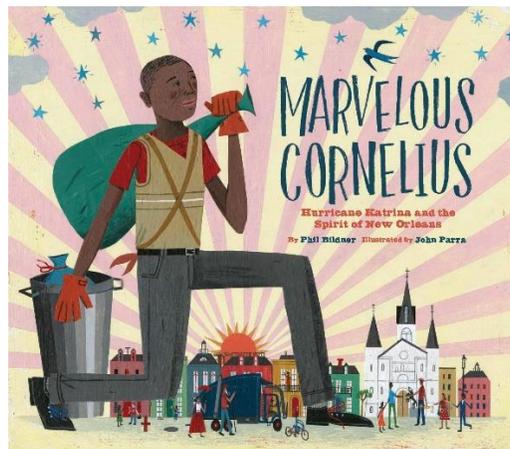


Second Reaction: The Marvelous Spirit of Working-Class Children’s Literature

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

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Marvelous Cornelius: Hurricane Katrina and the Spirit of New Orleans written by Phil Bildner and illustrated by John Parra, I begin. It has been a while since I sat in the author’s chair and shared a story with a group of young folks.

As I open the book, wide-eyed, little bodies scoot in closer. I flip to the first page while crossed-legs flap up and down excitedly and necks visibly stretch in anticipation of what is to come. Even though I have read the book before, I start to get excited, too. There is something about a read aloud that brings out the curiosity in all of us. There is something about this group that seems like they were all born curious, too.

I’d like to say it was solely my delivery that had the class of first graders on the edge of the carpet, but in truth it was mostly the cover of the book. Cornelius looks mighty and strong yet gentle as he kneels, holding a trash bag seemingly towering over the French Quarter but not in a usurping way. More of a giant among others kind of way. Like most of the kids in the class,

Cornelius is Black but he is also a community worker doing a job that is often read as working-class and that is where I will focus my attention in the writing of this piece.

Working-class literature that offers dignity to the working-class people it writes about can be difficult to locate. In writing *Marvelous Cornelius*, Bildner and Parra take great care to enter the intellectual life of a sanitation worker and demonstrate to readers why Cornelius and trash collecting as a profession are strong, helpful, necessary, and precious to our communities by offering dignity and respect to the profession and to the worker that few books do. In part, it was this respect and care that pulled the first graders into the text. The way Cornelius does his work is fascinating—dancing, singing, drumming—and the way he cares for his city both before and after Hurricane Katrina echoes the heart of a person who cares deeply about and has much pride for his community. Cornelius was an everyday hero, a hero that could have just as easily been the moms, dads, grandmas, aunts, uncles, etc. of these first graders. And it is this excitement and connection to the book that I wished I would have anticipated before I arrived. If I had, I could have brought with me a fully formed invitation to thinking about work and workers for the class to dive into, jumpstarted by *Marvelous Cornelius*.

Secondly, the young people were drawn in by the illustrations, particularly the ones that illustrated Hurricane Katrina. Someone noticed a cat sitting on a car that was almost under water and someone noticed a guitar floating along in the flood. Others noticed the way the font changes on the pages when explaining the way Cornelius moved down the streets leading a one-man parade while he picked up the trash. They noticed so many things, it took much longer to read the book than I had anticipated, as the illustrations are carefully composed to add depth to the story and to bring the culture and spirit of New Orleans to life.

As we neared the end of the book, their teacher pointed out a bluebird that can be spotted on every page. I later looked up what a blue bird represents. According to Wikipedia, a bluebird symbolizes a “harbinger of happiness” (2018). This is something I wished I would have paid attention to before I read it to the class, but I never even noticed the bird the first time. Cornelius was certainly a harbinger of happiness to his community. The bluebird seems to signal to the reader, “pay attention to the people doing the work around you because with the actions of those people comes great joy.”

I left the book with the class as a gift for inviting me to come and read with them. They told me they were going to look up Cornelius and New Orleans. I told them they could also use

the story as inspiration to learn about the workers in their own school. To get to know them and tell their stories to the world. They found this idea exciting and I plan to go back and help with this endeavor, as well as have them think deeply about equity in wages and worker rights.

We need more books like this one—ones that jumpstart important conversations about the world of workers that are often taken for granted. Ones that show how our lives are intricately woven together with our communities. Ones that focus on the lives of ordinary people, everyday jobs, and express how truly extraordinary they really are.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Jaye Johnson Thiel is a visiting scholar at the University of Georgia. She holds a PhD in Language and Literacy Education and has dedicated her scholarship to giving the world a glimpse into the intellectual lives of children from working-class families. Before receiving her PhD, she was a K-5 teacher and before that she proudly worked in the service industry, including taking orders for bus parts, sweeping hair, and serving food to hungry people.