

Q&A with Blue Balliett

By Karen Springer, August 19, 2010



Blue Balliett.

Like Percy Jackson author Rick Riordan, Blue Balliett has morphed from popular teacher to popular novelist. Daughter of the New Yorker's longtime jazz critic, she adored working with third and fourth graders at the University of Chicago Laboratory School. But she also loved spinning fictional tales based on intriguing historical figures. Six years ago, she started publishing bestselling mysteries: Chasing Vermeer, followed by The Wright 3 and The Calder Game. Next month, she is publishing her fourth title, *The Danger Box*. (Scholastic is printing 75,000 copies, which will add to the 2 million books in print for her previous three titles.) In this story, 12-year-old Zoomy lives with his grandparents in a tiny Michigan town. One day the boy's alcoholic father drops off a pilfered container with a mysterious notebook inside. Zoomy puts the journal, filled with notations about the Galapagos Islands, under his bed in his cardboard "danger box"; eventually, he and a friend figure out that the notebook is a famous artifact.

Your previous novels were history mysteries. How did your interest in Charles Darwin inspire you to write *The Danger Box*?

I began thinking about it when I saw the huge traveling Darwin show that started at the Museum of Natural History. I thought, I don't quite see how I could use Darwin, but isn't he inspiring? I read a bit more, and then I discovered that one of his most famous notebooks had been stolen, and was still out there somewhere. That did it for me. I dove in and read, read, read. I was just so excited to find out about that notebook. The family has kept it very quiet. The first very public notice I saw about it was last fall in England. This was the notebook he carried with him on the Galapagos Islands. The person at the core of this book is one of the most famous and powerful thinkers of our time, a man whose name is known by everyone around the world. The story is hung on an object that he owned that was stolen 25 years ago and is still gone.

In your acknowledgments, you say this novel was "in the making for a number of years." How many, and why so long?

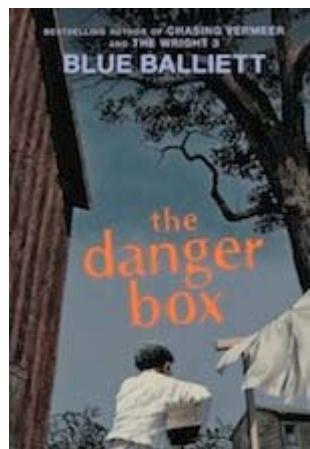
All of my books take me a number of years. I do a good year of thinking, reading, stirring ideas around in my head before I make a real decision about what the book is going to be. I just have to wake up one morning with that green-light feeling. I have to get all the ingredients. I was so fascinated when I found out that this notebook was still out there somewhere. I couldn't believe it. It's listed in the Art Loss Register. Isn't that fascinating? It disappeared from Darwin's study over 25 years ago, and his house is a museum. Many people did research on Darwin and were in and out. It's just waiting for one of these kids who read the book to find it! That's what I want to happen.

Have you heard from Darwin's family? Have you sent them an advance copy?

I haven't. Scholastic researched the rights and said there weren't any rights issues. We'll send them the copy when it's out.

Why did you find Darwin so inspiring?

He could be someone who would feel like a friend to kids. He got distracted, and he was dreamy, and he hated school, was not good at school, was not considered as successful a student as his brother was. He couldn't seem to settle on a profession. His father made him go to medical school. He dropped out. He just wanted to run around the countryside and collect shells. He had a terrifically hard time with anxiety. Qualities that usually are presented as weaknesses in people are qualities he had in abundance. I love the idea of asking kids that question. Are qualities that look like weaknesses sometimes strengths? I feel the same way about Zoomy's special kind of eyesight. I don't use that word at all, but we call that a disability in our culture. But it's just a different way of seeing, in actuality. Would a kid who didn't have Zoomy's way of seeing have gotten as far with the notebook? There are a lot of reasons that he and Darwin as personalities resonated together. You think



about all kinds of kids who are considered not top of the class, and if they could think of themselves as people with different kinds of possibilities within them, that's wonderful.

How easy was it to come up with the book's title?

Not hard at all. I think I have a funny kind of mind. I love trying to pull connections between things. I knew I wanted Zoomy to have a box of firecrackers. My son, as a very young boy, was fascinated by the smell of firecrackers. He liked to pick up these blown-up shells and smell them. I wanted him to have a little bit of boy danger. And of course the minute you think about Charles Darwin's ideas, you're thinking about things that are potentially explosive because of how his theories are seen in this country.

