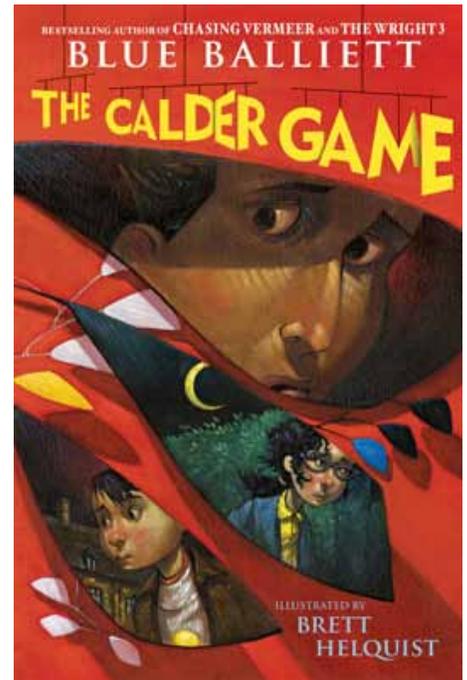


The Calder Game

by Blue Balliett

About the book

Calder, Petra, and Tommy are miserable with their new teacher, and even a field trip to the museum to see Alexander Calder's amazing sculptures does not cheer the trio. So when Calder gets the chance to visit England, Petra and Tommy are both envious of his escape and wonder how they will get along without him. But when Calder explores the fascinating mazes near Woodstock, he suddenly disappears along with a sculpture by the artist Alexander Calder for whom he is named. Is there a connection? Petra and Tommy fly to England to try to retrace the thoughts and actions of their closest friend—but will they be able to find him before it's too late?



Pre-reading Discussion:

Read the first chapter and then brainstorm a list of questions you hope the novel can answer. Remember that good readers always predict as they read but are not always right!

Discussion guide:

1. The friendship between Petra, Tommy, and Calder has always been unbalanced. Why is this? Can groups of three be easy friends, or is someone always odd man out?
2. Explore the art of Alexander Calder for yourself. How does it make you feel? How do the main characters in the book feel about Calder's art? With whom do you feel the most similar reaction? Why? Do you think art can change a person? How?
3. How does the trip to the museum show the contrast between the kids' previous teacher, Ms. Hussey, and their new teacher, Ms. Button? How do you survive a year of school with a teacher who you feel is difficult?
4. Ms. Hussey describes Calder's art as shouting, "HERE! NOW! and reminds you that each second of your life holds its own world of experience." (p. 42) What experiences most shape the lives of Petra, Tommy, and Calder? What is your own HERE! and NOW!?
5. Explain the town of Woodstock's reaction to the Calder sculpture that they received as a gift. Is it happily installed or has it caused controversy? Why? How can art stir trouble? Would art that caused no reaction be better than art that caused strong emotions? Why or why not? Do you think it's easier or harder to appreciate art that can be seen by anyone, art that isn't in a museum setting? Explain your thoughts.
6. Do you think graffiti, which is rarely legal, can be art? If so, and if officials are instructed to remove it, should they? (This is a real-life problem faced by British officials who are unsure about what to do with some of Banksy's work.) Is there any graffiti in your neighborhood that you see as art?

7. What are the five most interesting facts you learned about Woodstock and England while reading the novel? What would someone from England find fascinating about your town? Would you like to travel? What would you want to see? Would you, like Calder, have difficulty being an outsider for awhile? How long do you think it would take for someone to feel they belong in your town? If Calder, Petra, and Tommy visited your neighborhood, what do you think each one of them would be most interested in? What would they notice first?
8. In most mysteries, chapters are left with cliff hangers. Which chapters do you think are written with this technique? What can you learn about your own writing from studying Balliett's prose?
9. Petra and Tommy are called in to help with the investigation. What can they bring that no one else could? Who would your parents call to best get ideas about you? What might they be surprised to learn? How do Tommy and Petra help uncover the truth?
10. What adds to the suspicion that Calder could've fallen into the hands of people with bad intentions? What clues are given to his whereabouts? Did you believe he was in danger or simply on an adventure? Why?
11. Although Tommy finds something very important, he is willing to give it back to make an important wish. Who else makes wishes? What is the most important wish you have ever made? Do you believe in wishes? Why or why not?
12. Explain what happened to both Calder and the Calder sculpture. Who were the most important players in both disappearances? Describe Calder Pillay's ordeal. How did he survive it? Did the sculpture survive too?
13. Balliett changes point of view frequently in the story. First, we follow Calder along his adventure, and then it switches to Petra and Tommy. Why do you think she decided to write this way? What does it add to the story? Who do you think changes most over the course of the novel? Why?
14. How many mobiles can you find hidden in the book? Make a list.