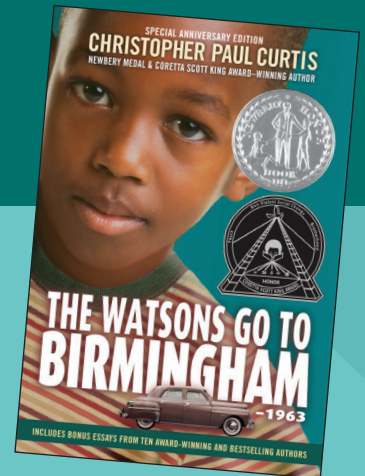


# READING BANNED & CHALLENGED BOOKS

## *THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM*—1963 BY CHRISTOPHER PAUL CURTIS

When the Watson family—ten-year-old Kenny, Momma, Dad, little sister Joetta, and brother Byron—sets out on a trip south to visit Grandma in Birmingham, Alabama, they don't realize that they're heading toward one of the darkest moments in America's history. The Watsons' journey reminds us that even in the hardest times, laughter and family can help us get through anything.



- What is the conflict in this novel? How does the tragic event in Birmingham contribute to the resolution of the conflict?
- The kids at school make fun of Kenny because he is smart. Explain how Kenny's teachers make things worse for him.
- Discuss the sibling relationships in the novel. Why does Byron bully Kenny? Explain why Mr. and Mrs. Watson think Grandma Sands can change Byron's behavior.
- Describe Rufus Fry. Why does Kenny call Rufus his "personal savior"? How do the kids on the school bus treat Rufus? Kenny joins the others in taunting Rufus. Why should he have understood Rufus's situation? Discuss Kenny's guilt for treating Rufus so badly. How does he attempt to make amends with Rufus? Kenny thinks that Rufus changed while the Watsons were in Birmingham. Debate whether it's Rufus or Kenny who's changed.
- What is the difference between racism and bigotry? Compare and contrast the racism and bigotry in Birmingham, Alabama, with that in Flint, Michigan. Explain what Mrs. Watson means when she says, "Things aren't perfect, but people are more honest about the way they feel." (pp. 5-6)
- What does Mrs. Watson do to prepare her children for the trip to Birmingham? Discuss the things that she cannot prepare them for. Explain why Mrs. Watson doesn't want to tell anyone in Flint what her family witnessed in Birmingham.



- What is PTSD? Debate whether Kenny suffers from a form of PTSD when the family returns from Birmingham. Kenny tells Byron, "I'm not scared. I'm just real, real ashamed of myself." (p. 200) Why is Kenny ashamed? How does Byron help Kenny come to terms with his shame?
- Many readers confuse topic and theme. Theme is what the novel is about. What is the central theme of this novel? The novel has appeared on a censored books list in Florida. Discuss how those who created the list are objecting to the topics in the novel, rather than theme.
- According to data collected by the American Library Association, the novel was challenged in Utah by a parent who felt "it's not right for children." What scenes in the novel do you think she is referencing? What argument would you make that these scenes are "right for children"?
- A parent in Wisconsin challenged the book because she didn't want her daughter to know that the civil rights movement ever existed. More recently, the novel has been placed on banned books list simply because the characters are black. The civil rights movement was a volatile time, and four little girls were killed when the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, was bombed by the Ku Klux Klan. Why is it important to know our history, even when it's harsh and violent? What positive things happened as a result of the civil rights movement? What argument would you make to those who want to erase history? How is banning a book because of the characters' ethnicity a form of racism? Explain how removing this book from school libraries violates students' civil rights.

**Guide written by Pat Scales, children's literature consultant**

