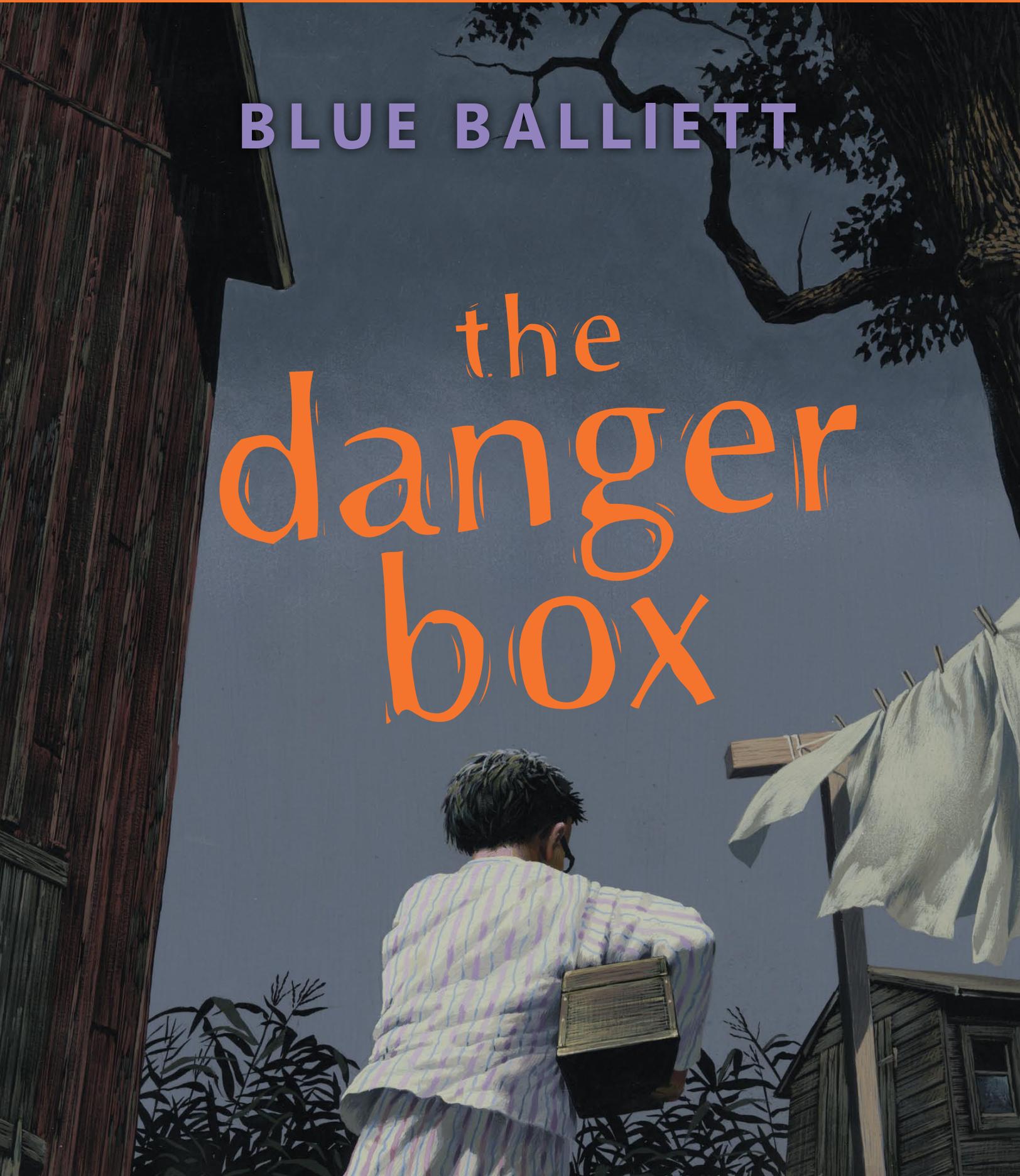


Discussion Guide

BLUE BALLIETT

the danger box



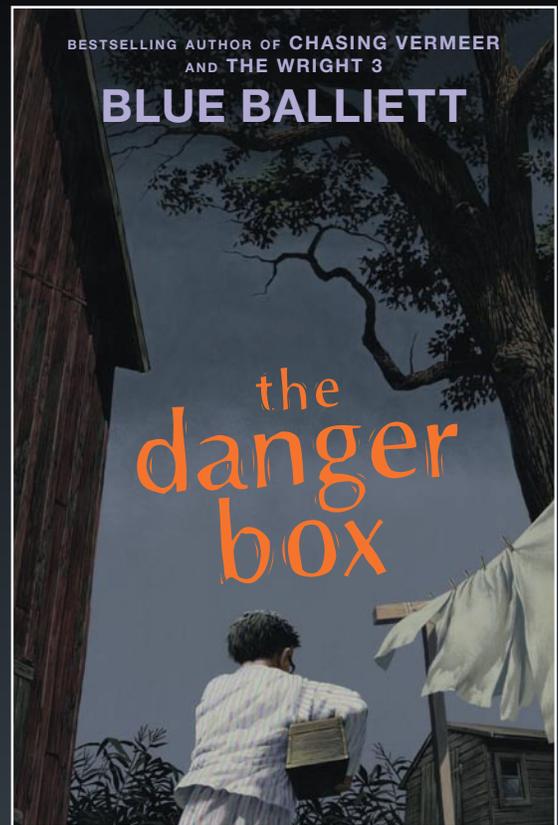
A boy in a small town who has a different way of seeing; a curious girl who doesn't belong; a mysterious notebook; a missing father; a fire; a stranger; a death. These are some of the things you'll find within *The Danger Box*, the latest mystery from bestselling author Blue Balliett.

Before Reading

Read the Author's Note. Brainstorm a list of what could be missing. What do you think the author means when she says, "Every book that shares secrets is a Danger Box?"

Questions for Discussion

1. What was Mr. Zip's plan? How was his plan derailed? Why do you think the plan with four players was so elaborate?
2. Make a list of the ten most important things a reader should know about Zoomy.
3. Describe the town of Three Oaks. Create a Venn diagram comparing this location to your own hometown.
4. How do lists help Zoomy navigate his days? Do you ever feel jittery-splat too? What sets him off? What can set you off?
5. Zoomy has pathological myopia and he says, "I don't know how anyone else sees the world, and no one knows exactly how I see the world!" and "If you can see More, it isn't always Better. Just different." (p. 23) Discuss what you think Zoomy means by these two statements and what they tell us about him as a person.
6. What choices is player four considering once he realizes that Mr. Zip is dead? How is this choice literally stolen from him?
7. Who is Lorrol? How does she change Zoomy's story? What is lucky and unlucky about her? How does their friendship develop? What similarities do they have?
8. Using the code from the second issue of *The Gas Gazette*, write your name.
9. Describing Gam, Zoomy says, "She makes the world seem like a safe and happy place, a place where many things are possible and there's always a hug waiting." Who makes you feel like this?
10. Who suddenly shows up in Three Oaks? What do you think was said between Buckeye and his parents in the garden? How does Zoomy feel about him? Why? How would you feel about him?
11. Explain what *The Gas Gazette* is. How does it add a mysterious element to the story? When did you, as the reader, figure out whom it was written about?
