

During a 13-year stint at the Fisher Body Plant #1 in Flint, Michigan, Christopher Paul Curtis began writing to get some relief from the factory noise. He was also pursuing a college degree at the same time. Eventually, he took an entire year off to write.

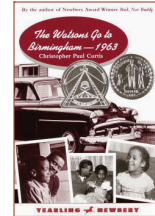
*The Watsons Go to Birmingham — 1963* was originally composed in longhand in the Windsor Public Library Children's Room. Curtis cites his family as great influences of his writing, so it makes sense that his son typed the first drafts of *Watsons* into their home computer.

Curtis lives in Windsor, Ontario, Canada with his wife and two children.

## 2009 Theme: Family Matters

Young Adult Selection:

### *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis



Kenny's family is known in Flint, Michigan, as the Weird Watsons, for lots of good reasons. But Kenny does well in school and tries to meet his hard-working parents' expectations.

After a string of misdeeds, Mr. and Mrs. Watson decide that tough guy, older brother Byron must be removed from the bad influences of the city and his gang. They feel that his grandmother and a different way of life in Birmingham might make him appreciate what he has. But an unexpected event makes Kenny see his family in a new light.

#### Discussion Questions:

- Some kids in Kenny's school make fun of him because he's smarter than most and because of his "lazy" eye. Then they pick on Rufus because of his clothes and his Southern accent. How does the teasing affect each of the two boys? How does it feel to be made fun of?
- Byron often seems like a mean kid, and sometimes he acts as though he hates Kenny. How do you know that he has deeper, nicer feelings than those? Why do you think Byron hides his feelings of love and tenderness?
- If you have brothers and sisters, do you ever fight? What do you fight about? Do you think there will ever be a time when you don't fight?
- Why did Byron vomit after hitting the bird?
- Even though the topic is very serious, there is a lot of humor in this book. Find the scene you think is funniest and read it aloud to a friend.
- Does Byron deserve to be teased while being punished?
- How do the events in Birmingham change members of the Watson family, especially Kenny? Have you read or heard about similar events that have taken place recently?
- How would you help Byron free his lips when they become stuck to the "Brown Bomber's" side-view mirror?
- Why would Mrs. Henry, Kenny's teacher, set Kenny up as an example for other kids to emulate? How does that affect any friendships Kenny might have with students in his school?
- What qualities do you look for in a best friend? Why was it hard for Kenny to make friends? What advice would you give him about being a good friend?

### Activity Ideas:

Explore the music that was popular in 1963, especially in the African-American community. Find recordings or lyrics for the songs mentioned in *Watsons*. What does the music tell you about the times?

Have kids gather photos and mementos from a family vacation. Supply the materials for a scrapbooking project.

Create a timeline from 1963 to today. Track important events and the progress our nation has made in civil rights.

Host a program on traveling, including topics like cool places to visit in Indiana and different types of transportation. Encourage participants to tell stories about the places they've been.

Plan a civil rights program and discuss events in 1963 Birmingham.

Host a 1960s party or fashion show.

### Related Materials:

#### Books about Families:

*Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis  
*Love Among the Walnuts* by Jean Ferris  
*Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney  
*The 39 Clues: The First Clue* by Rick Riordan  
*Running Out of Time* by Margaret Peterson Haddix  
*A Long Way from Chicago* by Richard Peck  
*Titanic Crossing* by Barbara Williams  
*Granddaddy's Gift* by Margaree King Mitchell  
*A Friendship for Today* by Pat McKissack  
*The Gold Cadillac* by Mildred Taylor  
*One Whole and Perfect Day* by Judith Clarke  
*Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues* by Harriet Gillem Robinet

#### Websites and resources for the Watsons:

- <http://www.nobodybutcurtis.com>
- <http://www.bookrags.com/studyguide-watsons-birmingham-1963/>
- <http://www.webenglishteacher.com/curtis.html>
- <http://www.randomhouse.com/features/christopherpaulcurtis/>

*For Books to Bridge the Region programs and activities relating to this book, visit [www.books2bridge.org](http://www.books2bridge.org)*

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