



# The Watsons Go to Birmingham- 1963

by Christopher Paul Curtis

## Teacher's Guide

Written By John Chua

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## Synopsis

### Chapter 1

Ten-year-old Kenny Watson tells the story of his "weird" family from his point of view. They live in Flint, Michigan, where in the winter, the temperature drops to twenty degrees below zero. Kenny has a thirteen-year-old brother, Byron, and a younger sister, Joey. His father is Daniel and his mother is Wilona. In the winter, the family huddles together to stay warm and Kenny's father tells funny stories. Dad tells about Hambone Henderson, Mother's childhood friend in Birmingham who warned her about coming to the frigid north. Hambone warned Wilona about Flint and tells her about a film on Flint, *Nanook of the North*. In fact, *Nanook of the North* is actually a famous documentary about the Inuits of Canada and not about Michigan.

Kenny's brother Byron likes to bully other kids in school, including Kenny. One time however, Byron gets himself into trouble. He kisses the outside mirror of the family car and his lips are instantly frozen to the mirror. His parents come to the rescue. But throwing hot water on the mirror does not help. Despite Byron's pleading and crying to not hurt him, his mother finally grabs and jerks him away from the mirror, tearing his lips in the process.

### Chapter 2

Kenny is a smart kid in school. Kenny recalls when he was in second grade, a fifth grade teacher named Mr. Alums took Kenny and had him read Langston Hughes' poetry to the fifth graders. Mr. Alums congratulated Kenny for his reading ability. Since Byron was in that class, Kenny thought that he would beat him up for

embarrassing him. But nothing like that happened. Instead, Byron was proud of him.

This year, Kenny is in fourth grade. Larry Dunn is a big bully in fourth grade but Byron is still the biggest bully at Clark Elementary School.

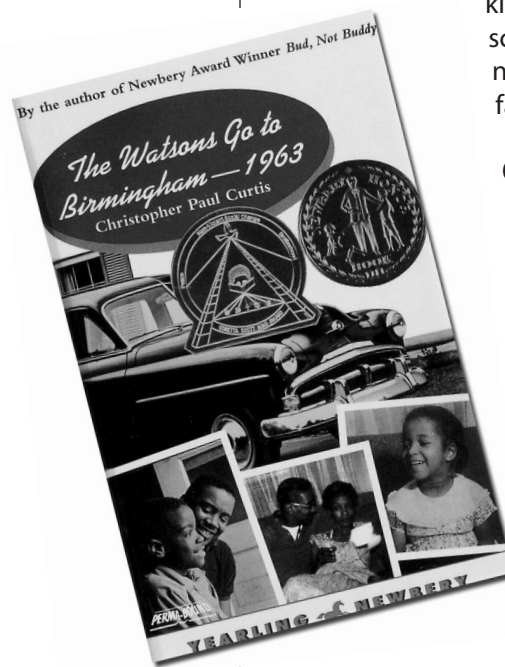
Because Kenny has one lazy-eye, the kids at school call him "Cockeye Kenny." And because he is rather smart, they also sometimes tease him by calling him "professor" or "Poindexter." One day, two new kids from the South show up at school, and Kenny instantly recognizes that he will no longer be the favorite target of the bullies.

### Chapter 3

Rufus is the new boy at school, along with his younger brother Cody. Kenny is surprised when he sees Mrs. Cordell introduce Rufus to Kenny's fourth grade class. He doesn't want people to associate him with Rufus and at first, he tries his best to stay away from him. However, to his surprise, people do not tease them both together. Instead, they target Rufus for their incessant teasing. Kenny and Rufus quickly become friends but one day, Kenny laughs along with the rest of the kids who are teasing Rufus and Rufus is immediately upset. It takes Kenny's mother to finally patch things up and have Kenny apologize to Rufus.