12. What is inside the box? How does Zoomy eventually figure out its importance? How is it lost again?
13. Summarize what happens when Zoomy discovers Buckeye's crime. What would you do in his situation? Why is he afraid to ask for help?
14. What are worry crumbs? What are Zoomy's worry crumbs? What are yours? What are other interesting sayings that Gam and Gumps have?
15. Why does player four come to Three Oaks? How does his visit change Zoomy's family?
16. Using the Internet for research, Zoomy is slowly able to put together the clues and discover whom he thinks may be the author of the notebook. Why does it have such value? Where does it belong?



1. Summarize what Zoomy and Lorrol learn about Darwin. What do you think is the most important thing to know about him and his work? Which fact or detail did you find most interesting? What do you think is the best way to research the life of a person?
2. Zoomy decides, “Maybe everyone’s life is a big, hoped-for plan with missing pieces, pieces that you only glimpse now and then.” Do you agree with him? How do we only get to see parts of our lives like Zoomy sees? What parts of the puzzle in your life are you looking for now?
3. List the steps that Lorrol and Zoomy use to discover information about player four. What do they figure out together? What does Lorrol discover on her own?
4. Despite the devastating loss of the store, Gumps decides to use it for the common good of the town. How so? How were the events in the story both good and bad for Zoomy and his family? How is Zoomy different at the end of the story?
5. In the end, what happens to the notebook? How does Zoomy inform the family of what happened? What do they receive back in the mail? Did you decipher the code or read the letter? Why?
6. Which character in the story is your favorite? Why? How do authors let us get to know a character? What makes you care about what happens to a character?
7. Have you read Blue Balliett’s other novels? How does this compare to her other stories? Are there elements that are similar? How is it different?
8. What are the mysteries that Zoomy and Lorrol solve? Are there mysteries in everyone’s life? Are they all meant to be solved? Explain why you would or would not like to spend a summer in Three Oaks.

