to a legal pad. I carry a pocket-sized notebook everywhere, and write down ideas whenever they occur. Sometimes, if I'm puzzling over a piece of the plot, it becomes clear just as I'm falling asleep or when I first wake up.

Q: You have said that the characters from your previous novels were loosely based on some of the kids you taught when you were a teacher at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools. Are Zoomy and Lorrol based on real kids?

BB: All of my characters are inspired by kids I taught and people I've known, but Zoomy's special way of seeing is a quality I've only observed from a distance. Before beginning the book, I visited an optometrist who fitted me with lenses that made it possible to temporarily glimpse the range of Zoomy's vision, and this doctor also allowed me to see what Zoomy's glasses might look like from the outside. While I was writing, I was always trying to imagine myself inside Zoomy, looking out.

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Q: Zoomy's grandparents are very supportive of him and treat him like any other kid, despite his physical challenges. Did you have similar grandparents?

BB: When quite young, I spent lots of time with grandparents during the summers, and think there's a special kind of bond that can pull the old and the young together. My sister and brother and I did help out a bit by sweeping, doing dishes, weeding or watering, and keeping my grandfather company while he ate lunch, which sometimes took a long time. Zoomy has lots of chores, and everyone in his household pulls together to get washing, gardening and cooking done. It's not a bad thing to be needed.

Q: Are there any particular character(s) in the book that you identify with the most and why?

BB: Like Zoomy, I was closely connected to the grownups around me, but didn't feel I could always see what was going on too clearly. Also, I had 'aha' moments, times when I suddenly glimpsed meaning or pattern, and felt I had understood something valuable—but didn't know how to say it. That's what I'm trying to do now!

Q: Talk about the 'Gas Gazette' entries... How did that come about and why did you decide to incorporate that in *The Danger Box*?

BB: The more I learned about this scientist's personality and life, the more I wanted to share with kids. At first, I planted lots of the quotes and facts that are now in the Gas Gazette within the text itself, but that began to feel heavy. I wanted the man himself to become a necessary piece of the puzzle, and that's when I turned him over to Zoomy and Lorrol, and he came alive as 'Gas', which was his teenage nickname. As soon as 'Gas' began to speak for himself, the Gas Gazettes just poured out...I could barely keep up with all that Gas wanted to say. It was an odd feeling, as if he'd stepped off the page.

Q: There seems to be a lot of interest in Charles Darwin recently. What is it about him that you think fascinates people to this day?

BB: Okay, so this mysterious scientist is Charles Darwin, yes! Well, on the occasion of his 200th birthday, in 2009, there were lots of exhibits and many wonderful books came out. I do think he's fascinating in part because he's such a hot-button figure, especially in the United States, where his theory of evolution still creates a huge amount of controversy.

Q: What do you hope readers will take away from *The Danger Box*?

BB: My hope is that kids from all kinds of backgrounds can be inspired by Darwin as a person, regardless of whether they or the people around them agree with his ideas about biology. Darwin was an amazing seeker of patterns, a huge dreamer and thinker—and yet he had so many qualities that most adults today would consider problems. The idea that so-called weaknesses can become strengths—that intrigues me. Are there also times when a physical disability can allow a person to accomplish things that others might not? I think this is an exciting question.

Q: What's next for you?

BB: Hmm, I'm still at the stage of gathering ingredients and stirring them around. I'm not quite ready to talk about what I'm up to, but my research is taking me to unfamiliar and not-easy places. And, as always, I'm learning like mad. That is one of the great pleasures—I guess I like the 'yikes, uh-oh' feeling of this kind of exploration.

You could say I'm a danger box kind of girl.

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