

Hurricane Friends Short Guide

Hurricane Friends by Anilu Bernardo

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Overview

Clari Martinez, like most thirteen-year-olds, is impatient, rebellious, unhappy when disciplined, energetic, imaginative, and loving. In "Hurricane Friends," she copes with an unhappy neighbor, saves a cat's life, and survives one of the most destructive hurricanes ever to hit the United States—Hurricane Andrew. Bernardo captures the experience of enduring a catastrophic storm, while offering plenty of storytelling excitement in the process. Clari is an appealing teenager who leads with her heart, and her adventure is vividly portrayed.

About the Author

Ann Reynold (maiden name Anilu Bernardo) born in Cuba and then, as a child in 1961, fled the island nation to the United States, her personal jumping off to freedom. She grew up in Miami, Florida and attended Coral Gables High school. She earned a B.A.

in Spanish in 1971 from Florida State University and then an M.A. in communications in 1980. Like many authors for young people, Bernardo began writing, when a youngster, stories and poems in her native language Spanish. She, her husband Jim, and daughters Stephanie and Amanda now live in Plantation, Florida.

Her first published book *Fitting In* is a collection of short stories that includes "Hurricane Friends" and was published as part of the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project at the University of Houston. *Fitting In* tied with Margaret Wiley's *Facing the Music* for the Paterson Prize for Books for Young People for grades 7 through 12, and the magazine *Stepping Stones* gave the 1996 *Stepping Stones Book Award* for children's literature to *Fitting In*.

Bernardo participates in the Florida Romance Writers organization and meets in a critique group with fellow writers.



Setting

Most of the action of "Hurricane Friends" takes place in Mrs. Murphy's backyard, Mrs. Murphy's front yard, and inside Clari's home. Mrs. Murphy's backyard is the focus of a dispute between her and the neighboring Martinez family, which is precipitated when Clari damages the back fence when she climbs over it in order to save herself some extra walking after school. When Clari climbs over the fence, knowing that she is not supposed to, she exposes the rift between neighbors that the advent of the hurricane will mend. Mrs. Murphy's front yard is where the Martinezes show their openheartedness and sound moral values. When Mrs. Murphy learns that she cannot bring Midnight with her to the shelter, the cat scrambles away—lost for all Mrs. Murphy can tell. Clari catches the cat and takes it to her room for safekeeping. The Martinezes also board up the picture window in the front of Mrs. Murphy's home, saving the elderly woman much grief by their charitable neighborliness.

The majority of the action occurs within Clari's home as Bernardo carefully shows how the Martinez family members relate to one another.

Through Clari's effort to manipulate her parents after her father has sent her to her room, Bernardo shows some of the dynamics of how they behave in their intimate family circle. They are a tightly-bound family whatever their disagreements, and when the hurricane breaks into their home, they respond as one.



Social Sensitivity

"Hurricane Friends" combines the theme of immigrants adjusting to life in Florida with some of the common issues a young person faces while learning to behave with maturity and to be respectful of other people. Bernardo handles these issues with good sense and perceptiveness. Although the focus is on the young person Clari, her family's efforts to fit into American society are significant motifs that help to unify the narrative and to give a rich cultural background for the story's events. Her father works a menial job in order to support his family, and he works at night because night work pays better than the same job would pay as day work. His efforts on behalf of his family, as well as his desire to be a good neighbor give him an air of nobility.

The entire family is striving to learn English. Clari, perhaps because she is the youngest and has been growing up American, has the best English diction, but her parents regard learning English as essential for themselves as well, with mastery of the language offering the promise of better jobs and greater social acceptance by their neighbors. In some parts of the United States this attitude may be controversial; efforts to legislate English as the language people should speak have exacerbated some of the friction that inevitably occurs between non-English speakers and English speakers in a nation where English is by far the dominant language. Bernardo does not include the controversy in "Hurricane Friends," instead her characters Hurricane Friends 4675 take it for granted that they must learn the language of their neighbors; this may annoy readers for whom the controversy is important.

"Hurricane Friends" is essentially Clari's story, and the problems with Mrs. Murphy tend to be more representative of any youngster's growing up than specifically having to do with immigration or Clari's ethnic heritage.

