

Chasing Vermeer



By

Blue Balliett

A Novel Study
by Nat Reed

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About the author: Nat Reed was a member of the teaching profession for more than 35 years. He was a full-time instructor at Trent University in the Teacher Education Program for nine years. For more information on his work and literature, visit novelstudies.org.

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Suggestions and Expectations

This 81 page curriculum unit can be used in a variety of ways. Each chapter of the novel study focuses on two chapters of *Chasing Vermeer* and is comprised of four sections:

1. Before You Read
2. Vocabulary Building
3. Comprehension Questions
4. Language and Extension Activities

A **portfolio cover** (p.7) as well as a **Checklist** (p.6) are included so that students may track of their completed work.

Every activity need not be completed by all students.

Links with the Common Core Standards (U.S.)

Many of the activities included in this curriculum unit are supported by the Common Core Standards. For instance the *Reading Standards for Literature, Grade 5*, makes reference to

- a) determining the meaning of words and phrases. . . including figurative language;
- b) explaining how a series of chapters fits together to provide the overall structure;
- c) compare and contrast two characters;
- d) determine how characters ... respond to challenges;
- e) drawing inferences from the text;
- f) determining a theme of a story . . . **and many others.**

Themes which may be taught in conjunction with the novel include art and art forgery; pentominoes; codes; the importance of friendship; chance and coincidence; self-acceptance; family and family relationships.

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List of Skills

Vocabulary Development

1. Locating descriptive words/phrases
2. Listing synonyms & antonyms
3. Identifying/creating *onomatopoeia*
4. Use of capitals and punctuation
5. Identifying syllables
6. Listing compound words
7. Identifying/creating similes
8. Use of singular/plural nouns
9. Using content clues: analogies
10. Identifying parts of speech
11. Determining alphabetical order
12. Identification of root words
13. Identifying/creating *alliteration*
14. Identifying anagrams.

Setting Activities

1. Summarize the details of a setting

Plot Activities

1. Complete a 5 W's Chart
2. Identify conflict in the story
3. Identify *cliffhanger*
4. Identify the climax of a novel
5. Write a synopsis
6. Predict an outcome
7. Complete a Sequence Chart
8. Identify *foreshadowing*

Character Activities

1. Determine character traits
2. Compare two characters
3. Understand concepts such as *meeting a challenge*
4. Relating personal experiences

Creative and Critical Thinking

1. Research
2. Write a newspaper article
3. Write a letter to a friend
4. Complete an Observation Chart
5. Conduct an interview
6. Write about personal feelings
7. Write a Book Review
8. Create *Found Poetry*

Art Activities

1. Design a cover for the novel
2. Create a Storyboard.

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Synopsis

When a book of unexplainable occurrences brings Petra Andalee and Calder Pillay together, strange things start to happen: Seemingly unrelated events connect, an eccentric old woman seeks out their company, and an invaluable Vermeer painting disappears. Before they know it, the two find themselves at the center of an international art scandal, where no one - neighbors, parents, teachers - is spared from suspicion. As Petra and Calder are drawn clue by clue into a mysterious labyrinth, they must draw upon their powers of intuition, their problem-solving skills, and their knowledge of Vermeer. Can they decipher a crime that has left even the FBI baffled? (Courtesy of the publisher)

Author Biography

Blue Balliett

Blue Balliett was born in 1955 in New York. On her birth certificate it says *Elizabeth*. Blue is an American author, best known for her award-winning novel for children, ***Chasing Vermeer***.

Chasing Vermeer, released by Scholastic Press in 2004, is her best-known and most highly praised book. Illustrated by Brett Helquist, it concerns the fictitious theft of a painting by 17th-century Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer. The book won a number of accolades and awards, including the 2005 Edgar Award in the Best Juvenile category. A sequel, ***The Wright 3***, was released in April, 2006, and a third, ***The Calder Game***, was published two years later, in April 2008. ***The Danger Box*** was published in August 2010. Her latest book, ***Hold Fast*** was published in 2013. Balliett has also published two books of Nantucket ghost stories.



*Before releasing **Chasing Vermeer**, she taught third grade at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools. During her tenure, she coordinated with NASA astronaut and University of Chicago alumnus John Grunsfeld to send her pupil's literature and creative artwork into space during a routine Hubble space telescope mission.*

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Student Checklist

Student Name _____

Assignment	Grade / Level	Comments

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Name: _____

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Chapter 1 - 2



Before you read the chapter:

Calder, the novel's protagonist, says about himself, "He knew he was kind of weird". In your opinion what would make a person consider him or herself to be weird? You may wish to brainstorm ideas with a colleague. Why might it not be too healthy to have this opinion about oneself?



