

1-1-1998

# Hurricane Catfish

Jason Carr

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digital.usfsp.edu/npml\\_outreach\\_advancement](http://digital.usfsp.edu/npml_outreach_advancement)



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Carr, Jason, "Hurricane Catfish" (1998). *Outreach: Society for Advancement of Poynter Library*. 4.  
[http://digital.usfsp.edu/npml\\_outreach\\_advancement/4](http://digital.usfsp.edu/npml_outreach_advancement/4)

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the Library Outreach at Digital USFSP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Outreach: Society for Advancement of Poynter Library by an authorized administrator of Digital USFSP.

### Hurricane Catfish

In Ichthyology class the craziest fish we ever studied was our professor: Arlo Drummond, Ph.D. He had hair like an asylum and eyes to match; he didn't like to kill fish for research, but he did it anyway; class was inevitably an experience. Arlo, as we all called him, gave us stories instead of lectures, and liked to claim that his last name was derived from a fish, the drum.

Arlo taught us by showing us; sometimes he would come to class with a fish in each pocket, which he cunningly lined with plastic for just such a purpose. As he walked, the brine in his pockets sloshed. One day he was later than usual because a special fish had just arrived at the lab.

It was a strange Friday afternoon because a Hurricane named Zoe was churning up the Gulf of Mexico and headed straight for our College on the Florida coastline. While we were in class, other people were desperately buying gallons of water, boarding their windows, and evacuating.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Arlo said as he came in, "my wife wants me to do something about the hurricane, but I'm not afraid of Hurricanes. My high-school football team was called the Hurricanes. I was their mascot, well, not really the mascot but the kicker. I sat on the bench until it came time for kicking, then the coach would yell "Drummond" and I had to go kick the football through the sun. I met the coach when I was fishing. He was a fisherman too. Once I had a shark on the

✓  
4

line and fought it all the way down the pier. When the line snapped, I was so angry that I just started kicking this buoy. It wasn't tied down to anything and man it flew! Coach saw me and told me to come be on the team, so I did. Anyway, we got a new fish today. I couldn't bring her in because she's adjusting to her tank right now. An albino catfish from the Afro-Asian family Clariidae. Her scientific name is *Clarias batrachus*. Write that down, I'm going to put in on the exam. Her everyday name is Zoe. I named her after the Hurricane. Write that down too!"

"Isn't *Clarias batrachus* the walking catfish?" Paul asked.

"Yes. We had to put a makeshift roof on the tank so she doesn't flop out and run away. Fish of this species have been walking around Florida for years. But not albinos. They cost extra, but I used my Herkomer P. Lugwench Grant to finance the catfish. I also bought two new kayaks for the lab portion of this course. Why don't we all go on little field trip to my car and have a look at them. Then we can stop into the lab and admire Zoe."

We all got up and went outside. The pine needles were swing-dancing in the trees above the building and the wind was already howling at us at about forty miles an hour. It grabbed Arlo's hair and tried to rip it out. Little twigs were flying here and there and some newspapers were swirling in a small whirlwind; they looked like fighting dogs. Some of the students took a look at the sky and left. The hurricane was supposed to hit that night, and since I was from Nebraska, I couldn't really go home. We all stood in front of the hurricane and in front of Arlo's piece-of-shit station-wagon.

The two kayaks strapped onto the roof-racks probably cost more than his car. They were camouflaged like commandos and as sleek as torpedoes. Rain suddenly came down on us and the kayaks held the water in tiny beads on their skins. Since Arlo was parked in the loading zone of the building (he tore up tickets), we only had to step back a few feet to keep dry.

"Yeah, the Herkomer Grant bought these too. They're custom made from Georgia for duck-hunting. I thought the camouflage would help so that fish wouldn't be scared away. These will be great in the Everglades. We went down there last year and I got in trouble because I had some students in the water with alligators. Some of the professors here and administrators have gotten upset about that. They felt I was wrong to put students in danger. Maybe I was wrong, but I wasn't scared of alligators, I was in the water too! Next time, if anyone has a problem with alligators, they can stay in the boat and be the alligator watcher. That way if the alligator starts to look aggressive, the other students can get warned. Damn bureaucracy!"

One of the students recommended moving the kayaks inside for the storm, but Arlo said he wanted them outside in case a flood came and he needed to get away. The weather report predicted a seven foot storm surge and our College was less than a hundred yards from the bay.

We left the kayaks and went into the lab to look at the catfish, Zoe. She had eyes that reminded me of the Great Red Spot, the huge storm that circulates on Mars. Zoe's white, dorsal spines were like a jumbled picket fence; they rose from short to tall, then descended again. She looked utterly distinguished, like a princess of Atlantis.

#### 4 Hurricane Catfish

---

"I'm not worried about it, but if the Hurricane knocks out the power, the tank oxygen levels are going to drop and fish will die. Not Zoe, I hope. If a fish can walk on asphalt, you'd think a little less oxygen wouldn't hurt her," Arlo said, talking to no one in particular.