Her complaints about having to walk a long distance to come home from school if she does not take a shortcut through Mrs. Murphy's yard are typical of complaints made by young people; her parents' response to her complaints is also typical. There seems to be a gap in understanding between generations. Adults do not see why a healthy, vigorous thirteen-year-old cannot walk some extra distance if it means being a good neighbor, and Clari, with her efforts to manipulate her parents, does not quite understand why they do not take her side. The parents try to resolve the issue with discipline, but Clari, is every inch a teenager and resists. Bernardo creates an interesting solution to the conflict between Clari and the adults around her by having Mrs. Murphy, the supposedly bad-tempered neighbor, figure out how to prevent Clari from damaging her fence and yet still allow Clari to cut through her yard: make a gate. She is inspired in this by the girl's inherent good heartedness, as evidenced by Clari's caring for her cat.

Clari does not realize it, instead fearing the anger of her parents if they find out she has Mrs. Murphy's cat in her bedroom, but her care for this cat is a reflection of her parents' own good hearted care for their neighbors.

Thus the caring for the cat and the idea for the gate represent a coming together of the generations and offer a fine working out of the story's social issues.

Literary Qualities

"Hurricane Friends" is structured like a short novel, and thus has novelistic elements like chapter breaks, complex character development, and ramifying subplots. The main plot focuses on how the characters cope with Hurricane Andrew, a tremendous storm that took lives, destroyed homes, and devastated land in parts of south Florida. Bernardo uses this real catastrophe to add authenticity and dramatic intensity to the background which tests the resolve, nerve, and charitableness of Clari, her family, and Mrs. Murphy. It also provides a sense of direction for her narrative: the story's first movement is driven by the anticipation of the hurricane; its second movement is driven by her characters' efforts to survive the hurricane; and its final brief movement is driven by people's responses to what the hurricane did.

The main plot is enhanced by the subplots of the conflict between Clari and Mrs. Murphy and Clari's caring for Midnight, Mrs. Murphy's cat. The conflict between Clari and Mrs. Murphy appears at first to be the main plot, but instead it serves to introduce the story's important characters and to establish how they relate to each other. It is established that Clari dislikes Mrs. Murphy, her parents are trying to be good neighbors to the old lady, and that Clari and her parents are struggling with the tense opposition of adolescent rebelliousness and parental discipline. This subplot provides the story with its emotional context, generating love, sympathy, tenderness, anger, and irritability. By evoking these emotions, the subplot helps to explain why Papi, Mami, and Clari choose to assist their grouchy neighbor, and it makes readers care about this family because we learn some of what lies within their hearts.

The cat subplot involves a clever passage of foreshadowing and helps to unify the narrative. Clari, whom we already know to be independentminded and willing to disobey her parents, feeds Midnight, even though she is not supposed to. This impulsive action to care for Midnight not only seems in character but shows that she is more than merely a stock manipulative brat; she is someone with a sound heart and a sensitivity for the needs of others, including those of a pet. Thus, her taking Midnight in out of the storm is entirely characteristic of her, and it eventually provides for a satisfying ending to "Hurricane Friends."

Bernardo is often at her best in her fiction when presenting sharply vivid descriptions. Some of her descriptive passages are prosaic (in this context, meaning straightforward, literal description), involving well-chosen words to create a strong overall impression of a scene, as in: "Grocery carts were loaded with canned food, batteries, and plastic bottles of juice and drinking water. No one was buying fresh meats or frozen foods." In a couple of sentences, readers can see a community's response to the news that a hurricane is headed their way.

People only buy what fits the coming crisis, items such as canned food which does not spoil if the power goes out for long, bottled drinks because the tap water may be fouled, and batteries to provide emergency light. In a few lines she also vividly portrays the aftermath of the storm: "Every part of the yard, the sidewalk, and the street was covered



with roof tiles, wrinkled aluminum sheets, tree branches and leaves, wood pieces, cardboard, paper, and items Clari didn't recognize." On the other hand, Bernardo's descriptions especially shine when she uses metaphorical language. "Her [Midnight's] shiny coat had irregular white spots which, against the dark fur, resembled a starry sky." This is excellent economy of language, using a metaphor (the starry sky) to capture the image of Midnight's coat. Bernardo's metaphorical language is not just reserved for static images but is also used to depict action, as in "The wind swatted raindrops on Clari while she worked. This was no ordinary rainstorm." In a pithy but pregnant phrase, Bernardo helps to create an atmosphere of frenetic energy, with "swatted" conveying the urgency of her family's preparations for the coming of Hurricane Andrew.



Themes and Characters

Clari, the main character, is an independent-minded thirteen-yearold who at first seems too self-absorbed to heed the advice of others and take responsibility for herself.