Classroom Activities

Writing

Inspired by *The Gas Gazette*, create a newsletter about a scientist or other famous professional in a field you’d like to study. Research at least ten interesting facts about them but do not reveal their identity. Then, post the clue newsletter on a bulletin board and have the class try to figure out the subject’s identity.

Reading

In a way, all books are mysteries, as a reader tries to decide what is important to the story and what is not. As you read *The Danger Box* leave sticky notes on pages where you think an important event has occurred or clue has been given. Explain in a sentence why you think this is important.

Math/Logic

Create your own code inspired by the one Darwin used.

Science

Create a poster or pamphlet that explains Darwin’s family tree. What important discoveries did he make while onboard *The Beagle*? Or, create a poster or pamphlet that summarizes and illustrates his theories.

History

Darwin is not the first scientist whose ideas upset his community. You might research the ideas of one of these other famous people in history and create a biography or newsletter about their discoveries: Nicolas Copernicus, Giordano Bruno, Galileo Gallilei, Tycho Brahe, Johannes Kepler, Edmond Halley, Zabdiel Boylston, Benjamin Franklin, Isaac Newton, Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, William Buckland, Charles Lyell, Louis Agassiz, Adam Sedgwick, Robert Chambers.

An Interview with Blue Balliett

Can you describe what's in The Danger Box?

The Danger Box is a mystery set in a very small, very quiet town in Michigan, one that could be almost anywhere in the United States. A worn, red notebook appears, one that might or might not have belonged to one of the most famous and controversial thinkers ever, a person who has been dead for over a hundred years—and whose name is known around the world. Dangerous sparks are struck...and soon a boy, a girl and a way of life are surrounded by flames.

You're widely known for writing books about famous artists and visionaries – Johannes Vermeer in Chasing Vermeer, Frank Lloyd Wright in The Wright 3, Alexander Calder in The Calder Game, what made you decide to write a new mystery focusing on a world-renowned scientist?

Science is filled with as much controversy and as many questions as art—especially the scientific ideas of this particular thinker. But the ideas that made this man's name a household word also hid who he was as a person. My hope in writing this book was to give kids more access to this inspiring, humble and often-misunderstood guy.

You have said The Danger Box is a book you had to write. Can you explain that?

When I stumbled on the fact that this one priceless notebook was missing, I was so excited—and the story practically told itself. Wouldn't it be amazing if this object were actually found one day by one of the kids who read my book? Stranger things have happened, and sometimes fact follows fiction.

How did you choose the setting for The Danger Box?

I knew I wanted a small community, and one within easy driving distance of Chicago, where I live. When I first saw Three Oaks, I fell in love with it—there's one main street with just a handful of local businesses, a train that runs through the middle of town but hasn't stopped there in fifty years, and endless fields of corn and soybeans. It almost feels like a small island buried in green.

Can you talk about your research process for this book? Did you discover anything about this famous man that surprised you?

I read lots about this man's life, which is often overshadowed by his ideas. I felt he could be an accessible and inspiring friend to all kinds of kids. He started out with lots of weaknesses and difficulties—anxiety, lack of success at school, compulsive collecting and list-making, to name a few—and yet somehow those qualities that tripped him up at first might not have been all bad, and perhaps they even became strengths that contributed to his work and fame.

Do you still write in your laundry room? Describe your writing process.

I do; I started out working in there when our kids were teenagers, as it's out of the way but still in the middle of the house. When I get stuck writing on my laptop I go to a legal pad. I carry a pocket-sized notebook everywhere, and write down ideas whenever they occur. Sometimes, if I'm puzzling over a piece of the plot, it becomes clear just as I'm falling asleep or when I first wake up.

You have said that the characters from your previous novels were loosely based on some of the kids you taught when you were a teacher at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools. Are Zoomy and Lorrol based on real kids?

All of my characters are inspired by kids I taught and people I've known, but Zoomy's special way of seeing is a quality I've only observed from a distance. Before beginning the book, I visited an optometrist who fitted me with lenses that made it possible to temporarily glimpse the range of Zoomy's vision, and this doctor also allowed me to see what Zoomy's glasses might look like from the outside. While I was writing, I was always trying to imagine myself inside Zoomy, looking out.

