

Reviewed by **Julie Froude**

Catfish Tale

Written By Whitney Stewart

Illustrated By Gerald Guerlais

Park Ridge, IL: Albert Whitman & Company, 2014

Catfish Tale recasts the fairy tale, “The Fisherman and His Wife,” in a Louisiana bayou setting. Readers can almost hear the narrator’s Cajun accent through Whitney Stewart’s use of the region’s dialect as Gerald Guerlais’ colorful, animation-style depictions immerse them in the bayou, alive with creatures of the swamp, riverboats, regional food, and Mardi Gras scenes.

Fisherman Jacques and his wife Jolie live in the swampy bayou. Jolie likes to cook and sing. One day Jacques catches a magic catfish. Startled by the talking fish, Jacques releases it and goes home, only to be scolded by his wife.

“You did WHAT?!” Jolie hollered when Jacques told his catfish tale. “You didn’t ask for even one small wish?” Jacques looked around and scratched his head. “What could I have wished for, *ma chère*? I don’t need nothin’ more.”

Thus begins the cycle of Jolie’s dissatisfaction. With each new improvement to their life she begs her husband to ask the catfish for “one more little thing.” To please his wife, Jacques complies. Each time, the catfish answers, “*Ah, tooloulou*—if that ain’t the easiest thing to do.” Life becomes bigger and grander with each succeeding wish, until it all disappears in one big hurricane. The tale concludes with Jolie’s realization that life was best the way it was before the wishes—she needs nothing more than

what she has.

This captivating story will delight children as they predict what will happen next. Students will enjoy comparing this book to a version of the original Grimm’s fairy tale, pointing out similarities and differences. Additionally, classroom teachers will appreciate having the cross-curricular skill of comparing and contrasting reinforced in music class. I find this book to be a welcome addition to what I call a “theme and variation” library—books with multiple versions of tales and folk songs such as *Over in the Meadow* and *There Was an Old Lady/Who Swallowed a Fly*.

Dramatizing the story with actors, music, and sound effects is another way *Catfish Tale* may be used in the music classroom. The hurricane scene in particular lends itself well to unpitched percussion. It is suitable for a small in-class performance or a larger programmed drama. Other applications for the music class include improvisation of short melodies to create a class theme followed by variations. *Catfish Tale* might also be used as a springboard to introduce specific music styles such as jazz or Zydeco.

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This book offers a host of other possibilities for using it with children. Explore geography and cultural elements such as food. Make language arts connections by expanding students’ understanding of unfamiliar words using the “Bayou Glossary” included in the book. Discuss and figure out the moral of the story. Well-traveled author Stewart includes a recipe for seafood gumbo, which provides students the opportunity to explore some of the words with



their taste buds. Multiple ages will enjoy this creative retelling of a classic story. I can't wait to share this book with my students! ■

JULIE FROUDE brings 28 years of living in Japan to her work as a kindergarten through Grade 6 music and percussion ensemble instructor in Hamilton, Ohio. She is fully certified in Kodály and has successfully completed all levels of Orff Schulwerk teacher

education, as well as pre-K through Grade 12 Japanese. Ms. Froude is also a part-time instructor of Japanese at the college level and has presented music workshops at state and regional conferences. Her passion is to introduce and engage students in authentic multicultural music experiences.