

Chasing Vermeer Study Guide

Chasing Vermeer by Blue Balliett

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Plot Summary

"Chasing Vermeer" is a fictional book that teaches young readers about art, writing, math, and history in a way that is fun and exciting. Through an art theft and other mysterious happenings, the main characters, Petra and Calder, become friends, grow to be more courageous, and solve an art crime.

The book opens as three unknown individuals receive letters from an unknown individual asking them for help in correcting a crime involving art. This letter threatens them, telling them that if they go to the authorities, their lives will be in danger. The next chapter introduces the two main characters, Calder and Petra. They are eleven year old students at the University School, located near Chicago. They are both unique, intelligent, and have an interest in patterns and the world around them. After seeing Ms. Hussey buying books about crime and art and then reading about the theft of Vermeer's The Lady Writing, they begin to worry that their teacher is somehow mixed up in this theft. Soon many of those they care about are possible suspects, so they decide they should help to solve this crime.

As these two children become deeply immersed in this mystery, they are flooded with so many possible clues and connections that they wonder how they will ever know which clues are actually significant. Through the help of a book called "Lo!" by Charles Fort, Calder's pentominoes, and The Lady from the painting found in Petra's dreams, the children discover that the painting most likely is on their school's grounds. After searching several of the buildings, they intuitively decide that the best place for the painting to be hidden would be in Delia Dell Hall, a beautiful old building whose many details resemble those in Vermeer's paintings.

Once the painting is found hidden in a wall in a stairwell, Calder and Petra run for their lives as alarms scream behind them. Soon they realize they are being followed by a man. Through Calder's bravery, Petra is able to escape from the chasing man but soon loses the painting as she and a police officer search for Calder. Once again, through intuition, Petra reclaims the painting and finds an injured, but alive, Calder.

At the end of the story, the author explains and gives many clues and coincidences found in this book. As she had stated in her introduction at the beginning of the book, the clues found in this book would resemble those found when playing with pentominoes. Clues would appear seemingly at random, and at the end the clues would come together to solve the puzzle. The book ends as the painting is restored to the museum, the crime against Vermeer described at the beginning of the book is rectified, and the main characters and those to whom they are close are safe.



About Pentominoes and about this Story, About the Artwork: A Challenge to the Reader, and Chapter One

About Pentominoes and about this Story, About the Artwork: A Challenge to the Reader, and Chapter One Summary

"Chasing Vermeer" is a fictional book that teaches young readers about art, writing, math, and history in a way that is fun and exciting. Through an art theft and other mysterious happenings, the main characters, Petra and Calder, become friends, grow to be more courageous, and solve the art crime.

About Pentominoes and About this Story explains how a set of pentominoes works. These twelve geometric shapes are used to create rectangles and to study the world in a geometric way. The author compares the story she has written to pentominoes. Many clues would be given, and by the end of the book the clues would lead to understanding much like when puzzle pieces are all put together, they solve the puzzle.

About the Artwork: A Challenge to the Reader tells the reader to look closely at the artwork in this book. It gives clues related to the story, and the illustrator has given the answers to these clues on a website.

In Chapter One, on a warm October night in Chicago, three letters are delivered to three different people. These three people have been chosen to pursue justice and are warned to not go the authorities. All three people are shocked by the letter they each received and are unsure how to respond. Should they take this letter seriously? What will happen if they do? What will happen if they do not?

About Pentominoes and about this Story, About the Artwork: A Challenge to the Reader, and Chapter One Analysis

About Pentominoes and about this Story gives the reader a heads-up regarding what will be found in this book. Pentominoes are very important to the plot and the thought processes of the main characters in this book, so this description of Pentominoes is very important to the reader.

About the Artwork is a fun way for the reader to interact not only with the story but also with the artwork in the book. It reflects how the main characters become intrigued by art, especially the art of Vermeer.



In Chapter One, the reader is quickly drawn in by the letter received by three people. The setting of the book is given in the first sentence of the chapter. The rest of the chapter pertains to the general purpose of this book; a crime is to be solved. What is most important in this chapter is that many questions are raised regarding who sent the letters, who received the letters, and what the crime is that the sender of the letters is talking about.



Chapter Two and Chapter Three

Chapter Two and Chapter Three Summary

Chapter Two begins in a classroom in which the teacher, Ms. Hussey, is teaching her students about writing letters. This woman is a unique teacher among those found at University School, a branch of the University of Chicago. This school was started as an experiment in working on projects and assignments that were relevant to daily life; Ms. Hussey very much agreed with this style of teaching. They were to investigate letter writing. Calder and Petra, two students in the class, are introduced. Petra is very excited about researching writing, while Calder, who is very interested in math and the pentominoes he plays with in his pocket, seems unhappy about studying words. Petra and Calder live near each other but have never been friends. Calder usually spent much of his time with his friend Tommy, but Tommy had moved away that summer. Now that Tommy was gone, Calder spent his free-time creating geometric shapes and words with his pentominoes and working in the local bookstore, Powell's. Petra enjoyed spending time at Powell's. These two children run into each other at the bookstore as Calder puts away books and Petra spies on Ms. Hussey. They bump into each other as Petra is startled by Ms. Hussey's sudden movement. They see that Ms. Hussey has chosen books about art and murder. Petra, embarrassed and upset that her secret place, Powell's, had been disturbed by running into Calder, quickly left.