David Levithan edited *The Danger Box*. Did he edit all your books?

No. He did *The Calder Game*, and Tracy Mack did my first two. When I was thinking about doing this book, I remember going to David and saying, "I have this idea." He said, "Darwin is dangerous territory." He came back to me and said, "Go for it. We want you to do it." Scholastic has been very good to me.

How old are your own kids?

My youngest, Daniel, is 23, almost 24. I have a daughter, Alphea, who is 25. Then I have Jessie, who's actually my stepdaughter, who's 35.

Do your kids serve as your first editors?

Nobody in my family sees it. David is the only one who sees it. I show David the first draft. But I don't have a writing group. I work in a very solitary way.

Are your kids writers?

No, they're not. I almost think writing isn't so much about writing things down as about how much people do or don't like playing with writing in their head. It starts very early. You can see that in eight- or nine-year-olds. There are certain kids who just love to play with words, whether it's the sound of words, or they play with sentences early. Jessie has done a bunch of things but she's been teaching most recently, and she's a really, really good writer. Alphea is bilingual in Spanish, and she works for the national immigrant justice center in Chicago. She works on legal rights, helping people through the court system. Dan is an audio engineer.

Does your husband pick up a red pen? Is he in the publishing business?

No. He's an urban planner. He's a wonderful partner in the making of the books because he's done a lot of travel with me. Three of them draw on our neighborhood in Chicago. He'll take pictures that go into the makings of the books. He's helped the illustrators. He's a good research partner. I think it's fun for him.



Balliett stayed in Three Oaks, Mich., while writing 'The Danger Box,' which is set there.

You write in the laundry room of your home in Hyde Park. Why?

I think I like it because it's not official. I don't like the idea of a big official desk. It's just a side of me that's forever rebellious. I like it also because it's in the middle of the house. I can run down and get something to eat. It doesn't have a lot in it. It doesn't have a phone. I haven't moved myself into a more official space, even though the kids are grown up and we have lots more space.

I work on a table with a laptop. I do write on my computer, but I also write on legal pads and always carry a little notebook. I've taken some pictures of messy pages in the notebook that I like to show kids, just so they get to see the mess before the tidy book. As a child, you don't often get to see all the scribbly stuff. So I also show them scribbly manuscript pages, where I've made notes, and my fast handwriting.

How many drafts before the neat one?

With *Chasing Vermeer*, I did at least 10 complete drafts. With this one, there were probably four. As I've gone on as a writer, I can try things out in my head before they go on paper. I'll live with it in my head for a few days, and then I'll go, no, no. I do a lot of "air editing." Earlier on as a writer, I would have written it out.

Why do you like mysteries so much?

Part of that is knowing as a mom and a teacher that when you get kids curious, they're engaged in a different way. They're using a lot more of their brain. I love the idea of giving kids a reason to find things out. If you help them to see the everyday world around them as being a place filled with mysteries, they're going to approach life with a much more alert, questioning kind of eye, rather than just walking through life with their eyes half closed. It adds to the fun of living if you can look around you and see mysteries. Mystery is a natural and powerful medium for kids, and you don't need to go into fantasy to realize how much exciting and strange stuff is around us all the time.

Do you always live in or visit the places you're going to write about? Would you ever consider making up a mythical city, or is there a reason you base your books in reality rather than set them in a fictional city?

I think I love that little zing of surprise that you get when you use a real place and it becomes mysterious. That must have started with me really early. I can remember reading *From the Mixed Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*. I was 12, and I was growing up in Manhattan. That was the first book I read that had an exciting mystery set in a place I'd been to. I never forgot that. To me, there's a ping that feels good about the challenge of taking the everyday world and making it mysterious or helping kids to see it in a different way.

You've dedicated *The Danger Box* to "the children of Three Oaks," the Michigan town where the story is set. In your author's note, "What's real," you say you visited. How much help did the kids there give you?

They were wonderful! At first I tried to sneak into town to just do a little research and poke around quietly. The town is so small that people just asked me outright, "What are you doing here?" I kind of had to say, "Well, I'm a writer." Then I just went to the school. I found the principal, who was in his office. I said, "I'm a writer, I live in Chicago, and I'm going to use Three Oaks as a setting. Is there anything I can do?" I did come and talk to the kids that fall. They had never met a writer before. I'm going to go back out to Three Oaks the very first stop on the book tour. Then I'm going to go back at the very end.

Do you consider *The Danger Box* a form of historical fiction?



