

SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY EDITION
CHRISTOPHER PAUL CURTIS
NEWBERY MEDAL & CORETTA SCOTT KING AWARD—WINNING AUTHOR



THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM

—1963



EDUCATORS' GUIDE WITH NEW ESSAYS, QUESTIONS & VISUAL CONTENT

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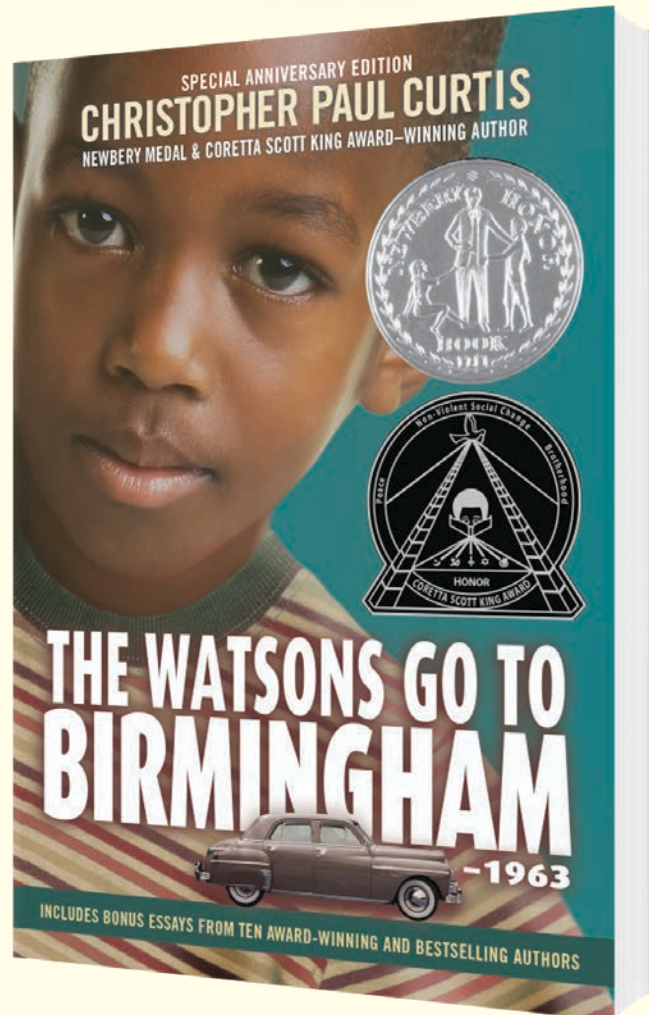
ABOUT THE BOOK

The Newbery and Coretta Scott King Honoree about a hilarious family on a road trip at one of the most important times in America's history, from the award-winning author of *Bud, Not Buddy*.

This anniversary edition features substantial new content, including an updated foreword and afterword from the author with commentary on present day events, tributes from influential authors and librarians, a map of the Watsons' journey, and images of the original manuscript.

Enter the hilarious world of ten-year-old Kenny and his family, the Weird Watsons of Flint, Michigan. There's Momma, Dad, little sister Joetta, and brother Byron, who's thirteen and an "official juvenile delinquent."

When Byron gets to be too much trouble, Watsons head South to Birmingham to visit Grandma, the one person who can shape him up.



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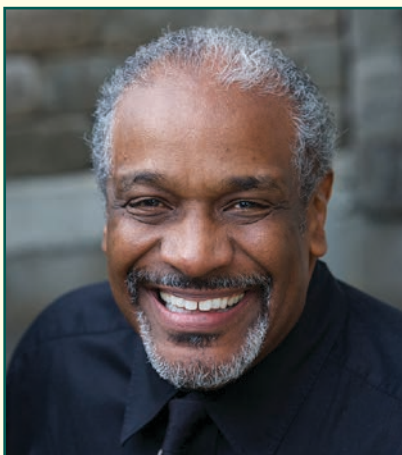


Photo © Daniel Harris (DSH photography)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher Paul Curtis won the Newbery Medal and the Coretta Scott King Award for his bestselling second novel, *Bud, Not Buddy*. His first novel, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, was also singled out for many awards, and has been a bestseller in hardcover and paperback. His most recent novels for Random House include *The Mighty Miss Malone*, *Mr. Chickee's Messy Mission*, *Mr. Chickee's Funny Money*, and *Bucking the Sarge*. Christopher Paul Curtis grew up in Flint, Michigan. After high school, he began working on the assembly line at the Fisher Body Plant No. 1 while attending the Flint branch of the University of Michigan.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

Pre-Reading Activity

Divide the class into small groups and ask them to check the index of several different American history textbooks for the following topics:

- Montgomery Bus Boycott
- Montgomery Sit-Ins
- Central High School (Little Rock, Arkansas) Integration
- Bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church (Birmingham, Alabama)
- Mississippi Summer Freedom Project
- Bloody Sunday
- March on Washington

How many of these topics are discussed in textbooks? Discuss how much information is given. Then engage the class in a discussion about why such topics are often omitted in American history classes. Why is an understanding of historical periods like the civil rights movement so important to our lives?