Chapter Three starts as Petra thinks about letters in her bedroom. She also watches, listens, and observes the commuter train as it passes by her window. Her thoughts are disturbed by the calling out of her sibling for toilet paper, which reflects the chaotic and loud habits of her family. Calder, like Petra, is of mixed races. Unlike Petra, his house was orderly and quiet. He sometimes wished he was not an only child, so his parents would not always be paying attention to him. The next day, new friends Calder and Petra awkwardly walk to school together, Calder with twigs in his hair from climbing through bushes to catch up with Petra, and Petra with cereal in her hair. Ms. Hussey's lesson plan for writing letters failed, so she took them to the Art Institute to study letters in old paintings. Petra and Calder ended up in a storage area that was closed to the public. Petra had been looking for art that was in storage and Calder tripped into the space. Ms. Hussey thought it was a great idea for finding hidden art.

Chapter Two and Chapter Three Analysis

Chapter Two is an important chapter. It gives the names and details of the two main characters in this story, Petra and Calder. The author connects the first chapter to the second using the idea of the letter. Also, the two main characters bump into each other at a book store where they catch their teacher purchasing books about art and murder. This suggests another connection between the art crime described by the writer of the letter in Chapter One and the interests of this school teacher in Chapter Two. This chapter also gives more details about the setting of this story, which takes place in Hyde



Park near the University of Chicago, focusing around an educational model in which children are given school assignments that are relevant to real life. This reveals something about the author, who has taught at this real school; by using University School as the setting for the book, it shows the author's interest in this educational program and this practical style of teaching.

The purpose of Chapter Three is to give background information for the two main characters, Petra and Calder. This information about the characters shows the similarities that exist between the two characters, as well as how they are each unique. The art information given in this chapter encourages young readers to be interested in art and its connection to literature. This chapter is an example of teaching across curriculum and how various school subjects are related.



Chapters Four and Five

Chapters Four and Five Summary

Chapter Four begins with Ms. Hussey's class discussing their trip to the art museum and the students' responses to the art they saw. She gives them a quote by Picasso regarding how she tells a lie but also tells the truth. This leaves the children puzzled but interested, especially Calder. Petra begins looking at the world around her for art; she finds very little at her home that she believes could be art. On her way to the grocery she sees Ms. Hussey drop off a book into the giveaway box outside Powell's; Petra takes this book, "Lo!," with her. From the first passage she reads, it seems to be strange and full of odd happenings.

In Chapter Five, Petra continues reading into the bizarre "Lo!" This book is full of unexplained events. The clippings in this book come from newspapers from all over the world and include hundreds of stories of bizarre events. The majority of these events are of living animals falling out of the sky. Charles Fort, the author of the book, believes that people take what happens around them and then make these often odd and unlikely events fit into something they can understand, rather than taking what actually happens and trying to figure out why it has happened. Petra grows excited because she wants to be like Charles Fort and study odd happenings in the world. She wants the adventure of experiencing and observing strange events. Hours later Petra has a dream about a woman from another time period who seems to speak to Petra through her knowing eyes. Petra soaks up all the details of this woman and her surroundings, including her pearl earrings, fur trim, and bows in her hair. She would not have slept at all the rest of the night if she had known how important this woman in her dream would be.

Chapters Four and Five Analysis

Chapter Four asks the biggest art question. "What is art?" By taking the children to an art museum to study art, the author is giving her opinion on effective ways of teaching children. Through the actions of Ms. Hussey, the reader wonders if the author, once a school teacher, had taught in a similar manner. This chapter also gives off a sense of unease and trouble, which leads the reader to be more engaged in what is taking place in the story. This book by Charles Fort, "Lo!," could prove useful or dangerous.

Chapter Five gives off a sense of adventure as new clues are given and odd happenings occur. Both the book and Petra's dream will become very important as the story progresses. This importance is hinted at in this chapter. These seemingly unconnected clues reinforce the author's comment about pentominoes prior to the start of the story. This book is a puzzle in which seemingly random clues are given that finally piece together to complete the puzzle. "Lo!" encourages readers to expect the unexpected and to not try to fit the unknown into one's mind in a way that one can



understand it but to try to understand what is difficult to understand. This book by Charles Fort may give insight into the author's views about how one should view challenges and puzzles. It definitely gives clues as to how Petra and Calder will later solve the mystery of the missing painting.



Chapters Six and Seven

Chapters Six and Seven Summary

In Chapter Six, Calder plays with his pentominoes in his room; they help him think. He is contemplating the assignment given by Ms. Hussey. What is art? To him art is something puzzling. Calder pulls out a box given to him by his grandmother; he loves the painting that is on the cover of it. He sits in the sun, what his grandmother called a "rainbow bath," and begins to write about the box. He is interrupted by commotion outside. Ms. Hussey, Mrs. Sharpe, and Mr. Watch are all there. It seems Mrs. Sharpe was not feeling well, and Ms. Hussey was trying to get her to sit down. He watches them until they leave and wonders what is going on. He receives a letter from Tommy, his best friend who has recently moved to New York with his mother and new stepfather "Old Fred," saying that his neighbor, a kid known as Frog, as suddenly disappeared. Calder writes him a reassuring response but worries about him.