### Chapter 4

In the cold Michigan winters, Kenny's mother likes to bundle up all the kids with layers of clothes. Often they are dressed much too warmly for the weather. One day, Larry Dunn steals Kenny's gloves and later decides to hurt Kenny and Rufus by pushing them into the snow. Kenny reports this to Byron who comes to his rescue. Byron tortures Larry by tossing him into a chain fence over and over again while other kids scream and laugh.



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## Chapter 5

Byron likes to play with matches and one day he burns tissue paper in the bathroom while trying to re-enact a movie scene. Kenny's mother, Wilona, catches him and decides to punish him by burning his fingers.

Joey is afraid for Byron. When Wilona pins Byron down on the floor, she blows out every match that Wilona brings to his fingers. In the end, Wilona gives up trying to punish Byron.

## Chapter 6

One day Wilona asks Kenny and Byron to buy things at the local grocery store managed by Mr. Mitchell. She tells them that they should just sign for the groceries as their father has made an arrangement with Mr. Mitchell.

Byron immediately thinks that the family is on welfare. Thus, he is embarrassed to confront Mr. Mitchell. Mr. Mitchell sets things straight by explaining that this is not welfare. Kenny's father has simply arranged to settle the bill once a week instead of each time the Watsons go to the shop.

## Chapter 7

Byron tries to straighten his hair using chemicals. Daniel decides to shave all his son's hair.

## Chapter 8

Wilona's mother, Grandma Sands, invites them to visit her in Birmingham, Alabama. Byron learns that if he does not behave himself, his parents will leave him with Grandma Sands the entire next school year.

## Chapter 9

Wilona packs food for the drive to Birmingham because she knows that many restaurants in the South do not serve African Americans. A neighbor gives Joey a parting gift, a white angel doll that she says resembles her. Joey politely thanks her but is not happy because she clearly does not resemble a white angel with blue eyes.

## Chapter 10

Daniel Watson decides to drive non-stop to Alabama. Driving through Tennessee at night, the dark mountains scare Kenny and his siblings. However, they notice that the stars shine brighter in the countryside.

## Chapter 11

The Watsons finally get to Alabama after driving for eighteen hours straight. Kenny and his siblings are anxious to meet Grandma Sands. Kenny's grandmother is a frail looking gentlewoman.

Kenny is immediately afraid that Byron would overpower her in any confrontation. He is afraid that his mother will change her mind about leaving Byron with Grandma Sands.

## Chapter 12

The Watsons are introduced to Mr. Robert, a "special friend" to Grandma Sands. Wilona is very curious about him as her father died twenty years ago. Grandma Sands scolds her daughter for being a busybody. Kenny is struck by how Grandma Sands talks to her daughter and how his mother reacts.

## Chapter 13

Grandma Sands warns the children not to go swimming at Mr. Collier's landing at the local lake. A local boy had drowned there recently because of a whirlpool. Kenny decides to ignore the warning even after Byron makes up a story and warns him about the Wool Pooh, an evil cousin of Winnie-the-Pooh, who pulls unsuspecting people underwater and drowns them. Kenny goes alone into the water and finds a turtle.

Suddenly, the water is above his head. Struggling to keep his head above water, he feels something pulling at his leg. Just as he thinks he is about to drown, Byron pulls him out of the water.

## Chapter 14

Joey goes to Sunday school while Kenny lies around in the garden dozing off. A loud noise like a thunder shakes him. People run out of their houses to see what is wrong. Wilona screams and Byron tells Kenny that someone has just bombed the church Joey is at.

The church is in ruins. Bodies and debris are everywhere. Kenny sees a wounded man and thinks he is the Wool Pooh. Kenny retreats back to Grandma's house and finds Joey. Joey explains that the church was so hot she decided to go out on the porch. She saw someone who looked like Kenny and followed him home.

## Chapter 15

Kenny is traumatized by this turn of events. After the Watsons return to Flint, Kenny often hides behind the living room couch. He admits to Byron that he is ashamed for having not fought the Wool Pooh and protected Joey at the church. Byron assures him that there is no such thing as the Wool Pooh.