 Correlates to Common Core Standards Reading: Informational Text: Key Ideas & Details RI. 6.1; Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 5.1, 6.1.

Questions for Group Discussion

Conflict is a literary element that creates tension in a story. At what point in the novel does Curtis introduce the conflict? The three types of conflicts are “human against human,” “human against self,” and “human against nature.” Explain how Curtis explores “human against human” and “human against self.” What two events contribute to the resolution of the conflict?

The climax of a novel is the most exciting part, or the turning point in the plot. What is the climax of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*?

Cite evidence that Mrs. Watson misses her hometown of Birmingham, Alabama. Discuss what she means when she tells her children, “Things aren’t perfect, but people are more honest about the way they feel.” (pp. 5–6)

Ask students to compare and contrast the three Watson children. Describe Kenny and Byron’s relationship. How does the church bombing change it?

Discuss Kenny’s friendship with Rufus. Why does Kenny think that Rufus is his “personal savior”? Kenny understands what it’s like to be the target of bullies. Why does he join them in making fun of Rufus? How does Mrs. Watson sense that something is wrong between the boys? Ask students to discuss what Mrs. Watson might have said to Rufus when she calls on him. Kenny thinks that Rufus changed while the Watsons were away. Debate whether it’s Rufus or Kenny who changed.

Why does Mrs. Watson think that Grandma Sands is the person who can change Byron’s behavior? Describe Kenny’s reaction when he meets his grandmother for the first time. Why does Kenny think that Byron will win the battle with Grandma Sands? At what point does he realize that he is wrong?

Kenny worries that he won’t ever know how to be a grown-up. Mr. Watson assures his son that he’ll have lots of time to practice before he actually becomes a grown-up. Describe his steps toward becoming a man.

Kenny tells Byron, “I’m not scared, I’m just real, real ashamed of myself.” (p. 200) Why is he ashamed? How does Byron help Kenny come to terms with his shame?

The novel is told in first person from Kenny’s point of view. How does Curtis use dialogue to reveal what other characters are thinking? Cite specific passages from the novel to prove your point.

 Correlates to Common Core Standards Reading Literature: Key Ideas & Details RL. 5.1, 6.1, 5.2, 6.2, 5.3, 6.3; Craft & Structure RL. 5.4, 6.4, 5.5, 6.5, 5.6, 6.6.

Activities

Write a letter that Kenny might send to Grandma Sands after he returns to Flint. Have him express his reaction to the bombing and what he plans to do to continue to fight for civil rights. Have students read their letters aloud in class.

Correlates to Common Core Standards Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 5.1, 6.1, 5.3, 6.3.

When Kenny was in second grade, he was asked to read a poem by Langston Hughes to a fifth-grade class. Read aloud and discuss the meaning of “The Negro Mother” by Hughes. Why did Mr. Alums, the teacher, think that students should know this particular poet? Allow students to work as partners and instruct them to choose a poem by Langston Hughes to read. Have the teams read aloud the poem they selected and lead the class in a discussion about the message of the poem. Suggestions may include: “Daybreak in Alabama,” “Democracy,” “Dreams,” and “My People.”

Correlates to Common Core Standards Reading: Literature Range of Reading & Complexity of Text RL 5.10, 6.10.

Kenny uses the following simile to convey how bad he feels about hurting Rufus: “I felt like someone had pulled my teeth out with a pair of rusty pliers.” (p. 45) Have students write a simile that expresses how Kenny feels when he discovers that Joetta is safe.

Correlates to Common Core Standards Reading: Literature: Craft & Structure RL 5.4, 6.4; Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 5.3, 6.3.

Mr. Alums tells his fifth-grade class how important it is to be “familiar and comfortable with literature.” (p. 23) Have students make an annotated reading list about the civil rights movement that Kenny might use with his own children to explain this period of his youth. Include fiction and nonfiction.

Correlates to Common Core Standards Reading: Literature Range of Reading & Complexity of Text RL 5.10-6.10.