Chapter Seven begins with Ms. Hussey's class discussing art and what the word art means to them. After school Petra and Calder study "Lo!" and discover that the name of the first owner was Louise Coffin Sharpe. They wonder if she is still alive. On Saturday Calder makes a book delivery to Mrs. Sharpe's home, the same Mrs. Sharpe from the book. Hanging on her wall is a replica of the same painting on Calder's box. It is called "The Geographer" and is by Vermeer. Calder tells her about Petra finding "Lo!" She asks him and Petra to come by for tea sometime to discuss Charles Fort, the author of "Lo!" On Monday morning Petra finds a letter about crime and art, but it blows out of her hands before she can finish reading it. Calder tells Petra about his meeting with Mrs. Sharpe. Calder borrows "Lo!" and agrees with Petra that it is strange and extraordinary. Calder researches Vermeer and notices that he uses the same objects in many of his paintings. He also wonders if there is any hidden information in his paintings.

Chapters Six and Seven Analysis

Chapter Six gives more connections to frogs and disappearances. The information given in this book connects it with previous chapters and events. This chapter also encourages reader to think about art and the definition of art, just as Petra and Calder are asked to do the same by Ms. Hussey.

Chapter Seven continues the theme of the more answers that are found, the more questions that arise. The questions, coincidences, and connections continue to pile up as the children struggle to make sense of it all.



Chapters Eight and Nine

Chapters Eight and Nine Summary

In Chapter Eight, Petra's dad is upset and brings up a letter that seems to have been very serious. Petra is not sure what all this means. It is Halloween and Petra goes as the lady from her dream, and Calder dresses up as a pentomino. When they first see each other, Calder recognizes Petra's costume from one of the books he had been reading about Vermeer. Petra is shocked to see the lady from her dream as the woman in Johannes Vermeer's 1665 painting of "A Lady Writing."

In Chapter Nine, Petra and Calder study more of Vermeer's life and work. The woman in Petra's dream had modeled for many Vermeer paintings. Petra is curious why she dreamed of her and the woman's significance. Petra and Calder decide to write down all the strange happenings that have taken place since Calder first wrote about his box and Petra found "Lo!" They try to make connections between odd events and coincidences. Petra asks Calder about pentominoes and how they work. He says they seem to speak to him and give him answers. He also says it's probably all silly superstitions. Petra and Calder like the fun of pentominoes as well as Fort's writings. Fort has helped them to look closer at the world around them. Petra and Calder continue to study Vermeer and learn that much is missing about his life. They are curious as to why that is. They decide to eat blue M & M's as a sign of secrecy. They will eat them at special times as a reminder of their determination to figure things out.

Chapters Eight and Nine Analysis

In Chapter Eight the oddities and weirdness continue. To add to this is the setting being placed at Halloween and Petra having a dream about the Lady from the painting prior to knowing that the Lady is from a Vermeer painting.

Chapter Nine is overflowing with coincidences. This chapter is exciting with this abundance of connections between seemingly unrelated events and information. It also gives information about Johannes Vermeer's life and works that helps to bring this artist who lived over three centuries ago to life. This chapter also shows young readers how history and art are connected and how they can be fun to study.



Chapters Ten and Eleven

Chapters Ten and Eleven Summary

In Chapter Ten, Calder calls Petra and tells her they should call the National Gallery to see if The Lady Writing was there. They are both worried about her. They learn she is on her way to the Art Institute in Chicago for an art show opening the following week. They are excited to see her. The next day Petra sees that her dad is still acting strangely; she is worried. Calder learns that his grandmother's favorite painter was Vermeer. Calder begins to wish he had never heard of Vermeer and Fort. He feels he is not only trying to solve puzzles but that he is deeply trapped in one.

In Chapter Eleven, Petra and Calder learn The Lady Writing was stolen; the kids had seen this coming. They decide to pay attention to everything around them to help the Lady. Ms. Hussey comes to school with her arm in a sling; she is also visibly upset. Calder and Petra worry about all the problems that seem to be arising at once. The Chicago Tribune publishes a letter from the thief. He demands the public learn the truth about Vermeer and the paintings that were falsely attributed to him. If they do not do this, the painting will be destroyed. The response to this letter is instant and huge.

Chapters Ten and Eleven Analysis

In Chapter Ten, puzzle pieces and clues are the focus. The purpose of these clues and the connections between these clues is explored by the children and almost become an obsession for them.

In Chapter Eleven, the plot thickens as a letter by the thief is published in the Chicago Tribune. This information makes the reader question what the connection is between this information and these two children.



Chapters Twelve and Thirteen

Chapters Twelve and Thirteen Summary

In Chapter Twelve, Ms. Hussey's class quickly becomes a museum and laboratory as they study Vermeer paintings and try to decide which are real and which are fakes. People everywhere are talking about art enthusiastically. No longer did one have to be an expert to have an opinion about art. On November 22nd the kids have tea with Mrs. Sharpe. Many objects in her home resemble objects in Vermeer paintings. They discuss Fort and how he has been important to them all. Mrs. Sharpe seems pleased with the theft, so the kids are worried by this. They wonder if she stole it. Also, problems with Tommy and Petra's dad continue. They add these problems to their list of odd events. They decide to go back to Mrs. Sharpe's house to see if she has any likely storage spaces for the stolen painting.

In Chapter Thirteen, Ms. Hussey asks them to think of how they would react if the thief had given them a letter asking them to help steal the painting and to not show the letter to anyone. Ms. Hussey gets upset while discussing what they might do. Calder and Petra worry about her and her involvement in the crime. The next morning the thief's letter appears in newspapers around the world. Bringing art to the people was becoming a worldwide phenomenon. Protests took place encouraging the thief to return the Lady and to ignore experts. The thief keeps encouraging strong public reaction. Ms. Hussey's students realize how much the importance of the letter still is.

