

**EDUCATOR GUIDE**

**INCLUDES  
COMMON CORE  
STATE STANDARDS  
CORRELATIONS**

**NOW A HALLMARK CHANNEL ORIGINAL MOVIE**

# **THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM**

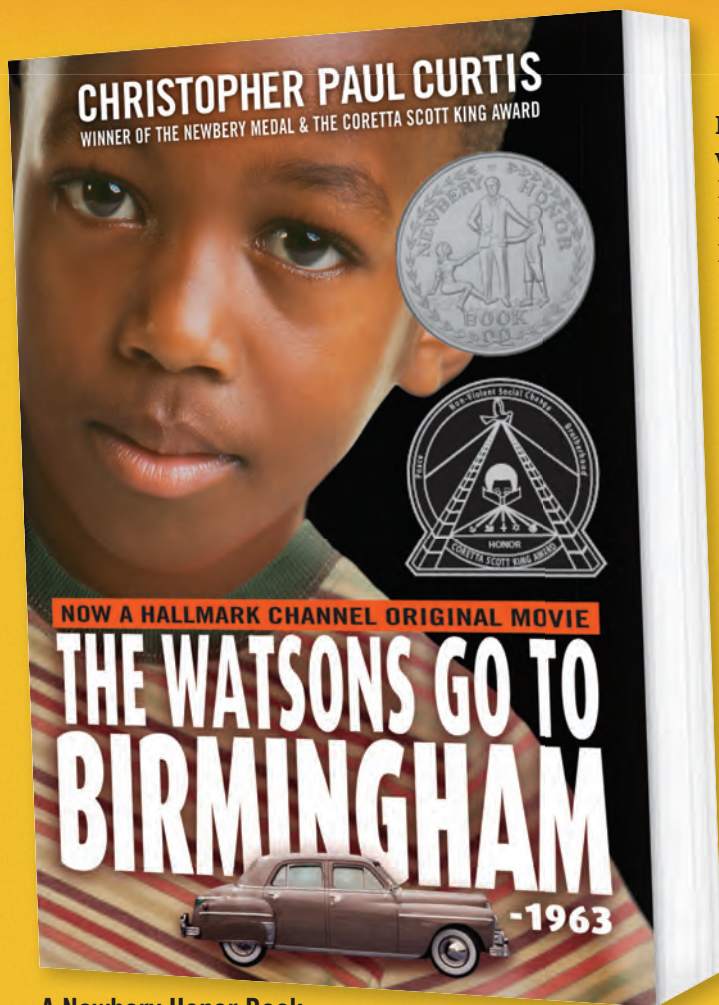


**—1963**



[RHTeachersLibrarians.com](http://RHTeachersLibrarians.com)


# ABOUT THE BOOK



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 Momma and Dad decide it's time for a visit to Grandma, Dad comes home with the amazing Ultra-Glide and the Watsons set out on a trip like no other. They're heading South. They're going to Birmingham, Alabama, toward one of the darkest moments in America's history.

A Newbery Honor Book

A Coretta Scott King Honor Book

Grades 3–7 • PB: 978-0-440-41412-4 • HC: 978-0-385-32175-4 • 

★ **"Startling, innovative, and effective."**

—*The Bulletin*, Starred



## IN THE CLASSROOM

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*The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* is a family story that is set at a time when race relations were tense and bloody, especially in the nation's South. The bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, was one of the tragic events of the civil rights movement that changed lives and led civil rights activists like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to march forward in his quest for an integrated society. The discussion and activities in this guide correlate to Common Core State Standards, and are layered in complexity to accommodate all types of readers. There are opportunities for literary analysis, research and writing, and a culminating activity that commemorates the 50th anniversary of the church bombing in Birmingham.


## PRE-READING ACTIVITY

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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 16th 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

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Ask students to define *racism*. Kenny struggles to understand how anyone could bomb a church and kill four little girls. Discuss the following comment from Byron: “I don’t think they’re sick at all, I think they just let hate eat them up and turn them into monsters.” (p. 200) How does Byron’s perception of the bombers apply to those responsible for violent acts in our current society?

