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Life Arts 6/1/2013 at 22:07:55

## Award-winning Children's Author Blue Balliett Tackles Homelessness in "Hold Fast"

By [Joan Brunwasser](#) ([about the author](#)) [Permalink](#)

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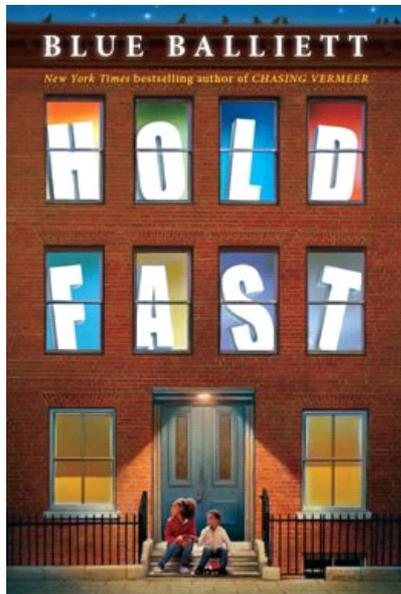
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book jacket by [Blue Balliett](#)

My guest today is award-winning children's author, Blue Balliett. Welcome back to OpEdNews, Blue.

JB: Your latest book, *Hold Fast*, has just been published. Like your other books, it's a mystery, and it's for kids but it's also very different. When you spoke recently at the Skokie Public Library, you mentioned asking yourself, "Do I dare to write this book?" What did you mean by that?

BB: I guess you could say that I'm an all-or-nothing kind of writer. I never start one of my mysteries before plunging deep into a chosen environment and set of ingredients, and won't use what I've found unless it feels authentic. The Chicago scenes and the events surrounding the loss of a home are as real as I knew how to make them, and it took me ages to feel I'd seen and heard what I needed to tell this story. I wasn't going to write about this unless I felt I could truly do justice to the experience, especially from the perspective of kids. Getting all of the first-hand information I needed was a challenge.

The journey I follow in this book -- from family life in a modest but happy home to life in a shelter after the disappearance of a parent -- was one that I wanted to share in a way that would ring true to all readers. It had to feel

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right both to those who had never had this kind of shake-up and to those who had. In *Hold Fast*, I try to provide a window into an earth-shaking crash of this kind. And yet... this is a mystery that explores the extraordinary power of hope, dreams, a family bond, and the written word. I knew this would be a tough balance to strike; hence my worries about daring to tell this story.



Blue by [Bill Klein](#)

**JB: You dedicated your book to Jayden. Who is he and how did he capture your heart?**

BB: Jayden was five or six when I met him over two years ago at a shelter deep on the Southwest side of Chicago. I was visiting as a volunteer for [Chicago HOPES](#), an after-school tutoring group for K-8 kids that meets in several shelters across the city. I'd been unable to locate the shelter when I arrived, and had called the tutor in charge to ask where it was. He popped out of a basement door and gave me a wave. As I headed over, a little boy appeared next to him. This kid was very short, but stood with wonderfully square-shouldered, here-I-am body language. He waved also and then shouted, "Blue! Blue! Over here!"

I think he'd heard that I was a person who made books and collected stories, and I'm not sure that meant much to him -- but he wanted me to feel welcome, whoever I was. When I got there, he stepped over, gave me a quick hug and looked directly into my face. I was just thinking what a beautiful sparkle of a kid he was, when he asked me politely, "So, what's YOUR story?"

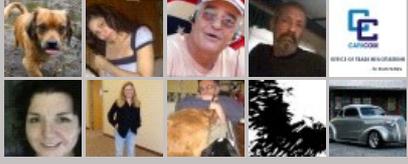
I guess I smiled back, but didn't say anything right away -- what, indeed, was my story? As I hesitated, he did

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something that still amazes me: he hurried to reassure me. He added gently, 'Everybody's got a story', as if to remind me of my own voice. And that was it for me: I knew, at that moment, that I had to write this book. It's for Jayden, a little boy who welcomed me with generosity, wisdom and grace to his shelter world in a desolate Chicago neighborhood; it's for all the Jaydens across the United States; and it's for everyone who isn't aware of the many thousands of kids who are growing up -- in one of the most affluent countries in the world -- without a home.

When I returned to Jayden's shelter the following week, he was gone. His family had packed up and left a couple of nights earlier. The tutor in charge was sad not to have been able to say good-bye, but explained to me that a parent often moved with no warning, feeling it might be easier for the kids that way. Many shelters limit the amount of time one family can stay before moving on -- or, in a happier light, perhaps there was an unexpected housing or employment opportunity for Jayden's family, and they hurried to take advantage of it. Jayden's last name is not available to me, so I'm unable to give him a copy of his own book.

My hope is that one day he will pick up a copy of *Hold Fast*, see his name in the dedication, and perhaps remember that author with the funny first name who once visited his shelter. If he does, I have no doubt that he'll find me.

**JB: Let's talk a bit about Early Pearl. I found myself bumping up against my own prejudices about issues such as defining quality of life and what constitutes a happy family. How did you accomplish that?**

BB: Early is growing up in a family that spends a great deal of time together, and with books and ideas as the main source of entertainment. This sounds old-fashioned and close to impossible in our age of electronics, but it is actually both pragmatic and very smart on the part of her father Dash, who understands that cost-free literacy is the path out of poverty for his family.