Chapters Twelve and Thirteen Analysis

In Chapter Twelve the children are making plans to solve the theft; this planning furthers the plot of the story and adds to the excitement. The children in the story also help young readers to learn how to retain and organize the information they obtain. The teaching of these life lessons through children the same age as the reader is a creative and fun way for children to learn lessons that are often drilled into them by their teachers and parents. Rather than simply being told what to do to stay organized, they learn how these techniques are effective through the actions of characters that are based on themselves and their peers.

In Chapter Thirteen, the children learn that many people they know could be involved in the theft. This gets the children in Ms. Hussey's class excited about writing and researching.



Chapters Fourteen and Fifteen

Chapters Fourteen and Fifteen Summary

In Chapter Fourteen, Calder delivers another package of books to Mrs. Sharpe. When he tells her he needs to use the bathroom, he actually goes on a hunt for large storage spaces. He finds a large wardrobe that would be perfect for hiding a painting. He later tells Petra about this. Calder receives a letter from Tommy; Tommy's stepfather has deserted them, so the kids hold a bake sale to raise money for Tommy and his mother. They learn on the evening news that Mrs. Sharpe received one of the thief's letters and is asking for police protection. They also learn that her husband had been a Vermeer scholar and had been murdered many years before. Petra and Calder's minds were reeling with all this information.

In Chapter Fifteen, Ms. Hussey does not come to school. She has been arrested as a possible suspect. Her students are out of control. Ms. Hussey is released; she had also received one of the letters. Questions arise regarding why these two women were chosen by the thief. After Ms. Hussey's return, Petra overhears her on the phone. She sounds scared and Petra knows something is very wrong. Petra and Calder go to Fargo Hall for hot chocolate. Petra thinks the painting is on campus and they need to hunt for it.

Chapters Fourteen and Fifteen Analysis

Chapter Fourteen is filled with more clues and confusion. The desertion by Tommy's stepfather seems like an odd clue to add to this story, although in the last chapter of the book, this clue becomes one of the most important ones. The knowledge that Mrs. Sharpe's husband had been murdered adds intrigue for the reader.

Chapter Fifteen heightens the sense of danger as the kids decide to get involved in finding the stolen painting. The chapter shows young readers that even children can be empowered by events in their lives and help to better their own lives and the lives of those around them.



Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen

Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen Summary

In Chapter Sixteen, Petra and Calder sit in Gracie Hall, the Lower School, and wonder if the painting could be here. They pretend to have an assignment that requires them to make a map of the school and gain access to many hidden areas around the building. They are taken to the basement where Calder gets purposely left behind. When Petra returns to him, he has found a painting, but it is not the Lady.

In Chapter Seventeen, near Mrs. Sharpe's home Petra sees a piece of torn paper that is a portion of the letter by the thief. She shows it to Calder. The next day a book is published praising the good that has come from the theft but also tells the thief it is time to return the painting.

Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen Analysis

In Chapter Sixteen, the children's thinking follows the clues given by the pentominoes. They see clues in everything, which can give readers a sense of excitement about their own worlds and lives. Excitement can be found in the ordinary. The increased risk of Petra and Calder increases the excitement of this book, especially the finding of the painting that turns out to not be the Lady.

Chapter Seventeen teaches readers how art can be accessible to all. It, like many other chapters, encourages readers to see the art in the world around them and to appreciate all art.



Chapters Eighteen and Nineteen

Chapters Eighteen and Nineteen Summary

In Chapter Eighteen, Petra and Calder discuss the goodness or lack thereof of the thief on their walk to school. They are shocked to see Mrs. Sharpe on a stretcher outside her home. She had broken her leg. She then gave the kids a letter to mail for her, a letter addressed to Ms. Hussey. They almost decided to open it and read it, but it was dropped on the ground and stepped on by a man with a foreign accent. He picks it up and quickly mails it. They visit Mrs. Sharpe in the hospital who believes the woman in Petra's dreams is trying to speak to her. They discuss Fort, Picasso, and pentominoes. Calder receives a call from Tommy. He and his mom are moving back to Hyde Park, and Frog has returned from a vacation with his family.

In Chapter Nineteen, Petra and Calder are excited to return to their search. They have decided to check King Hall for any clues to the location of the painting. They have no luck but decide Delia Dell Hall is much more interesting. There are a variety of rooms including a modern movie theater. They decide to look in Delia Dell Hall for the painting. Petra grows nervous as they wander the beautiful and unique building. Petra notices the windows and wood resemble Vermeer paintings. Other aspects of the place resemble words and ideas Mrs. Sharpe had come up with when playing with the pentominoes. She feels sick from all the coincidences and they hurry out of the building. Petra says she thinks that they will find her in Delia Dell.

Chapters Eighteen and Nineteen Analysis

Chapter Eighteen focuses on the building of friendships. The two developing friendships in this story are between Calder and Petra and between the kids and Mrs. Sharpe. This chapter shows the importance of friendship between not only those who are your age but those who are older and younger than you.

Chapter Nineteen contains a metaphor between Delia Dell Hall's graceful design and dance. More clues to the puzzle are also given in this chapter. It makes the reader once again question whether these clues are connected or simply coincidental.



Chapters Twenty, Twenty-One, and Twenty-Two

Chapters Twenty, Twenty-One, and Twenty-Two Summary

In Chapter Twenty, that night Petra reviews all that happened at Delia Dell. She wonders at Ms. Hussey and Mrs. Sharpe's connections to the crime. She begins to think her imagination is running away with her. In the bath she imagines a rectangle inside of a triangle. She then wishes she could stop thinking. The next morning she wakes refreshed. She feels much more sure about the truth her imagination gives her than she was feeling the night before. As she walks into the kitchen, she sees horrified looks on her parents' faces. The thief demands that attributions to Vermeer be changed by January 11th, or he would destroy The Lady Writing. Petra drops the paper and rushes out of the kitchen.

In Chapter Twenty-One, the thief is discovered to be more ruthless than the kids had first thought. Petra and Calder decide that something must be done to stop the thief, but, for a moment, they get caught up in the fame they would receive if they find the painting. When they ask Mrs. Sharpe for her advice, she simply tells them to be careful. As they enter Delia Dell Hall the man with the accent who had stepped on Mrs. Sharpe's letter is there. They panic and run out of the building but decide to enter through a basement entrance. At this point, Petra sees her dad with a package in his arms in the building and wonders what he is doing there. Petra and Calder explore the second floor of Delia Dell, and through the window Petra is surprised again to see her dad, this time without the package and talking to the man with the accent.

In Chapter Twenty-Two, they decide to return to Delia Dell Hall that night. Odd coincidences of twelves keep occurring, such as the fact they discover they are both turning twelve on December twelfth. They begin to wonder if there is some sort of connection between Vermeer and the number twelve. They stop on a stairwell, on the twelfth step and tap on the twelfth rectangle on the wall. They continue to tap along the wall until one of the panels finally gives. There is the Lady. Both children get choked up with emotion. Petra wraps the Lady in fabric, and Calder decides to carry a "Danger: Slippery When Wet" sign, so it does not look so obvious that they have the painting. They open the door and begin to run when the alarm sounds.

Chapters Twenty, Twenty-One, and Twenty-Two Analysis

Chapter Twenty enhances the sense of urgency and danger. It also shows the toll it is starting to take on Petra. In the chapter foreshadowing takes place in which Petra's



father asks her if she is fortunate that she does not have to find this missing painting and the thief. This foreshadows later events in which Petra and Calder save the painting and learn the identity of the thief.

In Chapter Twenty-One, even Petra's dad becomes a possible suspect. Another character enters the story, a man with a foreign accent. This accent and the illustrations of him make him seem very dangerous. This character is used to throw both the reader and the children somewhat off track as they fear he may be out to get Calder and Petra. Many of the characters in this story are becoming possible suspects. It makes the reader question the behaviors of all the characters in the story. Who is innocent? Who is guilty? This chapter suggests a theme that all have something to hide.

Chapter Twenty-Two contains the climax of the story as The Lady Writing is found hidden in the wall of Delia Dell. This is when the story gets really exciting as the students run, with alarms screaming, into the wintery night with The Lady.



Chapters Twenty-Three, Twenty-Four, and Afterwords

Chapters Twenty-Three, Twenty-Four, and Afterwords Summary

In Chapter Twenty-Three, the children are being chased by a man. The man chases and catches Calder on a playground, but Petra is able to find a security officer. She tells him what has happened on the playground, but when they get there and get out of the squad car to look for Calder, the man jumps into the squad car and takes The Lady Writing. A search begins for Calder and the man. Petra realizes that the Castiglione's treehouse would make a great hiding place. This is where she finds Calder and the painting.

In Chapter Twenty-Four, Old Fred is found dead on the train from a heart attack. On the playground, Calder pretended to be unconscious. He then followed Old Fred to the Castiglione's treehouse, and when Fred climbed a branch to the train tracks, he climbed the tree to get The Lady Writing. He assumed the thief would be coming back for it soon. After climbing into the treehouse, he passed out and was woken up by Petra. It is learned that Fred Steadman is actually Xavier Glitts, the Glitter Man. He was a well-educated but conniving man. He was known for being able to successfully change his identity. He was hired to steal the painting and devised a great plot involving Zelda, Tommy's mom, Mrs. Sharpe, Ms. Hussey, and Mr. Watch. He had planned to tell the world the painting had been destroyed when in reality he would have delivered it to his boss for the price of sixty million dollars. All those who had been caught in Xavier's plan felt awful about how easily he had deceived them. The children had tea again with Mrs. Sharpe and discussed all of the coincidences that had been found throughout their adventure. Mrs. Sharpe tells of her own scary coincidences to the Vermeer story and the number twelve. Like Petra, Mrs. Sharpe felt the woman in the painting had talked to her too. More twelves are found throughout the book and are discovered by Calder, including the names of the characters in this book. The author continues to reveal the many coincidences and connections found in the story. The story ends as the narrator tells the reader that after The Lady Writing was returned to the National Gallery many Vermeer painting labels were changed to "Attributed to Johannes Vermeer." The children keep part of their adventure to themselves, not sure what is real and what is not.

After Words includes About the Author, About the Illustrator, Q & A with Blue Balliett, Q & A with Brett Helquist, Create Your Own Secret Code, Make Your Own Pentominoes, How I Draw, with Brett Helquist, What Is It?, Ways of Seeing, Chase Down a Vermeer, A Sneak Peak at "The Wright 3." Some sections give more information about the author and illustrator, such as their interests, hobbies, and childhoods. Other sections encourage young readers to create their own adventures by making secret codes and



pentominoes. Still other sections give information about creating and studying art. They are an introduction to art appreciation, history, and theory and aesthetics.

Chapters Twenty-Three, Twenty-Four, and Afterwords Analysis

Chapter Twenty-Three adds many twists to the story as the children escape the building with the painting and are chased by the thief. So, when it seems the story is about to come to a close, a twist is added in which the reader wonders if the children will succeed in saving the Lady. This cliff hanger encourages the reader to quickly continue onto the next chapter.