Guide written by Pat Scales, children’s literature consultant, Greenville, SC.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES FOR THE TRIBUTES

- Elizabeth Acevedo** tells us about her former high school English students reading, discussing, and researching *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. She connected with a social studies teacher in order to support her students’ reading. **Acevedo** was impressed by the topics her students inquired about, including “the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing . . . Alabama and the deep South, segregation and the Great Migration,” saying she used *The Watsons* to help fill in gaps in knowledge about the civil rights movement in America. What did you learn from *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*?
- Famed artist **Jacob Lawrence** painted a collection entitled *The Migration Series*, “an ambitious sixty-panel series portraying the Great Migration, the flight of over a million African Americans from the rural South to the industrial North following the outbreak of World War I.”¹ View this series, and make connections to the Watson family and their story. Which pieces in the collection speak to you the most, and why?
- Pauletta Brown Bracy**’s essay details the historical context of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. She lists, for example, the price of gas, the number one song on the radio, the average income, and the price of a new home in 1963 versus 2020. The year 2020 has seen a once in a century global pandemic—COVID-19—as well as a renewed reckoning to disrupt and dismantle systemic racism after the murders unarmed Black citizens. Just as Rosa Parks’s “nobly defiant stand against discrimination that led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott . . . had continued to gain momentum and garner wider public awareness,” (p. 220) mass protests and demands for accountability arose in cities across America and the world. What other grassroots movements are rising to confront societal ills? How did the bombing at the church galvanize the civil rights movement?

4. Christopher Paul Curtis gently and authentically shows how Kenny, the narrator of the story, processes guilt, grief, and trauma. Kenny crawls and curls up behind the family couch, which he thinks has magical powers. He says:

I was waiting to see if the magic powers were going to treat me like a dog or a cat, or if when Byron or Joey woke up one morning they'd find a crumpled-up yellow towel where I was supposed to be.

The only trouble was that the magic powers seemed to be taking a real long time to decide what was going to happen to me. Maybe I wasn't spending enough time back there. (p. 195)

Kenny retreats to that space after the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The space behind the couch envelops Kenny in safety and peace until he is ready to confront the realities of his world.

Christopher Paul Curtis deftly shows how important it is for young people to process their emotions in their own way, on their own time. **Chris Crutcher** explains, "The message Kenny Watson's older brother, By, gives him to help bring him back from what he witnessed the day of that godawful bombing is universal. It's a message of courage, empowerment, and acceptance of what is so, delivered in language that every teenager and pre-teenager can wrap their imaginations around. In the world of literature, that alone is priceless." (pp. 223–224)

How have you worked through difficult situations? What is your "space behind the couch"? What books or other works of art have you leaned on to get through hard times? How have you processed grief or guilt? What did that look like? Who was there to support you?

5. The poet **David Baker** writes in "Elegy and Eros: Configuring Grief": "I like to think of the sound of weeping, along with the sound of laughing, as among the first thoughtful articulations a human being ever made. More than growls or grunts, more than snarls or barks or howls, weeping and laughter indicate passionate responses to

experience, to a perception of circumstances not only in the present but in the past and—even more fascinating—the future."²

Christopher Paul Curtis shows the full-bodied, robust humanness of the Watson family and the people in their lives. His characters display a wide range of emotions—there is weeping and laughter and everything in between. **Janet Brown** writes, "Readers feel a wealth of emotions, from fear to joy, anger to immeasurable love." She continues, "The relatable characters in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* grow from their experiences—and so does the reader." (p. 217) Which moments in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* produced weeping and laughter? Why did these moments touch you? How have you grown as a result of reading this book?

6. The authors within this collection illuminate Christopher Paul Curtis's use of humor and joy. **Varian Johnson** explains, "I would argue that the defining moments of the novel aren't about anguish. Rather, they are about joy." Johnson continues: "When we first meet the Watsons, they're all sitting on the couch, huddled together, trying to keep warm during the brutal Michigan winter. Then Kenny's dad starts telling stories, and before you know it, all the Watsons are cracking up. They mock each other, but the family's teasing is born of love, not anger or oppression. And we see this love—this joy—throughout the novel as the "weird Watsons" make their way from Flint, Mitch-again, to Alabama and back—all of them packed into the Brown Bomber, Ultra-Glide and all!" (p. 232)

Likewise, **Janet Brown** writes, "Mr. Curtis's use of humor is one of the reasons this book is so beloved. Well-placed humor sometimes has an incredible power to diffuse destructive emotions and allow people to address serious issues with greater clarity. Mr. Curtis has included just enough humor to help us realize that life is filled with joy, and we must daily do all we can to find and sustain it." (p. 218)

Why does Curtis include these lighter moments in the story? Share anecdotes of moments of joy and laughter that occurred in your life when

² Baker, D. (2007). "Elegy and Eros: Configuring Grief" in *Radiant Lyre: Essays on Lyric Poetry*. Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press.

circumstances felt heavy. Why is it critical to seek these moments?

7. Jason Reynolds and Varian Johnson celebrate Christopher Paul Curtis's depiction of and connections to family, both the immediate and extended. The Watsons from Flint, Michigan, and those in Birmingham, Alabama, reaffirm their familial ties through experience and tradition. Describe any relatives who live in a different state or part of town from you. How are their experiences similar or different from yours? How do you remain connected to them?