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 “man against man,” “man against self,” and “man against nature.” Explain how Curtis explores “man against man” and “man 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 saver”? 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 baby steps and giant steps toward becoming a man.

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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

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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 the cause for civil rights. Have students read their letters aloud in class.

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

Divide the class into small groups and ask them to dramatize a scene where the Watsons recount their trip to Alabama to friends and neighbors. Allow each of the Watsons the opportunity to speak about the bombing.

🕒 **Correlates to Common Core Standards Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas 5.4, 6.4.**

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 for Kenny 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.**

## ACTIVITIES (continued)

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Christopher Paul Curtis says on the dedication page that his parents gave him “roots and wings.” Discuss how one must understand their roots before they can take flight. Ask students to write a short paper that reveals how civil rights activists like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave African Americans wings. Encourage peer editing for clarity and grammar.

- **Correlates to Common Core Standards Writing: Text Types and Purposes W. 5.1, 6.1, 5.2, 6.2; Production & Distribution of Writing W. 5.5, 6.5.**

The mission of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute is “to promote civil and human rights worldwide through education.” Lead a class discussion about the relationship between human rights and civil rights. Then have students take a virtual field trip of the Institute ([BCRI.org](http://BCRI.org)) and write a brief paper that explains how the exhibitions fulfill the mission statement.

- **Correlates to Common Core Standards Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 5.4, 6.4; History/Social Studies: Craft & Structure RH. 6-8.4; Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 5.2, 6.2.**

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.**

September 15, 2013, marks the 50th anniversary of the Birmingham church bombing. Record a class documentary that commemorates this day. Include the following:

- An interview with Kenny, Byron, and Joetta who return to Birmingham for this special day.
- Two songs from the civil rights movement like “We Shall Overcome” or “This Little Light of Mine” performed by students staged as the 16th Street Baptist Church Children’s Choir.
- Eulogies for the four little girls who were killed.
- Old photographs (found in books in the library or sites on the Internet) of the bombing as visual reference to the tragedy.
- A short clip of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

Post the documentary on the school website.

- **Correlates to Common Core Standards Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 5.3, 6.3; Production & Distribution of Writing W. 5.6, 6.6, 5.7, 6.7; Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 5.4, 6.4, 5.5, 6.5, 5.6, 6.6.**

## VOCABULARY

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Ask students to jot down unfamiliar words, slang terms, and phrases and try to define them taking clues from the context. Such words may include: *miraculous* (p. 23), *emulate* (p. 24), *trespassing* (p. 169), *crackers* (p. 146), *rednecks* (p. 146), “*panning on folks*” (p. 30), “*patoohing at the match*,” (p. 74), and “*jack you up*” (p. 137).

 Correlates to Common Core Standards Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 5.4, 6.4, 5.5, 6.5.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

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### [CivilRightsMuseum.org](http://CivilRightsMuseum.org)

This is the official website for the National Civil Rights Museum.

### [BCRI.org](http://BCRI.org)

This is the official website for the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute.

### [NPS.gov/mlkm](http://NPS.gov/mlkm)

This is the official website for the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial operated by the National Park Service.

### [NBCLearn.com/finishingthedream](http://NBCLearn.com/finishingthedream)

This website, produced by NBC Learn, is a series of videos that chronicles the civil rights movement.

Tune in to the  Random House channel on



for a



video featuring Christopher Paul Curtis—perfect for an author study!

The channel also includes interviews with other Newbery winners, book trailers, and more.

[SchoolTube.com/channel/randomhouse](http://SchoolTube.com/channel/randomhouse)





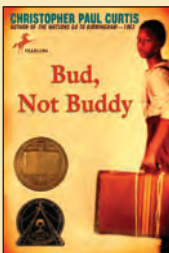
Photo © Lin Z. Jones, UM Photo Services

## 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, among them a Newbery Honor and a Coretta Scott King Honor, 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*.

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. He is now a full-time writer. He lives in Detroit with his family.

### Also by **CHRISTOPHER PAUL CURTIS**



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