I don't think so. Historical fiction would be taking a period in history and bringing it alive. Instead, I have Darwin coming alive in his own way.

You open with Charles Darwin's quote, "It is like confessing a murder," and Crockett Johnson's quote, "His hand holding the purple crayon shook." Zoomy, the main character, writes in a purple crayon, and Darwin plays a large role in the story. But why these two quotes?

I just love the oddness of putting those two together. I've always thought *Harold and the Purple Crayon* was really a profound book. I've loved it forever, since I was four years old. It's such a great story about a child who makes himself into an adventure and draws himself out of it. That's sort of what Darwin did too. He drew himself into a world, and he didn't completely draw himself out of it.

Your book mentions the dangers of schools not talking about evolution, the evils of slavery, the bad effects of alcohol, and problems with keeping secrets. Did this happen accidentally, or did you do it on purpose?

I think I just realized those were just real-life ingredients for kids living in this part of the world. I just wanted to drop them in as they're pieces of life.

Certainly Zoomy doesn't have a perfect parent. Are you trying to make kids feel better if they don't, either?



Balliett on the house where she stayed in Three Oaks: "It's the only place that rents rooms in town. The owner let me have my breakfast upstairs, and here I'm having a little quiet writing time."

The stairs at the public library in Three Oaks, which play a role in Balliett's story.

No. I never really want to preach to kids. I'm just presenting, life isn't totally perfect, but it is a really cool puzzle. There are ambiguous things in the story that are meant to be ambiguous. He probably never will catch up with his mom. You don't really know whether his dad is going to be able to stay sober. There are things that are messy about it.

Would you ever do a sequel?

I don't think so. I think Zoomy is off and running.

Your dad, Whitney Balliett, wrote for the *New Yorker*. Do you think he gave you your "writer" gene, and did he teach you to write?

I can't say he taught me to write. But I come from a family of people who love, love, love to read. Actually, my mom [Elizabeth Platt] was a writer, too. She was a writer early on, had three kids and stopped writing. But she's written a book on daycare, and another book on Head Start. Growing up, we talked a lot about books and writing. I just have always loved words and poetry. And I'm just fascinated by what you can do playing with words.

You taught third and fourth grade at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools. I believe you stopped teaching fulltime in 2002. Do you miss teaching?

I really miss the kids. I also miss the school. I had lots of freedom to be a Ms. Hussey-like teacher. Ms. Hussey [in *Chasing Vermeer*] was cooler than I was. I couldn't have done all the things she did. In terms of someone who learned with her kids in the classroom, it was so much fun. I could design big projects with them. In that way, my books come right out of the classroom. Kids who are all different kinds of learners can hitch onto these books. This was really my intent -- that boys and girls could hitch onto these books. My mail comes just as much from boys as from girls. I have kids of my own who are very different kinds of learners. It's just harder to hook boys into reading -- not every boy, but generally speaking.

Did you leave the school before the Obama girls arrived?

I did, sadly. I would have loved to have them as a family. I left just before.

You thank the directors of the lab school, and you used its library. Do you ever guest teach there?

I kind of have a standing invitation to go back and do something with kids. I go back every time one of these books comes out. Until this book, all of the books were in some way hooked into Hyde Park [the Chicago neighborhood where the lab school is]. The kids really felt like these were their books, too.

Your real name is Elizabeth. Why are you called Blue?

Elizabeth is my mom's name. I think my dad wanted to call me Elizabeth, and she just said she didn't think any of the nicknames for Elizabeth fit me, so she just started calling me Blue, day two or so. I think it was after the color of the sky.

What can you say about the *Chasing Vermeer* movie?

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. It's so complicated. I'm very relieved I'm not a Hollywood person. Who knows what will happen? Something good will happen. I'm sure!

Have you sold film rights to any of your other books?

I haven't. My agent is much better on this. It's the beautiful thing about having an agent.

Do you have an idea for your next book, and are you already working on it?

I'm doing my air planning! I have a quiet period in my head where I need to get all the ingredients and stir them. I'm learning a lot and I'm heading into unfamiliar territory.

Will the book be set outside of Hyde Park?

Probably.

What about *The Danger Box* is particularly special to you?

I loved writing this book. I loved the idea of being able to give Darwin as a person to these kids. He's humble and inspiring and accessible. I'm certainly not pounding the table about evolution to kids. That wasn't my purpose. I wanted to say, "Look at this man, he was amazing. Look at yourself!"