

Los Angeles Times

Blue Balliett switches setting but not adventure in 'The Danger Box'

By Susan Carpenter – September 14, 2010

When Blue Balliett burst onto the tween literary scene with her first action-packed intellectual art mystery six years ago, it was, in every sense, a puzzler. An unknown Chicago teacher had propelled herself to the top of the country's bestseller lists with "Chasing Vermeer," a tall tale crafted from the disparate, and not especially child-friendly, subjects of a 17th century Dutch painting, an ancient Greek puzzle game, a wrinkled old lady, a discarded library book and an art museum.

It was a roller-coaster ride of a story that could easily have come off the rails but instead stayed on track with an endless array of unexpected but explainable plot twists that kept young readers questioning and turning pages.



Author Blue Balliett (E. Jason Wambsgans/ MCT/
August 11, 2010)

Now readers who fell in love with Petra, Calder and Tommy in follow-up mysteries that took the beloved Balliett characters into an endangered Frank Lloyd Wright house and on to England to pursue a missing sculpture will enter an entirely different world with the author's fourth and latest middle-reader mystery, "The Danger Box," which recently hit stores nationwide.

With her newest, the bestselling author journeys outside the big city and into a small town with new characters and challenges that are a departure for Balliett but are as wondrously mystifying as her there is the legally blind Zoomy, who clings to the world with the help of to-do lists and his elderly grandparents, who found him as a baby on their doorstep.

Like Balliett's earlier books, many of the characters and situations in "The Danger Box" are real. The rural, old-fashion town of Three Oaks, Mich., actually exists. So, of course, did Darwin and the now-missing notebook he kept while traveling in the Galapagos Islands. Combine those disconnected ideas, as Balliett did, and they add up to another imaginative and thought-provoking mystery — Balliett's preferred mode of storytelling and one that has returned accolades and bestsellers.

"Any time you can get kids curious, they're going to pay attention and focus in a different way," Balliett explained in a telephone interview from her home in Chicago. "If you give kids an idea that grown-ups haven't completely figured out and don't have the answer to and ask, 'What do you think?' you've got their brains working. They love to grapple with real questions and mysteries and situations that aren't completely understood, so I think mysteries are a perfect vehicle for kids."

It was Balliett's interest in a very specific mystery that led her to a bachelor's degree in art history from Brown, then a 10-year stint at an elementary school in Chicago and a class assignment that inadvertently led to the writing of her first bestseller, "Chasing Vermeer," in 2004.

"What is art about?" she wondered.

Balliett had grown up in New York and spent a lot of time wandering through the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Frick Collection, "associating art with time that was my own in a place I could be dreamy and look at something and think whatever I want," she said.

She was intrigued enough with art that she decided to pursue it in college, but she didn't like being taught what she was seeing in various pieces, she said.

"I could never tell people what they were seeing," she said. As a teacher, "I loved the idea of exposing kids to art in such a way that they could see what they wanted to see and take away what they wanted to take away.... That's, to me, what art should be about: a place where you can be different from the way you are in the rest of your life and you can use your mind in a different way. A place where there aren't any rights or wrongs."

It was 1999 when she took her third-grade class on field trips to see art all around the city in an effort to discover its unsolved mysteries. Toward the end of the school year, she asked her class to write their own art mysteries using a real artist. Balliett gave herself the same assignment she'd given her class and wound up writing the wildly adventurous and truly puzzling story of two kids who get tangled up in an FBI investigation in their pursuit of a missing Vermeer painting.

Balliett's latest was similarly inspired by a museum. In 2007, she went to see a Charles Darwin exhibit at the Field Museum in Chicago — an exhibit that was just as much about Darwin the person as his ideas.

"I was really intrigued," said Balliett, who immediately began reading Darwin biographies, then assembling the various pieces she would put together in "The Danger Box."

"He's thrilling because he had all these complicated issues that were a part of who he was. ... He was somebody who would've had a pretty rough time in our school system now, which doesn't allow kids a lot of latitude for different learning styles or various passions," said Balliett, who stopped teaching in 2004. "I thought, I would just love more kids to know who he was because he had such a bumpy start and really struggled with anxiety and fears and then went on to become one of the most powerful thinkers of all time."

With "The Danger Box," Balliett mirrors many of Darwin's attributes in her lead character, Zoomy — a boy who struggles in school, is bad at doing what he's supposed to and loves to collect things. In Balliett's hands, Zoomy's weaknesses, such as his poor eyesight, are turned into strengths, allowing him to see the world differently and navigate his way through it in a way that solves the puzzle of the mysterious notebook that has somehow landed in his grandpa's antiques store.

Unlike her three previous books, which furthered their intricate plotlines with clues embedded in black-and-white drawings from Brett Helquist, "The Danger Box" does not include artwork. Instead, Balliett's delightfully expressive language is punctuated with newsletters that reveal some of the lesser-known aspects of Darwin's storied life.

By bringing Darwin's life issues and thought processes to light, Balliett not only reveals insight into the decades-long percolation of ideas and experiences that resulted in Darwin's theory of evolution but also hopes to encourage readers to put down their video games and iPods and do the same.

"I'm hoping that I can inspire kids to realize it's OK to shut things off, to have a moment with their own thoughts," Balliett said. "That's actually become quite a challenge for kids. Amazing things can happen if you can shut out the world for a little while."