Vocabulary:

Choose a word from the list to complete each sentence. [Be careful, some words may be appropriate for more than one sentence - try to pick the best fit.]

discriminating	ample	convention	pretentious	intriguing
gullible	extraordinary	collaborate	mediocre	labyrinth

1. Marsha decided to _____ with Jane in the writing of the class play.
2. Most people find the pompous ways of the governor to be quite _____.
3. All of the paper carriers were given _____ time to get their accounts settled.
4. His ability to find water with a witching stick is quite _____.
5. His marks in high school were mostly _____.
6. To be a successful chef one must have a very _____ sense of taste.
7. When it comes to believing everything my uncle says, my aunt is quite _____.
8. Your offer is certainly most _____, however I'm afraid I must decline it.
9. The farmer designed a complicated _____ in his corn field.
10. Her hair style simply defies _____.

Questions



1. In the letter sent out to the three people in Chapter One, the letter-writer used three criteria in making his selections as to whom the letters would go to. What were these criteria?

1.	
2.	
3.	

2. The **setting** of a story includes not only where but when the story takes place. What is the setting of the story in Chapter Two?

3. *Every good story involves one (or many) crisis.* Describe the specific **crisis** faced by the woman who received the second letter. (What did she perceive the letter to be at first?)

4. What did the second woman consider to be the **spooky part** of the letter?

5. What was there about Ms. Hussey that made her a unique kind of teacher?

6. List four forms of communication mentioned in Chapter Two. Brainstorm with a colleague to see if you can come up with any more.

7. What *two part task* did Ms. Hussey give the students?

8. Chapter Two introduces us to the two principal characters of the novel. In the chart below compare **Petra** and **Calder**. You may use physical similarities/differences as well as those relating to their personalities.

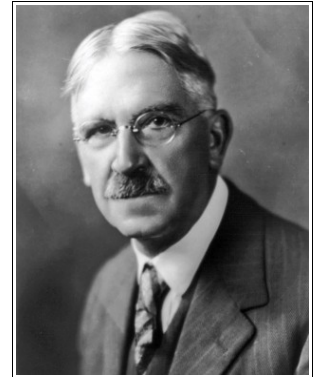
Criteria	Calder	Petra

9. Investigate the meaning of the literary device, *foreshadowing*. How might the conclusion of Chapter Two be an example of this?

Language Activities

A. John Dewey

John Dewey (1859-1952) was a huge influence in the way Ms. Hussey taught. Dewey believed that learning was active and schooling too long and restrictive. He believed that schools should give students real, guided experiences. For example, Dewey believed that math could be learned via learning proportions in cooking or figuring out how long it would take to get from one place to another by mule. He thought that history could be learned by actually experiencing how people lived, and how plants and animals grew.



Using resources in your school library or the Internet, do a further investigation of this important man, researching three additional facts about his life and/or his beliefs.

1.	
2.	
3.	

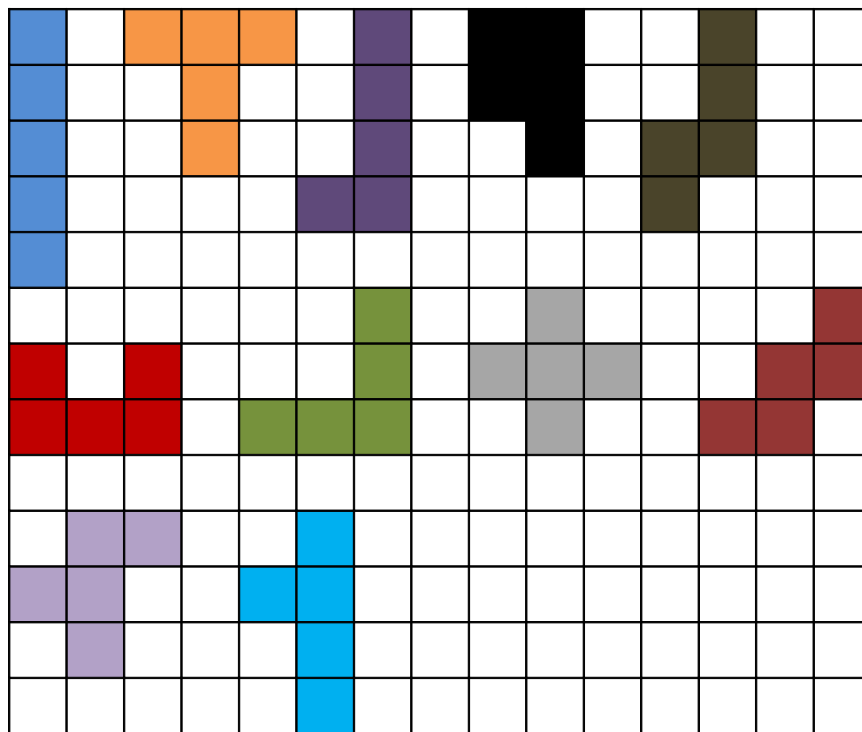
B. The author seems to enjoy using **alliteration** - a literary device where the author **repeats** the same consonant sound at the beginning of several words in close succession. The following is an example taken from Chapter Two is: “**F**irst **f**ind, then do”. Using your imagination, create your own examples of **alliteration** from the following topics. Each example must contain a minimum of three words.