Chapter Twenty-Four wraps up the story as the thief, the final piece of the puzzle, dies and the painting is saved. The children become heroes as the story ends happily ever after. The chapter also receives all the many coincidences that may not have been noticed by the reader. This reflects how our own lives can be filled with clues and coincidences that we never noticed before.

After Words continues the author and illustrator's encouragement of young readers to feel personally connected to the story, art, and adventure. It continues to show how school subjects such as art, math, and writing can be fun and exciting.



Characters

Calder Pillay

Calder is an eleven-year-old boy who attends the University School in Hyde Park near Chicago. He is what the narrator calls a Hybrid kid with his dad being from India and his mom from Canada. Their home is quiet and orderly. As an only child Calder often wishes his parents paid less attention to him. Calder is a smart, somewhat odd, boy who loves pentominoes and anything related to math and patterns. As the story progresses, he uses the patterns and clues he believes his pentominoes give him to guide his and Petra's search for The Lady Writing, a painting by Johannes Vermeer.

As the story begins, Calder is an awkward and somewhat shy boy whose best friend, Tommy, has recently moved to New York City and left him alone without an ally. He frequently notices Petra, a girl who lives on his street and is in his class at school and wonders about her. Their friendship begins when he catches her spying on Ms. Hussey at the book store. This friendship grows as these two kindred spirits study the world around them to help solve the mystery of the missing Vermeer painting. By the end of the story, Calder has become a brave, adventurous, and smart twelve-year-old who risks his own life for the sake of another and for The Lady.

Petra Andalee

Petra Andalee is a quirky eleven-year-old when this book begins. She is smart and has a way with words that is unusual for a child her age. Like Calder and many other kids in Hyde Park, she is a blend of cultures with her dad being of both North African and northern European descent and her mother was from the Middle East. She is the eldest of five children and often tires of the chaotic home in which she lives. There are many things she wishes she weren't, such as shy, shaped like a lima bean, and having lopsided ears. She also wished she could be a famous writer without having to go through the un-famous stage. Like Calder, she is unique and has a strong interest in patterns and the world around her.

At the beginning of the story, Petra seems to be a shy girl who spends a great deal of time alone. Prior to her friendship with Calder, it does not seem like she has any close friends. The only other student in class that is mentioned is Denise, the loud-mouthed bully. As the story progresses, Petra's shyness seems to fade. She is better able to stand up to Denise and eagerly shares her thoughts and opinions with Calder. Petra, at first, is the more adventurous of the two main characters. She is constantly studying the world around her, trying to find the extraordinary in the ordinary. This adventurous attitude at times wanes as she realizes the danger she and Calder face. Although she does grow fearful at times, she does not allow this to affect her for long. She eagerly makes plans with Calder that lead to the recovery of The Lady and the discovery of her thief.



Ms. Isabel Hussey

Ms. Hussey is Calder and Petra's very liberal teacher. She encourages the students to think on their own and to step out of the box of their own comfort zones. She is also one of three people who receive a letter from the thief, who asks her to help him. After being brought in for questioning, she admits that she had received one of the letters.

Tommy Segovia

Tommy is Calder's best friend whose mother and stepfather move him to New York. After his stepfather ditches them, it is learned that he is the thief. Tommy is moving back home to Hyde Park.

Mr. Watch

Mr. Watch is the owner of Powell's Bookstore and the recipient of one of the three letters. He, Ms. Hussey, and Mrs. Sharpe are seen by the children several times throughout the story.

Frank and Norma Andalee

Frank and Norma are Petra's parents. Their home is a chaotic but loving one.

Walter and Yvette Pillay

Walter and Yvette are Calder's very attentive parents.

Charles Fort

Charles Fort is the author of "Lo!" This book guides the children as they search for The Lady.

The Lady

The Lady is the woman in "The Lady Writing" by Johannes Vermeer who comes to Petra in her dreams. She also speaks to Mrs. Sharpe. She guides both of them in helping her right the wrongs done to Johannes Vermeer.



Mrs. Louise Coffin Sharpe

Mrs. Sharpe is the somewhat unfriendly old woman who lives near Calder and Petra. Her husband was a Vermeer scholar and she received one of the three letters from the thief. She admits this to the police and asks to be put under police protection.

Frog

Frog is a boy who is in Tommy's class in New York who they all believe has disappeared. In reality, he went on a vacation with his family.

Johannes Vermeer

Johannes Vermeer is the artist who painted The Lady Writing. Much of his life is unknown and several paintings are said to have been painted by others but signed under his name, so that those owning the paintings to sell them for more. The thief says in his letters he wants the wrongs done to Vermeer to be corrected.

Art Scholar/Thief/Fred Steadman/Xavier Glitts/Glitterman

This talented and intelligent man creates a detailed plan for stealing and selling The Lady Writing. Unfortunately for him, Calder and Petra are able to follow clues that lead them to the discovery of where he has hidden the painting. He later dies of a heart attack aboard a train.

Zelda

Zelda is Tommy's mother who is wooed by Xavier Glitts and moved to New York.

Leland Sharpe

Leland Sharpe is Louise's husband who was killed over thirty years before for some information he had learned about Vermeer's life.

Mrs. Trek

Mrs. Trek is the Lower School principal who shows the children into the basement.



Objects/Places

Chicago

This is the setting for the story.