A genuine, deep love of literature and a playful way with words are directly linked to his dream of becoming a librarian, and of course the beauty of the public library is that it offers the written word free, and to all. As an institution, it is a bottomless source of ideas and stories; there is always more to grow with, and plenty of it. And what it provides is there for the taking, which seems miraculous in the modern world. A library card makes you a member of this powerful club, and without spending even one penny! Dash shares his excitement about written language and library-linked possibilities with Early and her brother Jubie, and also makes clear that the Pearl family are going places with their dream. They have a plan.

Dash and Sum are both determined to make their family work, and neither have relatives to lean on. This young couple are everything to each other and their kids, and this does, for them, make a very close and strong family unit. Fueled by words and hopes, they are growing happily in a world of their own making until Dash disappears... It is then that the strength of his ideas comes under fire, and Early is forced to use the tools he left behind, the only ones she knows well: tools built from a world of words.



Trying to work despite Pummy, who became a character in *The Calder Game*. by [Bill Klein](#)

**JB: While you deal with a heavier subject this time around, *Hold Fast* is neither dark nor depressing. As always, there's the mystery. And the incredibly strong bond the Pearls have with one another. Then there was a recent *New York Times Magazine* [article](#) on the very topic of**

## Chicago's housing crisis. Would you care to comment on that?

BB: I was thrilled to see this article appear online this week! Like my character Early's 'Home Dreams', the activism described here is a bold move -- far more radical than the plan in *Hold Fast*, but definitely related. The Anti-Eviction Campaign's partners describe their work as putting 'home-less people into people-less homes', which is exactly what Early and the kids who share their home dreams hope to accomplish. And the math is the same: forming an equation from the astounding number of people who've lost homes, on one side, and the shocking number of empty residences on the other. I love the idea that solutions to this untenable situation are arising spontaneously from different sources right now: from the South Side Chicago activists described in this NYT article, who are literally fixing up homes themselves and helping homeless families to move in, and from writers like me.

Early's kid-driven solution just popped into my head uninvited one day, while I was writing *Hold Fast*, so actually I'll give her full credit for it! Speaking of her solution, I know that the [Chicago Coalition for the Homeless](#) has plans to try it out in shelters. And I've heard from classrooms across the U. S. this spring, who are hoping to get the Home Dreams approach firmly launched in their community. This is exciting, and so deeply needed. Kids can definitely help.

I agree with Langston Hughes' feeling about the power of dreams. I've heard him say in a recording that, "All the progress that human beings have made on this old world of ours grew out of dreams." I so agree. I'd only add that sharing and exploring these dreams, through words, is an essential part of all progress. And all literature!



Working on .Chasing Vermeer. . we stopped folding laundry a long time ago by [Bill Klein](#)

**JB: I can't wait to see what they accomplish with this project. It makes so much sense. What haven't we talked about yet, Blue?**

BB: *Hold Fast* represents a number of firsts in my life. I think it's safe to say that it's my most realistic, most tragic and yet also most deeply joyful book. It's a story of extremes, of dreams, of seems... and of nots and knots! It's a book filled with wordplay, and the first book in which I explored poetry. The chapters in *Hold Fast* are divided with onomatopoeic words that each have a bouquet of definitions. They aren't exactly what you would see if you looked up the word in a dictionary. Within those definitions lie clues -- some viable and some red herrings -- to the solution of the mystery. This was great fun to construct, and I loved using word meanings in this hide-and-seek context.

Another first happened after the publication of the book, and involved a hugely generous and unanticipated response from a wild variety of sources. I traveled and talked pretty steadily from February to early May. I went to both coasts, many cities, a number of small communities. My audience included children, librarians, teachers, parents and booksellers, of course, but also urban planners, educators, and people working in the context of social service agencies. This variety of occupations and age groups was new and strange and exciting. I kept saying "Yes, I'll be there!"... and ended up feeling very tired but happy at the end of this looong book tour.

*Hold Fast* is a book that reminds me all the time of how many people across the U. S. are indeed holding fast to dreams, and of the power of a story to take on a life of its own in the world. I've been holding fast to *Hold Fast* on a wild ride this spring, and am grateful for this amazing experience.

JB: Thank you for talking with me again, Blue. It's always a pleasure.

BB: Thanks so much, Joan, for your extreme patience. I always enjoy doing things with you!

I look forward to seeing your finished interview.



Here I am studying the world...

Here I'm around the same age as my characters by [Blue Balliett](#)

\* \* \* \*

Blue's [website](#)

*Chicago Tribune* a [rticle](#) about Lane Gunderman, formerly homeless high school student, who just got a free ride to Stanford, March 14, 2013

My previous interview with Blue: [Award-winning Children's Author Blue Balliett on "The Danger Box" and More](#), June 16, 2011

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<http://www.opednews.com/author/author79.html>

Joan Brunwasser is a co-founder of Citizens for Election Reform (CER) which since 2005 existed for the sole purpose of raising the public awareness of the critical need for election reform. Our goal: to restore fair, accurate, transparent, secure ([more...](#))



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