

Hold Fast By Blue Balliett

Grade Level: 5

Lexile Measure: 780L

Genre: Mystery and Suspense

Subject: Homelessness and Poverty, Parents, Violence and Crime

Where is Early's father? He's not the kind of father who would disappear. But he's gone...and he's left a whole lot of trouble behind. As danger closes in, Early, her mom, and her brother have to flee their apartment, and are forced to move into a city shelter. Once there, Early starts asking questions and looking for answers—because her father hasn't disappeared without a trace. There are patterns and rhythms to what's happened, and Early might be the only one who can use them to track him down. With her signature, singular love of language and sense of mystery, Blue Balliett weaves a story that takes readers from the cold, snowy Chicago streets to the darkest corner of the public library, on an unforgettable hunt for deep truths and a reunited family.

Pre-Reading Discussion: Home is defined before the opening chapter as “a place to live by choice, sometimes with family or friends; a haven; a place of origin, comfort and often of valued memories.” Which part of this definition best describes your home? What do you most enjoy about your home? The author continues with this startling fact, “By the end of the 2012 school year, an estimated thirty thousand children in the city of Chicago were without a home.” Were you shocked by how large this number is? What does it mean to be homeless? How do you think the homeless can best be helped?

Discussion Questions:

1. Describe the setting of the story and find a key quote that best represents it. How does the setting impact the conflict of the story?
2. Compare the Pearls' family home to your own. What do they have in common? How are they different? What do the Pearls dream of having one day? What does your family dream of? What's important to the Pearl family?
3. The Pearls collect words like some families collect movies. Why are words so important to them? How does Early learn new words?
4. Summarize the steps that led to Early, Jubie, and Sum having to move into a shelter. How do you think most families find themselves in need of a shelter? What is the most difficult part of their new life inside it? Compare their old apartment to life in the shelter.
5. Create a blog post or journal inspired by Early's experiences about how schools could best accept “shelter kids” into their learning community.
6. List the steps Early takes to solve the mystery of her father's disappearance. Rank each step on a scale of most to least helpful. Discuss your list and rankings in small groups.
7. In the end, what happens to the Pearl family? How does Early help solve the mystery? What becomes of those who separated them for so long? Who most helps Early on her quest?

Writing: In the novel, Early starts a letter campaign to let important people know about the plight of homeless families in Chicago, a place where many vacant homes exist. Research the resources available to families that are homeless or living in poverty in your own community. Using Early's letter as inspiration, write your own persuasive letter to someone who could make a difference—a mayor, sheriff, or even the editor of the local paper.

Vocabulary: Create your own journal of important words, like the Pearl family. For each word entry: define it, find its origin, list any syllables and antonyms, use it in a sentence, and draw a picture to help you remember it.

Reading: Defining Character and Evaluating Relevance of Evidence from the Text with the help of a character chart for students to find key quotes which best represent the characters from the novel and explain why they picked it.