Although warned by her father not to climb Mrs. Murphy's fence in order to take a shortcut home, she does so anyway. When she is caught her father punishes her and tells Clari, "Don't climb over the fence!" though the lesson Clari prefers to absorb is "Stay clear of Mrs. Murphy! The old lady was trouble." She transfers the blame for her transgression to someone else: "Mrs. Murphy was a grouch who complained about everything." Her efforts to manipulate her parents do not make her seem any better, and they may make her life more difficult: "I really work up a sweat going the long way. But .. if you'd rather do more laundry."

"Don't worry about the laundry.

I'll handle it. Or better yet, you can wash your own clothes."

There is nothing unusual about Clari's efforts to turn matters around to suit her convenience, but this is not a trait that should be highly prized in either young people or adults since considerable personal, family, and social harm can result from its unfettered application.

Clari has both bad and good qualities like all people, and the crisis caused by Hurricane Andrew brings out all that is best in her. If Clari were truly selfish or cruel she would not rescue Mrs. Murphy's cat Midnight, but she does so because she cares about the welfare of the cat much more than she dislikes Mrs. Murphy.

Furthermore, she does as her parents say as they prepare for the hurricane, showing a tacit acceptance of their greater experience with such storms.

Clari even helps her father board up Mrs. Murphy's front window to protect the glass and Mrs. Murphy's belongings from the wind and rain.

These actions show Clari's emerging wisdom—the valuing of life other than her own (the cat), the recognition that she can learn from her elders (the preparations), and the ability to rise above minor disputes to recognize the needs of others and to help those who require help.

Mrs. Murphy is allowed similar growth. She at first seems something of a petty woman who is far too set in her ways. It is true that her fence is damaged when Clari climbs over it, but even her father thinks she is too temperamental. He remarks that if his family had taken her in, "I don't know which would have been worse: the hurricane, or the storm Mrs. Murphy would have raised inside our house!"

When he takes Mrs. Murphy's antenna down, he says that "I think Mrs. Murphy is too stubborn to ask her neighbors for help!" Mrs. Murphy sounds very much the type of



adult an impatient young person like Clari would dislike. Bernardo, however, is not content to leave the elderly woman as a one-dimensional antagonist for Clari, and she shrewdly gives Mrs. Murphy redeeming qualities that enlarge her as a human being. Crucial to her character development is her effort to take Midnight with her when she boards the van that will take her to the community shelter: "You can't bring pets to the shelter," the driver shouted into the wind. He raised his hands and waved them in warning.

"I've got to bring her! She'll be very quiet on my lap!" Mrs. Murphy's cracking voice sounded like a loud cry.

"I'm sorry. I'm not allowed to bring a pet in the van. They won't allow her in the shelter, either.

Those are the rules," the man said, shaking his head.

"Oh, please." Mrs. Murphy seemed ready to cry. Clari felt sorry for her. "I can't leave her in the house alone!"

Mrs. Murphy is here shown to be much more than an old grouch; she is a vulnerable human being who has the capacity to care. Clari belatedly recognizes this and a bond of sympathy begins to form. This recognition on Clari's part is an important aspect of the growth of her character because her emotions reach beyond her selfabsorption to empathize with another person's plight. Mrs. Murphy is granted a kindred growth in her character; she appreciates the good deeds of her neighbors and even thinks of a way to resolve her differences with Clari: "I wonder if you can help me install a gate for Clari." Mrs. Murphy smiled back when Clari stole a glance at her. "It's a long walk around the block for such a nice girl."

The other important figures in "Hurricane Friends" are Clari's parents, Papi and Mami Martinez. They both work and they share some of the household chores. For instance, Papi has dinner already cooking by the time his wife comes home from work; he will leave at seven because he works at night.

Both are immigrants who are trying to build good lives in the United States.

Both also are working on their English, apparently mostly at work because they speak Spanish at home.

Their family life is sketched quickly, but their actions show how they and their daughter work with each other.

Papi seems to be the disciplinarian; it is he who sends Clari to her room for once again annoying Mrs. Murphy. He and Mami have a close rapport, and Clari's attempt to play one against the other is an utter failure because Mami backs her husband up. When they need to prepare for the coming hurricane, Papi and Mami work as a team, each seeming to understand what the other is doing without much discussion. They even help Mrs. Murphy without worrying about whether or not they should. They also seem to



know their daughter well; they include her in the important work and even understand why she took care of Mrs. Murphy's cat. They may not be perfect parents but they lead by example, showing through their respect for each other and their concern for their neighbors the kind of behavior they expect from Clari.

