

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963 by Christopher Paul Curtis

## Book Information

Christopher Paul Curtis, The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963

Quiz Number: 11552  
Delacorte Press, 1995  
ISBN 0-440-41412-1; LCCN  
210 Pages  
Book Level: 5.0  
Interest Level: MG

The ordinary routines of the Watsons, an African-American family from Michigan, are drastically changed when they visit Alabama.

**Award:** ALA Best Book for Young Adults; ALA Notable/Best Books; BCCB Blue Ribbon Book; Coretta Scott King Award/Honors; Golden Kite Award/Honor Book; Jane Addams Book Award/Honor Books; Misc./Other; Newbery Honor; Publishers Weekly Best Book

**Topics:** Canadian Content, Canadian Content (All); Community Life, Prejudice; Family Life, Misc./Other; People, African American; Power Lessons AR, Grade 5; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Elementary School Library Collection; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks

## Main Characters

Byron Watson Kenny's thirteen-year-old-brother, who always gets in trouble and enjoys telling his brother and sister made-up stories to explain things

Grandma Sands Mrs. Watson's mother, who lives in Birmingham, Alabama, and has the reputation of being a strict woman

Joetta "Joey" Watson Kenny's little sister, who doesn't like to see others get in trouble

Kenny Watson a ten-year-old-black boy who is self-conscious about his lazy eye and generally does as he is told

Mr. Watson Kenny's father, who enjoys telling jokes and entertaining his family

Mrs. Watson Kenny's mother, who grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, and has had a hard time adjusting to the cold Northern winters

## Vocabulary

**juvenile delinquent** a young person, generally under the age of 18, who violates the law

**peon** a person forced to work off his debt or work as a servant

## Synopsis

This is a funny story about life in the Watson family as told by ten-year-old Kenny Watson. Kenny is the middle child of a black family living in Flint, Michigan, during the turbulent civil rights movement of the 1960s. His older brother, Byron, is considered an "official juvenile delinquent" because he is constantly getting himself in trouble. Among the things nasty Byron does are bullying students at school, teasing Kenny and Joey, setting fires, and disobeying his parents. Once in a while, Byron steps out of character and stands up for his siblings or feels sorry for one of his poor victims, but generally, Byron just gets in trouble. When Byron has his hair cut into a "conk" against his parents' wishes, the Watsons decide they must take him to spend the summer in Birmingham with his strict Grandma Sands.

Momma and Dad spend weeks preparing for the car ride to Birmingham. Momma plans the whole trip right down to who will eat peanut butter sandwiches each day along the way. Dad works to have the car ready for the long trip and even has a record player installed in the car so he won't have to listen to the hillbilly radio stations along the way. Once they set out on the trip, Dad foils most of Momma's plans by driving straight through to Alabama.

Once they arrive in Birmingham, Kenny decides that Grandma Sands and Byron will have a major "battle"

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963 by Christopher Paul Curtis

before the end of the summer. It quickly becomes apparent that Grandma Sands will be the victor because Byron follows her every order from the moment they arrive. Byron won't even disobey Grandma Sands and explore the whirlpool. When Kenny does decide to test the waters of the whirlpool, he finds himself being pulled under and is convinced he is drowning. Byron is nearby and saves him.

A few days later, a black church in Grandma Sands's neighborhood is bombed during a children's Bible study. Kenny goes to the church to find Joey and thinks she has been killed and taken by the Wool Pooh (his interpretation of a monster that lurks in the whirlpool). The night after the bombing, the family packs up and returns to Flint. Kenny has a difficult time dealing with the near death of his sister and his failure to be the person who saves her. Byron finally takes Kenny aside and tells him that no magic will make him feel better and that the whole incident is hard for everyone to understand. He convinces Kenny to get on with his life.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

Whenever Byron was in trouble and was set to be punished, Joey would cry and/or do something to help him improve his situation. Do you have a sibling who defends you or whom you defend even though he or she may deserve punishment? What is one thing you've done to protect a sibling from punishment?

*Answers will vary based on each child's experiences.*

### Literary Analysis

Though this story is fictional, the church bombing was based on a true event that happened in Birmingham in 1963. The incident was one example of the atrocities suffered by black people during the fight for civil rights. Do you know of any other events that happened around this time as a consequence of the civil rights movement?

*Black citizens were killed, had their homes burned, were beaten, and generally harassed by "unknown" white citizens. Black children were sent to separate schools and had to use separate facilities in public places.*

### Inferential Comprehension

The setting for the majority of this story is Flint, Michigan. Momma is from the city of Birmingham, Alabama. Momma and Dad have a discussion about living in Flint versus living in Birmingham. What are the differences between the cities?

*Flint is quieter and colder. Birmingham is warmer and more tumultuous because it is at the center of the civil rights movement. Flint is generally not segregated by race or skin color, whereas much of Birmingham is.*

### Constructing Meaning

After the incident in Birmingham, the Watsons apparently pack up quickly and go back to Flint. There is no discussion about their reason for taking Byron back with them, or of a concern for Grandma Sands. Why did the author choose to jump two weeks ahead in the story at this point?

*It shocks the reader to realize Byron is home, clarifying the seriousness of the matter. Also, Byron's attitude seems changed by the incident, as he is very concerned about Kenny's need to hide behind the couch. This is the point in the story where the tone becomes less humorous and more emotional.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Literary Features** The author

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963 by Christopher Paul Curtis

---

made wonderful use of humor to relate events that happened in Kenny's life. Reread some of the funniest scenes in the story such as Byron getting his lips stuck to the mirror, Byron telling Joey about the frozen people, or Dad imitating Moses Henderson. Have students write in a similar manner about a funny event that happened in their own families.

times?

**Understanding Characterization** Throughout the story, Kenny paints a clear picture of the personalities of and the relationships between the members of his family. Have students list the characteristics of each member, and then compare and contrast the family members. Discuss how Kenny and Byron's relationship changes over the course of the story, especially after the church bombing. Have students consider their own relationships with siblings and/or parents and compare them to those of the Watson family.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Life in the United States has changed a great deal from the 1960s, particularly for African Americans. The 1960s were marked by civil rights protests and attacks on blacks by those who opposed equal rights for black people. During this time, many people were hurt and/or killed in the name of equality. The church bombing in Birmingham, in which four young girls were killed, was a real event that happened in 1963. Research and discuss other events that happened around the country during the 1960s. Discuss the possibility that police often knew who committed crimes against black people and why they did not always punish them. Compare this era with Hitler's atrocities against the Jews.

**Comparing and Contrasting** When Kenny's father bought the Glider for the car, he justified it by saying he was concerned he would become used to the country music on the Southern radio stations if he did not bring his own music. His father obviously did not appreciate or like country music. Research the kinds of music popular in the 1960s. Find examples of different types of 1960s music and play them for the class. What does the music reveal about the listeners and the