8. Jerry Spinelli, Deborah Taylor, Vince Vawter, and Rita Williams-Garcia draw attention to Curtis's craft. **Spinelli** states, "If I had to name my favorite feature of that craftsmanship, I would say point of view." He continues, "Not only does Kenny Watson's point of view give us access to a ten-year-old sibling's wacky mix of kid elements, but it also brings home to us the terrible human cost of a tragedy no newspaper headline can fathom."

"Kenny Watson's black-kid experience stands in proxy for four young girls we can never know. With every passing year, our understanding of his unhinged reaction to the central event grows." (p. 237)

Taylor says, "It was hard to believe that this was a debut novel, given how well crafted it was from beginning to end. The snappy dialogue, astute descriptions, and interactions between the characters rang true on every page." (p. 238)

In his Newbery Medal acceptance speech, **Vince Vawter** described three principles that Christopher Paul Curtis embodies: "1. Don't write just for young people. Write a book for everyone that young people will be able to read and enjoy. 2. Write a book that has never been written. 3. Write a book that has a reason to exist." (p. 240)

Williams-Garcia explains that as she was writing her book *One Crazy Summer*, "Somewhere in my

subconscious, both [*The Watsons*] and [Curtis] were there to show me how the pieces move and how to tell a difficult story with humor and heart." (p. 243)

Find a passage within the text that you think is particularly well written. Why does it stand out to you? What aspects of the writer's craft engaged you, and how could it serve as a mentor text for your own writing?

9. Kate DiCamillo refers to **Elizabeth Alexander's** poem "Praise Song for the Day."³ This poem was written in honor of the inauguration of President Barack Obama in 2009. Read this poem. What images stand out? What links to *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* can you make?

10. Kate DiCamillo shares how she used *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* as a mentor text. She describes how she "typed up the first chapter to get a feel for how long a chapter in a children's novel would be, how long the entire manuscript would be." (p. 225) Reread the first chapter of *The Watsons*. How and why does this chapter work? What do you think **DiCamillo** discovered about high-quality children's books based on this chapter? Discuss the techniques employed.

11. Chrystal Carr Jeter writes about the time when Christopher Paul Curtis did an author visit in Anchorage, Alaska. She describes her students' connections to *The Watsons* and to Curtis. "Readers quickly identified with the funny scenes common to every child in Alaska: serious sibling rivalry, snow fights, lips and fingers stuck to poles, school issues—including bullying—and a universal need to belong and be loved. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* offered a compelling storyline about a regular family with two parents whose determination to raise their children with solid roots was underscored by a stern hand from Grandma. A strong matriarchal unit was also a familiar scenario in Alaska Native communities." (p. 228) **Jeter** describes "young Alaskan-born children [who] grew up remote from the Lower

Forty-Eight, just as the Watsons were remote from Birmingham, but both groups shared strong family ties and a stern matriarchal influence.” (p. 230)

Why does the universality of these experiences matter? Books enable young people to make connections to and empathize with those who—by virtue of location or culture—may be very different from them. Do you think this is important? Why?

12. **Rita Williams-Garcia and Jacqueline Woodson** share their opinions of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* and their familial connections to it. Williams humorously shares how Curtis reminds her of her “nemesis,” her brother Russell. (p. 242) She writes, “I grew up believing the role of the oldest brother was to do just that: frustrate and humiliate the younger sister.” (p. 242) Woodson tells readers how this book served as the “Family Read.” (p. 244) Do you have a relative or friend who is similar to one of the characters in the book? Explain how this person is like that character. Discuss how the theme of family is central to this book.

13. In his essay, **David Barclay Moore** considers how the protagonists of both his book *The Stars Beneath Our Feet* and those in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* go through the growing pains

of friendship: “The challenges of childhood friendships test my character Lolly much in the same way Kenny is tested when deciding if he should befriend the awkward new kid in town, Rufus Fry.” (p. 233) Why is it important for Christopher Paul Curtis to show the evolution of friendship between Kenny and Rufus? Why does Curtis show that Kenny feels bad and guilty about disappointing Rufus? Describe how friends—the chosen family—are also a central theme in this book. Describe a time when you let a friend down and what did you to make amends.

14. **Terry Fisher** describes how Christopher Paul Curtis used the library setting as an inspiration while writing *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. Where do you see that inspiration in the story? Think about where you would write to be inspired.
15. The authors of the essays honoring *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* read and enjoy literature for young people. Select three essays from the collection and imagine the authors having a conversation with one another. Write out or role-play the conversation among these authors. Which aspects of the essays will you focus on in your conversation?

MORE BOOKS FROM CHRISTOPHER PAUL CURTIS TO SHARE WITH YOUR STUDENTS AND READERS.