In the remains of midnight, Hurricane Zoe struck shore. She took coconuts and smashed the windshields of trucks; telephone poles bent like Pisa; greenhouses collapsed on tomatoes and beautiful bees. Sirens were going off all over town as those who had been crazy enough to stay evacuated at last. Even a College boy from Nebraska got in his car and went North without any particular course; his college was a red bull's eye for the storm. The ceiling of the organic chemistry lab caved in and rainwater began to react with every chemical imaginable. Jars sputtered and exploded; gases formed that were noxious enough to kill cattle; a storage room for organometallics lit up like Armageddon. All titrations were of the tempest.

Nothing was safe from the wrath of Zoe. The college dormitories melted and liquefied computers flowed through the streets. The flag pole took the shape of a horseshoe. Zoe picked up a grove of palm trees somewhere on the coast and gave a terrible lesson in acupuncture to the biology complex, including the fish biology lab, whose walls were impaled at least ten times. The only section of the building that was spared was a tiny office on whose door a bronze name-plaque read Arlo Drummond, Ph.D. In this room, the only soul left on campus, oblivious to every danger, and entirely devoid of fear, was Dr. Drummond. He was busy poring over a fish catalog, trying to decide

## 5 Hurricane Catfish

---

what combination of fish he could afford with the remainder of the grant. If it had not been for a stray toilet-seat, which began banging on his office door, Drummond would not have looked up at all.

"What's that? Damn students want to talk to me about something, again, probably fish!"

Drummond got up and opened his office door to let in the toilet seat. As soon as the door was opened, the toilet seat flew across the room and tore a hole in the far wall. Why it had not simply torn a hole in the door too was beyond comprehension. Drummond peered into the hall and finally realized that something was happening. Skeletons from a thousand different organisms were rioting in the hall after having been freed from their cases in the zoology department.

"I hope the fish are doing fine," he said to himself as he returned to his desk. The fish were in the process of being smashed and scattered. Many tanks had turned to trash, and gasping gills lay everywhere. Some electric wires had even fallen into one tank and fried several Belizean eels. Zoe the catfish was busy surveying the scene with her blood-bead eyes; the lid on her tank had been fortuitously swiped away by a giant palm frond. She wasn't a stupid fish, and thought about all her options. Other fish were dying all over the room, and she knew that the power would soon cut off. In fact the blackness came over all the buildings just as she leapt from her tank, skidded across a padded stool, and landed on the threshold of the lab entrance.

"I know there's supposed to be a hurricane, but this is ridiculous. Where are the power line guys? They could do a poor

## 6 Hurricane Catfish

---

Ichthyologist a favor now and then." Drummond said as he got up and lit a fish-shaped candle that sat on his desk. He then grabbed the candle and started down the hall, which ran past the labs and to an exit.

Suddenly he stopped, bent down, and held out his flaming fish to look at something that was moving along the corridor, also towards the exit. He saw at once that it was Zoe, his recent albino acquisition to the collection.

"Where you goin?" he said point-blank to Zoe.

"I need freedom," the fish said.

"Look, I don't have time to chat. The sea's rising and unlike you I'll drown. I have a plan, though, to get you clear of here. Follow me. I'm not picking you up because one of your kind once spined me and my thumb was sore for a month," Drummond said as he passed Zoe and headed out the exit door.

While the albino catfish hobbled along behind him, Drummond pulled down one of the kayaks, put on a life-vest, helmet, and spray-skirt, all of which he kept in the back of his car.

Zoe made it out of the building and went over to see what he was doing.

"If you stay around here, you'll get squashed by debris," Drummond said to the fish, "you've got to get into deeper water. It's been a long time, fish, but I used to be a kicker on a football team. Climb on my shoe and I'll kick you towards the bay."

Zoe hesitated, then rocked on her pectoral fins like a seal and slid up onto Dr. Drummond's right shoe. He then took a few steps back,

## 7 Hurricane Catfish

---

strode forward in the rainy moonglow, and kicked the catfish straight into the hurricane. Zoe went into Zoe. Then Drummond realized that the calm, the lack of heavy wind, and the fact that moon and stars were visible meant that he had kicked in the calm, in the eye of the storm.

"Lucky fish. I can't kick too well into a hundred mile and hour wind. I guess all albinos are lucky. I wish I was an albino instead of a professor," he said to himself as he hoisted the kayak back onto the roof of his car, then got inside of it, careful not to roll off the side of the car and break his neck. He knew the sea like only a fish man can know her. When the storm surge came, he knew it would rise above his car.

When Hurricane Zoe hit Dr. Drummond, he was fortunate to have his helmet; a brick from a small Caribbean island bounced off his head. Still, he wasn't fazed. At worst, the hurricane would kill him; at best he would get a chance to test one of the kayaks in the field. As the bay rose and nudged him off of the roof of his car, he wondered what kind of fish he might see at sunrise.

"The students are going to love this," he said of the College campus as he paddled away through the ruins of modern education.