A cricket's song -	
The rumble of thunder -	
A mourning dove's call -	

C. Pentominoes

Pentominoes will look familiar to anyone who has played the game *Tetris*. Pentominoes are puzzle pieces made from exactly **five** congruent squares. There are a total of 12 pieces (often named after the letters of the Latin alphabet that they vaguely resemble), adding up to a total of 60 squares. You can arrange these pieces into four different rectangles.



Activities

Use graph paper to make your own set of pentominoes modeled on the above samples.

1 - Check the Prologue of *Chasing Vermeer* to find the corresponding letter which represents each of the 12 pentominoes

2 - Use the pentominoes **P**, **U** and **V** to make a rectangle.

3 - use the pentominoes **L**, **P**, **T**, **Y** to make a rectangle.

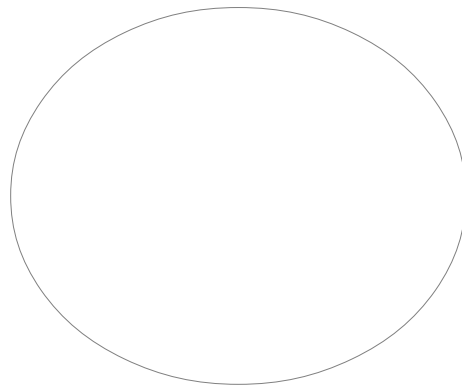
4 - find at least two ways to make a rectangle using four pentominoes.

D. 5 Ws and an H.

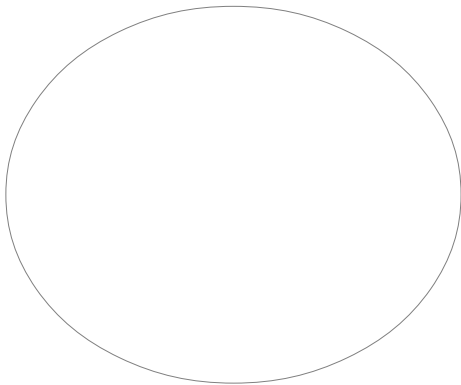
Choose an event from this section that you thought was really important and/or exciting. Using facts that you gleaned from reading about this event, fill in the balloons below, summarizing what you learned.



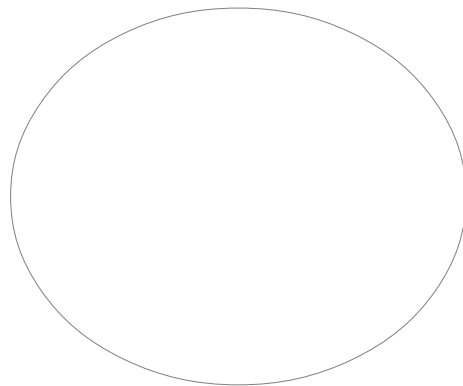
WHO?



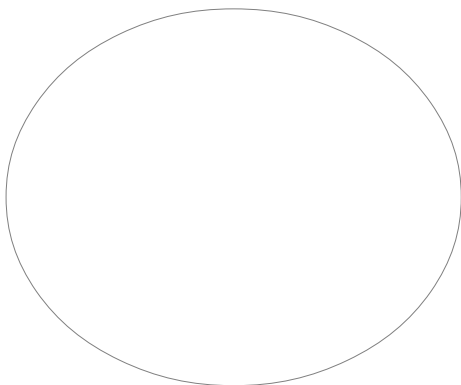
WHAT?



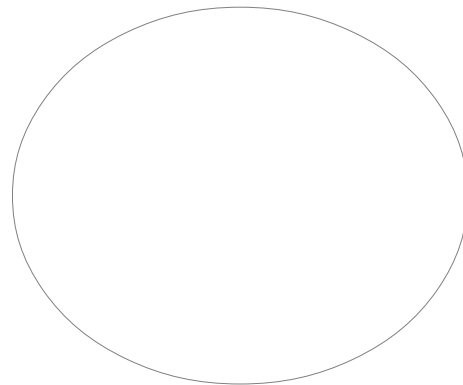
WHEN?



WHERE?



WHY?



HOW?

Extension Activity



A Picture's Worth a Thousand Words



Use the three boxes to describe and illustrate the beginning, middle and conclusion of these chapters.

Beginning Picture:	Beginning:
Middle Picture:	Middle:
Concluding Picture:	Concluding: