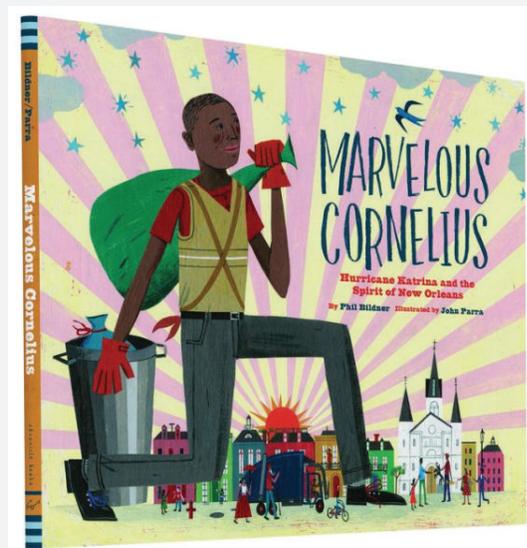


## **First Opinion: Community through Strife and the Storm: How Marvelous Cornelius Made Magic in the Big Easy**

Bildner, Phil. *Marvelous Cornelius: Hurricane Katrina and the Spirit of New Orleans*. Illustrated by John Parra, San Francisco, Chronicle Books, 2015.

*Cassie J. Brownell*



I began my career in education as an early childhood educator three years after Hurricane Katrina's winds and waters ravaged the city of New Orleans. Although I only came to know New Orleans as it was post-Katrina when I was teaching there, Phil Bildner's words and John Parra's illustrations call attention to the spirit of New Orleans that makes it a magical city not only for visitors, but also for those that call the city home. Supported by depictions of the focal character—Marvelous Cornelius—as seemingly larger-than-life, the words rhythmically dance on readers' tongues as Cornelius and his New Orleanian friends sashay and shimmy through the city's historic streets in the famous French Quarter.

On the opening page of the book, a quote is shared from civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr. that calls for men and women—no matter their occupation or "lot in life"—to live out each day doing their best work for themselves and for their communities. As a sanitation worker in the city of New Orleans, a job others may consider unimportant or mundane, Cor-

nelius puts his personal spin on the work. In doing so, he carves out a space for himself as a leader in his community. In the text, readers are witness to the tricks with trash cans and bags of garbage Cornelius performs with ease, as well as his commitment to picking up each and every praline wrapper on the street. Thus, with each turning of the page, the joy of Cornelius and his community is felt by readers as they read aloud his musical calls like “Rat-a-tat-tat!”—a clear connection to the city’s musical roots.

Yet, as the yellow skies depicted in Parra’s illustrations turn dark, so too does the heart of the city. Just as in real life where, in the days preceding Hurricane Katrina as well as those that followed, fear clouded the joy of the people seeking relief or awaiting reports from the wreckage, so too does fear cloud the joy of Cornelius and the members of his community. Moreover, Marvelous Cornelius and his multitude of friends—like the real citizens of New Orleans—also come together to overcome the travesty of Katrina and to demonstrate, as is often said in the city, that the soul is waterproof. Both in the book and in real life, individuals from near and far come together to rebuild the city and recover the spirit of New Orleans so many worried was lost.

In his closing author’s note, Phil Bildner shares how he, like many in the years that followed the deadly storm, made several trips to the city to contribute to its rebuilding. Bildner shares that such trips were not simply about renewal, but rather (and more importantly) were about relationships. One result of Bildner’s trips was hearing the life story of Cornelius Washington. Known as the “wizard of trash cans” in the city’s French Quarter, Washington is the real person at the heart of Bildner’s story, someone Bildner came to know first through journalist Katy Reckdahl and later through Washington’s mother. Written with the “flavor of folktales and folk heroes like John Henry,” *Marvelous Cornelius* tells the story of a beloved community member.

### About the Author

**Cassie J. Brownell** is an Assistant Professor of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education within the University of Toronto. As a former early childhood and elementary educator in post-Katrina New Orleans, Cassie’s scholarship amplifies the experiences and voices of multilingual and multicultural children in urban schools. Her past research has examined children’s written and multimodal texts in schools, the intersection of critical literacies and civics, and how, by hearing differences, children and teachers can listen to and compose experiences of community.