Hyde Park

This is the neighborhood in which the story takes place.

University School

This is the school Petra and Calder attend. It is also where the painting is hidden.

University of Chicago

This is located near the University School and is connected to this school.

Powell's Used Books

This is where Calder works and where Calder and Petra bump into each other as Petra spies on Ms. Hussey.

Harper Avenue

This is where both Petra and Calder live.

New York

This is where Calder's friend Tommy has moved with his family. It is also the home base of the thief, Tommy's stepfather.

Gracie Hall

This is where the children first look for the painting but do not find it.

Delia Dell Hall

This is where the children find the stolen painting.



Castaglione's Treehouse

This is where the thief hides out and where Petra finds Calder and the painting.

Train

This is something of which Petra frequently takes notice. It is also where Xavier Glitts dies.

The Art Institute

Ms. Hussey takes her class here for a field trip.

Calder's House

This is where Calder lives with his family. Their home is very quiet and peaceful.

Petra's House

This is where Petra lives with her large family. It is often loud and rowdy here, which annoys Petra.

Themes

Justice

The theme of justice is significant in this story. It is first seen with the three letters sent by the thief, wanting justice for Johannes Vermeer. This desire for justice was then expressed by the main characters as they searched for The Lady Writing - both to save her and to vindicate Ms. Hussey and Mrs. Sharpe. The three who received the letters from the thief also desired justice but were unsure of how to go about protecting Vermeer's work as well as themselves. The thief encouraged a sense of justice by stealing The Lady Writing and sending letters to the paper demanding the public protect Vermeer's name by learning the truth about his work. This led a worldwide interest in the protection and creation of art.

Justice is a universal theme. All cultures have some sort of understanding of justice, although the definition of justice and how one goes around finding it might be different. Even from one time period to another, the beliefs about what is wrong and right are altered and therefore laws and what is just is also changed.

Justice is an important theme for children to begin to understand, as being a member of a community, one must follow laws and have an understanding of politics and law to play a role in creating new laws. In this way one can play, an active role in protecting justice in one's country and around the world.

Appreciation For the World Around Us

The author encourages the reader to be more observant and appreciative of the world around us. Through many characters in this book, the reader is drawn into the beauty of a bright yellow leaf, the striking fall of light on an object, and the architecture found in our daily environments. As the characters are encouraged to study the ordinary, the reader also becomes more aware of what surrounds him or her.

This theme is closely tied to the theme of coincidence and connection, because through close observation one may witness the many coincidences and connections that take place around us. By taking time to study our world, the ordinary can become the extraordinary.

Appreciation for one's planet, culture, or society is a universal theme. All people have a sense of self and that self includes the world in which one lives. Teaching children to have respect for that world and to take notice of that world is an important aspect in all cultures. What is unique about this theme pertaining to this story is that the author asks the reader to not only notice his or her world but to question it. This reflects Western thought and the belief that one has the right to one's own opinions and to question the norm.



Coincidence and Connections

A theme running through this entire book is one of coincidence and whether or not various events and information are coincidental or purposely connected. These coincidences and connections are foreshadowed by the author in her introduction to *Pentominoes* and the book. Like playing with *Pentominoes*, many clues are given throughout this book, and the clues finally come together at the end to solve the mystery of the stolen painting. The author also gives many more coincidences, that she created throughout the book that are not necessarily relevant to the stealing of the painting, in the last chapter of the book.

The two main characters in this book come across many circumstances and clues that seem to be eerily connected. They frequently question whether these similarities and ties are simply a series of coincidences. These seemingly connected events, reflective of the patterns and riddles created using *Pentominoes*, guide Calder and Petra as they search for *The Lady Writing*. Through their questioning, problem-solving skills, and attention to detail, these two successfully find *The Lady* and the thief.

The author uses these two characters and this theme to show young readers how important and often exciting, it can be to study the ordinary to find the extraordinary and to pay attention to the world around them to solve problems and create adventure. The seemingly boring world around us, especially the art world, can be a very exciting place to explore.



Style

Point of View

This book is from the point of view of a narrator. Through the use of the omniscient and the third-person perspective, plus first person through the use of quotation marks, the reader is given a great deal of information regarding the characters, setting, and plot. The majority of the information given pertains to the thoughts and feelings of the two main characters, Calder and Petra, with the purpose of keeping the thoughts of others from the reader to enhance the sense of mystery. The two main characters, Petra and Calder, are the focus of the narrator's attention. The reader is given details about their thoughts and feelings regarding school, each other, and the mystery they have felt is theirs to solve.

The narrator only gives details regarding the other characters to progress the plot, aid Petra and Calder in solving the mystery, as well as to confuse and puzzle them and the reader. At the end of the story the narrator explains many of the clues found in the story, as well as clues that were used to throw the main characters and reader off track.

The narrator seems to be the voice of the author, as so much of the information found in this book pertains directly to her life. Also, with the introduction by the author and a question and answer section at the end of the book with the author, the reader becomes very connected, not only with the characters in the book, but with the author herself.

Setting

The overall setting of the story is modern-day Chicago. Most of the story takes place in the Hyde Park neighborhood outside Chicago and the University of Chicago's University School. Many of the locations in this story are real places. The author, having taught at the University School for many years, has used it as the setting, for it is a place she knows well. She mentions New York City and Nantucket, two other places she has spent a great deal of time.