"Hurricane Friends" is a story in which carefully delineated characters are more important than any other structural element, though the strong unifying theme of good neighborliness is essential as well. This is one of the outstanding aspects of the story because neighborliness is an uncommon theme in young adult literature and it imparts a fresh tone to "Hurricane Friends." The theme is introduced by Clari's initial lack of neighborliness toward Mrs. Murphy, but it awaits full development for the onset of Hurricane Andrew. Papi and Mami serve as examples of how good neighbors behave. Their example at first is a small one when they discipline Clari for trespassing on Mrs. Murphy's yard.

As the storm nears, they show that neighborliness involves positive action not just reaction, that good neighbors not only help each other but even make sacrifices for one another. Given the alternative of boarding his bathroom window or Mrs. Murphy's front window, Papi chooses to protect Mrs. Murphy's furniture and other belongings by sacrificing his board for Mrs. Murphy's window. Even after a tree smashes his home's unprotected window Papi never questions whether he did the right thing; he is certain that he did, as are Mami and even Clari.

The conflict between Mrs. Murphy and Clari enhances the theme of neighborliness. It would be easier to help a kind and gracious neighbor than a reclusive and grouchy one, but the Martinezes show that likability is not a criterion for helping others. Mrs. Murphy is plainly not able to help herself, so the members of the vigorous Martinez family strongly shoulder her burdens and do what good hearts and a sense of community require. In response, Mrs. Murphy shows her own neighborliness by finding a way to ease the tensions between herself and the Martinezes.

Another significant theme, somewhat more common to literature for young adults, is that of family unity.

"Hurricanes can't be taken lightly.

This is a powerful one," Papi declares, and he and his family get to work to prepare against the coming storm.

This shared work against a common threat shows one aspect of familial solidarity, the gathering together of family members to work united toward a goal, but the theme is also developed in other ways. When the tree breaks the bathroom window, "The fierce wind blasted through the rooms with a whistling roar. They were pelted with wet leaves and rain"; a moment of crisis displays how the family comforts and protects one another. Clari panics for a moment but is first comforted by her mother and then by her father, and she participates in the search to find something to protect the bathroom, showing

how a family working together in a dangerous situation offers reassurance to the individual family members.



Topics for Discussion

1. Clari seems to be healthy and energetic so why can't she take the longer route home and avoid annoying Mrs. Murphy?

2. Many of Anilu Bernardo's readers live in areas where hurricanes are rare or never appear. What would "Hurricane Friends" teach them about hurricanes and how to survive them?

3. How realistic is Clari? Does she behave like a thirteen-year-old girl?

How does Bernardo make her seem realistic?

4. Papi is working hard at learning English. How important is it for immigrants such as he to learn English?

What advantages does speaking English provide?

5. Clari and Mrs. Murphy seem to share a love for cats. Can a shared affection such as this bring antagonists to an understanding of each other? Can it even generate affection between two people?

6. If Mrs. Murphy is, as Papi says, "too stubborn to ask her neighbors for help," should she be left to suffer the consequences? Why help her?

7. Is Papi wise? In what ways is he?

In what ways is he not?

8. How does the Martinez family work together?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. When did Hurricane Andrew sweep through Florida? What damage did it do? Is the account in "Hurricane Friends" accurate?
2. What are hurricanes? How do they form? Where do they come from?
3. How should people prepare for a hurricane? What supplies should they buy and why? What precautions can they take?
4. What are the first several things people should do after a hurricane has passed?
5. Clari's father carries luggage at the airport. What sorts of jobs do immigrants from Cuba typically find in the United States?
6. Papi seems to live a hard life. He works at night, needs to earn tips, carries luggage, struggles with his English, and has a grouchy neighbor.
Why would he and others like him want to leave Cuba for such a life in the United States?

For Further Reference

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Celis, Esther. *Skipping Stones* 9, 2 (March-April 1997): 7. Admires how the characters in the stories of *Fitting In* overcome their fears.

Hudak, Melissa. *School Library Journal* 42, 11 (November 1996): 120. Highly recommends *Fitting In* to libraries.

Publishers Weekly 243, 38 (September 16, 1996): 84. The only negative review of *Fitting In*.

Related Titles

"Hurricane Friends" is one of several stories published in the collection *Fitting In*. They all focus on young Cuban Americans learning to thrive in Florida. Bernardo has also published a novel, *Jumping Off to Freedom* (1996; see separate entry, Vol. 9), that tells of the harrowing passage across the sea between Cuba and Florida by people escaping the restrictive society of communist Cuba, who hope to find the freedom to build good lives for themselves in the United States.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996