Zoomy's grandparents are very supportive of him and treat him like any other kid, despite his physical challenges. Did you have similar grandparents?

When quite young, I spent lots of time with grandparents during the summers, and think there's a special kind of bond that can pull the old and the young together. My sister and brother and I did help out a bit by sweeping, doing dishes, weeding or watering, and keeping my grandfather company while he ate lunch, which sometimes took a long time. Zoomy has lots of chores, and everyone in his household pulls together to get washing, gardening and cooking done. It's not a bad thing to be needed.

Which character(s) in the book do you identify with the most and why?

Like Zoomy, I was closely connected to the grownups around me, but didn't feel I could always see what was going on too clearly. Also, I had "aha" moments, times when I suddenly glimpsed meaning or pattern and felt I had understood something valuable—but didn't know how to say it. That's what I'm trying to do now!

Talk about the "Gas Gazette" entries. How did that come about and why did you decide to incorporate that in The Danger Box?

The more I learned about this scientist's personality and life, the more I wanted to share with kids. At first, I planted lots of the quotes and facts that are now in the *Gas Gazette* within the text itself, but that began to feel heavy. I wanted the man himself to become a necessary piece of the puzzle, and that's when I turned him over to Zoomy and Lorrol, and he came alive as "Gas," which was his teenage nickname. As soon as "Gas" began to speak for himself, the *Gas Gazettes* just poured out. I could barely keep up with all that Gas wanted to say. It was an odd feeling, as if he'd stepped off the page.

There seems to be a lot of interest in Charles Darwin recently. What is it about him that you think fascinates people to this day?

Okay, so this mysterious scientist is Charles Darwin, yes! Well, on the occasion of his 200th birthday, in 2009, there were lots of exhibits and many wonderful books came out. I do think he's fascinating in part because he's such a hot-button figure, especially in the United States, where his theory of evolution still creates a huge amount of controversy.

What do you hope readers will take away from The Danger Box?

My hope is that kids from all kinds of backgrounds can be inspired by Darwin as a person, regardless of whether they or the people around them agree with his ideas about biology. Darwin was an amazing seeker of patterns, a huge dreamer and thinker—and yet he had so many qualities that most adults today would consider problems. The idea that so-called weaknesses can become strengths—that intrigues me. Are there also times when a physical disability can allow a person to accomplish things that others might not? I think this is an exciting question.

What's next for you?

Hmm, I'm still at the stage of gathering ingredients and stirring them around. I'm not quite ready to talk about what I'm up to, but my research is taking me to unfamiliar and not-easy places. And, as always, I'm learning like mad. That is one of the great pleasures—I guess I like the 'yikes, uh-oh' feeling of this kind of exploration. You could say I'm a danger box kind of girl.

About the Author

Blue Balliett grew up in New York City, where she often visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Frick Collection, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Guggenheim. She studied art history at Brown University. Balliett and her family lived year-round on Nantucket Island for many years and now live in Chicago, where she taught at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools before becoming a full-time writer.

Blue Balliett's first book *Chasing Vermeer* was a *New York Times* bestseller and Edgar Award winner, and won the Chicago Tribune Prize for Young Adult Fiction. It has now been translated into about 35 languages. Her second book *The Wright 3* was hailed in a starred review in *Kirkus* as "another *tour de force* blending art, math, philosophy, history, and literature." When her third book *The Calder Game* came out, *Booklist* in a starred review said: "Balliett offers readers new ways to think." *The Danger Box* marks a departure for Balliett, featuring a new cast of characters, a charming small-town setting in Three Oaks, Michigan, and a scientific mystery wrapped inside a compelling family story. Blue writes in the laundry room of her home in Hyde Park, Illinois.



Books by Blue Balliett

Chasing Vermeer

Hardcover: 978-0-439-37294-7 • \$16.95
Paperback: 978-0-439-37297-8 • \$7.99

The Wright 3

Hardcover: 978-0-439-69367-7 • \$16.99
Paperback: 978-0-439-69368-4 • \$7.99

The Calder Game

Hardcover: 978-0-439-85207-4 • \$17.99
Paperback: 978-0-439-85208-1 • \$7.99

The Danger Box

Hardcover: 978-0-439-85209-8 • \$16.99

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Discussion guide written by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer, children's author and educator.

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