In fact, Byron explains, it was because Kenny looks like someone else that Joey was saved. Byron makes Kenny feel much better. It is time for him to go play with Rufus again.

## Epilogue

The author explains that at the time the Watsons made a trip to the South in 1963, the country was caught up in a struggle for civil rights. During this period many African Americans were denied basic freedoms and many were killed. Four girls died in the bombing of a church in Birmingham on September 15, 1963. The author tells the reader that the true American hero will stand up and say: "as long as one person is being treated unfairly, we all are."

## Timeline of Key Events in 1963

- Jan. 1** United States has over 12,000 military advisors in Vietnam.
- Jan. 17** President Kennedy proposes a federal budget of \$98.8 billion, including a deficit of \$11.9 billion.
- Jan. 28** South Carolina is the last state to begin desegregating its schools.
- Feb. 21** A bill to create Medicare is sent to Congress.
- March 8** The U.S. Supreme Court rules that defendants in criminal trials are entitled to free legal counsel.
- April 10** The nuclear submarine *USS Thresher* sinks during a test dive; all 129 aboard die.
- April 12** Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. is arrested during a protest in Birmingham, Alabama.
- May 7** The communications satellite *Telstar* is launched into orbit.
- May 15** Gordon Cooper is the fourth American to orbit the earth.
- June 11** The University of Alabama is desegregated after federal troops confront Gov. George Wallace, who steps aside and allows two blacks to enroll.
- June 12** The American Heart Association begins campaigning against cigarette smoking. Civil rights leader Medgar Evers is killed by a sniper.
- June 23** President Kennedy tells a crowd of over one million in West Berlin, "Ich bin ein Berliner."
- July 8** U.S. bans all financial transactions with Cuba.
- Aug. 28** The Freedom March brings 200,000 people to Washington, D.C., Rev. King delivers his "I Have A Dream" speech.
- Aug. 30** The hotline between Washington, D.C, and Moscow begins operating.
- Sept. 15** A bomb kills four girls at the Sixteenth Avenue Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.
- Oct. 6** The Los Angeles Dodgers win the World Series.

- Nov. 1** South Vietnamese military leaders assassinate President Diem and seize power.
- Nov. 7** United States recognizes new South Vietnamese government.
- Nov. 22** President Kennedy is assassinated. Police arrest Lee Harvey Oswald after he is seen running away from the building where the shots were fired.  
Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson is sworn in as president while flying back to Washington.
- Nov. 24** Jack Ruby kills Lee Harvey Oswald.
- Nov. 29** The Warren Commission is formed to investigate President Kennedy's assassination.
- Dec. 4** Roman Catholics in the United States are told they can substitute English for Latin during mass.

## Author Sketch

Christopher Paul Curtis was born in 1954 to Herman Curtis, an auto worker, and his wife Leslie. Like the Watsons in the novel, Christopher Curtis grew up in Flint, Michigan. After high school, Curtis spent thirteen years working in an auto plant. He also worked as an aide to a state politician and for a data processing company. For many years he took part-time courses at the University of Michigan in Flint and eventually graduated in 1996. It was while as a college student that he began his novel, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963*.



His first draft of the novel won the University of Michigan's Avery and Jules Hopwood prize. Writing in longhand at a local library, he gave his manuscript to his son to type on the computer. Curtis used memories of his own childhood as well as historical facts, notably the bombing of the Sixteenth Avenue Baptist church on September 15, 1963, in Birmingham, Alabama. Curiously, Curtis did not begin the novel as a story for young readers. However, its approach to handling the telling of a difficult time in American history makes the novel particularly suitable for young readers.

The success of his first published novel allowed him to pursue a full-time career as a writer. Curtis lives in Windsor, Ontario, Canada, across the border from Detroit. He has two children and is married to Kaysandra Curtis, a nurse.

