

**ALLIGATOR SUE
BY SHARON ARMS DOUCET**

**Louisiana Young Readers' Choice Award Nominee 2006
Grades 3-5**

Submitted by Martha Jordan, Children's Services Coordinator
Ouachita Parish Public Library, Monroe

Title: Alligator Sue
Author: Sharon Arms Doucet
Illustrator: Anne Wilsdorf
Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003
Pages: 40

Summary

This rollicking tall tale explores a theme of self-identity and, as the starred review in *Publisher's Weekly* notes, it is "a triumphant tale of finding one's way in the world." When hurricane winds swoop down on Suzanne Marie Sabine Chicot Thibodeaux (or Sue as everyone calls her) and carry her away into the swamp, she is adopted by Mama Coco, an alligator, who raises Sue right along with her little gator babies. Sue comes to love Mama Coco and all of her brothers and sisters. Memories of her real family fade, until one day after her brother Chomp teases her unmercifully about her puny bellow, she starts out on her own through the swamp. Mama Coco follows her and breaks the news that she is really a girl. Mama Coco offers some sage advice: "All you can do is be who you is." But Sue knows it is up to her to decide what to do with the rest of her life. She finds her family's old houseboat and learns to cook and to play on her daddy's accordion. But she misses her alligator family and wonders if she's really a girl or a gator. She sets out for the swamp and soon finds herself caught up in another hurricane. Making her way to Chomp's den, she is safe and sound when she remembers that Mama Coco is guarding a nest of new eggs. She and Chomp head for the nesting area, pack the eggs carefully in Spanish moss and place them into Sue's pirogue, taking off just as the hurricane washes away Mama Coco's nest. They hurry to the safety of Sue's houseboat and sit out the storm while listening to Sue's accordion music. When the babies are safely hatched soon afterwards, Sue is asked to be their godmother. Later, Chomp tows her houseboat to a spot halfway between his den and Mama Coco's den. There, Sue can keep a close eye on her godchildren as they grow up. The move also brings about a name change as Sue finally decides who she is – half gator and half girl – and from now on, she will be known as Alligator Sue.

Awards

Children's Literature Choice List 2004. Missouri State Teachers Association
Publisher's Weekly, starred review

Author's Biography

Sharon Arms Doucet was born January 15, 1951, in Champagne, Illinois. She is the daughter of a geologist and a teacher. She earned both bachelor's and master's degrees at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and also studied at the University of Nice in France. Prior to her writing career, she taught English as a Second Language and French in universities and schools in Louisiana. Doucet is married to Michael Doucet, lead singer of the Cajun band BeauSoleil and lives in Lafayette. She has a daughter from her first marriage, a son and a stepson. As a young girl, Doucet changed her name to Jo after the character in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and dreamed on some day being a writer herself. With five children's books and one adult book to her credit, it is safe to say that her dream has been realized.

Other Titles by Sharon Arms Doucet

Fiddle Fever.

Lapin Plays Possum: Trickster Tales from the Louisiana Bayou, illustrated by Scott Cook.

Le Hoogie Boogie Songbook: Louisiana French Music for Children.

Why Lapin's Ears Are Long and Other Tales from the Louisiana Bayou, illustrated by David Catrow.

Back Before Dark (adult novel).

Illustrator's Biography

Born in 1954 in Luanda, Angola, Anne Wilsdorf is a Swiss illustrator who has written and/or illustrated numerous children's books, many of which have been published in Europe. She regularly contributes stories to several children's magazines. She lives in Lausanne, Switzerland where she also teaches illustration at the French School of the Graphic Arts.

Other U.S. Titles Illustrated by Anne Wilsdorf

Jack and the Beanstalk by Beatrice Schenk De Regniers

The Old Man Who Loved Cheese by Garrison Keillor

Ruby Lu, Brave and True by Lenore Look

Sunny Boy! The Life and Times of a Tortoise by Candace Fleming

Related Titles

Feliciano Feydra LeRoux: A Cajun Tall Tale by Tynia Thomassie
Feliciano Meets d'Loup Garou: A Cajun Tall Tale by Tynia Thomassie
Mama Don't Allow by Thacher Hurd
Moon's Cloud Blanket by Rose Anne St. Romain
Why Alligator Hates Dog: A Cajun Folktale by J. J. Reneaux

Classroom Connections

- Art: Draw a bayou scene. Make a collage using grasses, Spanish moss, berries and other items found in the swamp, plus rice and any other interesting Louisiana/music/alligator items that can be found.
- Language Arts: Talk about regional differences in pronunciation and speech patterns, with special emphasis on Cajun, Louisiana and southern expressions. Learn some French words and phrases. Write an essay "Who Am I?"
- Literature: Read several tall tales and discuss what traits place them in this genre. Read some Louisiana folktales or original stories set in the swamps and bayous of Louisiana and note anything in them that is similar to Sue's story.
- Music: Listen to Cajun music. Learn about the accordion as a musical instrument. Have someone come to play for the class and show them how the instrument works. Learn how to do the two-step.
- Science: Learn about alligators, bayou ecosystems and hurricanes.
- Social Studies: Explore Cajun culture. Have a "fais do-do." Cook wild rice, gravy and pralines.

Web Sites

Animal Bytes: American Alligator

<http://www.seaworld.org/AnimalBytes/alligatorab.html>

Includes facts about this reptile, including taxonomic information, physical and biological features, and fun facts.

Cajun Gator

<http://www.geocities.com/BourbonStreet/Delta/4089/>

This is a nice site on Cajun culture that includes history, music, recipes, sites to see in Acadiana, and the Acadian flag.

Creature World

<http://www.pbs.org/kratts/world/na/alligator/>

Includes a picture and facts about the American alligator.

Tall Tales

<http://www.hasd.org/ges/talltale/talltale.htm>

This great site lists the characteristics of a tall tale and has information about how tall tales got started. There are several familiar tales to read on the site – Paul Bunyan, Johnny Appleseed and others. Children are invited to write their own tale and given an outline to help them get started.

World Kids: American Alligator

<http://worldkids.net/critters/reptiles/gator1.htm>

Includes biological information and habits of this reptile.

Encyclopedia of Cajun Culture: Fais Do-Do

<http://www.cajunculture.com/Other/faisdodo.htm>

This site describes various customs of the Cajun Culture, including the tradition of getting together to dance and enjoy music and friends.