The story takes place during the fall and winter with the most important day being December 12th. This is the twelfth birthday of both Calder and Petra, the day of the month on which Vermeer most likely died, and Old Fred's last day of life. Twelves also hold a significance with pentominoes, stair steps, and other details of the story. This pattern of twelves helps set an eerie mood for much of this book, with Halloween and the onset of winter assisting in the sensation of chills felt by the main characters and the reader as they find more clues and coincidences.

The author's knowledge of these various locations, as well as her training in art history, have aided her in creating exciting and believable fiction. The voice of the narrator seems to be that of the author as she weaves this art thriller and brings the characters to life.



Language and Meaning

This book is written using vocabulary that is readable and understandable, yet somewhat challenging for young readers in upper elementary through lower middle school. She frequently uses context clues to guide the reader in understanding more challenging vocabulary. She also uses literary devices such as metaphors and similes to add depth and detail to her work. Cliff hangers are frequently used to guide the reader from one chapter to another and to keep a sense of mystery and excitement throughout the story. Foreshadowing frequently takes place throughout the story to add to the sense of danger and to encourage the reader to continue reading.

The natural, informal style of the author's writing makes the characters easy to connect to and encourages young readers to enjoy reading. Vocabulary that is common among children is also used by the main characters and other children in the story to make them more believable and accessible to young readers. Young readers can easily relate to the children found in this story, which makes for a much more engaging and relevant story. It also encourages young readers to see that intelligent, artistic, and unique kids are cool.

Like a painting, her writing captures the details of the characters' personalities and surroundings, encouraging the reader to take notice of his or her own world. The Afterword also encourages students to enjoy the fun and excitement found in the book through the making of pentominoes, secret languages, and art.

Structure

The book is comprised of twenty-four chapters with titles that express the main point of each chapter. Prior to these chapters the author and illustrator both write short notes to the reader regarding information found throughout the story. These notes are to give the reader important knowledge regarding pentominoes, which are significant to the story, and the artwork found in the book, which, like pentominoes, encourage the reader to solve visual puzzles found in the illustrations. At the end of the book, more information is given about the lives and work of the author and illustrator, how to create a secret code, how to make pentominoes, and art appreciation. It also gives a sneak peek into the sequel to this book. Each chapter is divided into sections regarding the events taking place in the story at the same time, so, for example, the reader can see what is happening in the lives of the two main characters at the same time. The author creates connections between these various sections within each chapter, as well as from one chapter to another. Although at first these connections may be puzzling, the reader learns details that explain many, but not all of these connections and possible coincidences. The author does leave some of these details a secret in order to leave the reader with a sense of mystery and curiosity.



Quotes

"Would they ever study regular subjects, like the other classes did? Calder didn't care. What they were doing was real exploration, real thinking - not just finding out about what a bunch of dead, famous grown-ups believed. Ms. Hussey was cool" (Chapter Two, p. 7).

"Picasso said that art is a lie, but a lie that tells the truth" (Chapter Four, p. 36).

"His thought was that most people bent over backward to fit everything that happened to them into something they could understand" (Chapter Five, p. 45).

"The woman was gazing directly into Petra's eyes. Her expression was knowing, filled with kindness and interest, and she had the look of someone who understood without being told" (Chapter Five, p. 47-48).

"I love hearing about people who figure things out for themselves. Plus, I love to think about things that no one understands. Yet" (Chapter Seven, p. 63).

"It seems like there's too much connection here...Do you suppose that ideas overlap like this all the time, and people just don't realize it?" (Chapter Nine, p. 88-89).

"Every person, every set of eyes, has the right to the truth" (Chapter Eleven, p. 110).

"Good people sometimes get caught in bad things" (Chapter Thirteen, p. 129).

"They were examining works of art with a toughness and intensity usually seen only in the buyers of new cars or electronics" (Chapter Seventeen, p. 171).

"But what interests me is the idea that much of we humans take to be a lie is true, and much of what we think is true is a lie" (Chapter Eighteen, p. 183).

"The world felt rich with possibility. Her practical reasoning last night now seemed cowardly, unimaginative. What had gotten into her?" (Chapter Twenty, p. 201).

"They didn't know if the world was ready for it. And they still weren't entirely sure what had been real and what had not" (Chapter Twenty-Four, p. 254).



Topics for Discussion

Who was Johannes Vermeer? How is he important to this story? Why might the author have used Vermeer in her story? How does the author try to alter one's view of fine art through this story and the life and work of Johannes Vermeer? Does she do this successfully? Why or why not?

Describe the two main characters in this story. How are each character's personality traits beneficial when searching for the stolen artwork? How do these traits guide them in finding clues and solving mysteries? What traits do you have that would help you solve a mystery?

The author has a degree in art history. How does she use this degree to write this story? Based on this story, what is the author's opinion of art? What might she also think about those who observe art?

Describe the three letters sent by The Glitterman. How might you have reacted to receiving one of these letters? Why? Do you believe an art theft today such as his would receive such attention and interest by the public? Why or why not?

Pentominoes are important to this story. What are pentominoes? How are they important to this story and the solving of this crime? What other elements in this story are repetitive and seem to guide Petra and Calder? Why?

The University School is unique. How is it unique? Do you believe the students in this school benefit from this? Why or why not? How might your school change if it adopted the same purpose as the University School? Would these changes be positive? Why or why not?

Describe Ms. Hussey's class. How does it compare to your own class or classes? What can be learned about the author's views on education based on Ms. Hussey and her classroom? Do you agree with the author's views? Why or why not?

Choose one character in this book. Describe him or her. What role does he or she play in this book? How is he or she connected to the theft and recovery of The Lady Writing?