## Critic's Corner

*The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963*, Christopher Paul Curtis' debut novel, has been widely praised by critics. Awarded Best Books by *Publishers Weekly* and *The New York Times* in 1996, it was also the winner of the Coretta Scott King and Newbery Honors. In addition, the American Library Association gave it a Best Book for Young Adults Award as well as a Notable Book Award in 1996.

*Horn Book* called Curtis' handling of the story "superb" and *The New York Times Review* describes it as a "marvelous debut, a fine novel...both comic and deeply moving." In a review in *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, Betsy Hearne calls the novel "startling, innovative, and effective." All in all, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* has received exceptionally positive reviews.

## Other Books by Christopher Paul Curtis

*Bucking the Sarge* (2004)  
*Mr. Chickee's Funny Money* (2005)  
*Bud, Not Buddy* (1999)

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Frazier, Kermit. "Alabama Bound" *New York Times Book Review*. Nov. 12, 1995.  
Review, *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, January 1996.  
Review. *Horn Book*, March-April, 1996.  
Review, *Booklist*, August 1995.  
Review, *Publishers Weekly*, Oct. 16, 1995.  
Review, *School Library Journal*, October 1995.

## Related Reading

Walter Dean Myer's *Motown* and *Didi: A Love Story, Now Is Your Time!* *The African American Struggle For Freedom*; and *Slam!*  
Angela Johnson's *Toning the Sweep*  
Gary Paulson's *Nightjohn*  
Mildred D. Taylor's *Road to Memphis* and *The Friendship*  
Jacqueline Woodson's *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*

## General Objectives

1. To examine the migration of African Americans to the North following the Civil War
2. To discuss growing up in America as a theme
3. To compare individual versus institutional racism
4. To examine Flint and Birmingham, as examples of the contrast between the North and the South
5. To discuss economical and psychological isolation from mainstream America
6. To discuss societal expectations of children
7. To examine the nature of conflicts between siblings
8. To define heroism
9. To discuss the importance of family unity

## Specific Objectives

1. To discuss how Kenny comes to terms with himself
2. To evaluate Byron's transformation from delinquent to a responsible brother
3. To analyze how children develop psychologically
4. To understand why Byron's parents feel the need to leave him with Grandma Sands
5. To discuss how children taunt or bully others
6. To understand how difficult it is for the Watsons to travel from Michigan to Alabama in 1963
7. To note how Daniel uses humor to get his point across
8. To examine Joey's need for role models
9. To discuss how Byron and Kenny feel about welfare and their mother's reaction

## Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Curtis' novel, consider the following terms and applications:

**First Person Narrative:** *The Watsons Go to Birmingham -1963* is told from the point of view of the narrator, ten-year-old Kenny Watson. First person narratives are often powerful because the reader can feel the emotions of the story teller, and experience his ups and downs. We can better understand Kenny's problems and sympathize with him because we know some of his deepest thoughts through a very personal and revealing narration.



**Historic Milieu:** is the setting of fictional events in a real period of history. Although the novel is a fictional account of a period in the life of Kenny Watson, the setting is based on historical facts.

**Theme:** is the subject of a discourse or text. There are several themes in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963*, the central of which is one about growing up and maturation. Curtis presents growing up as a fun, scary, but important process in life. Byron learns that becoming an adult goes beyond changing one's looks such as growing facial hair or straightening hair to follow the latest style. Growing up requires learning about responsibility, and in particular, taking care of his siblings and keeping them out of harm's way. The lighthearted first half of the novel gives way to a serious second half and with this, Byron's acknowledgement of the harsh realities of growing up in a turbulent and racially divisive America.

Parallel to Byron's development is the change in Kenny. Through Byron, Kenny learns about turning from looking inward to looking outward and discarding the world of make-believe. Byron's maturation thus helps Kenny come out of his own shell.

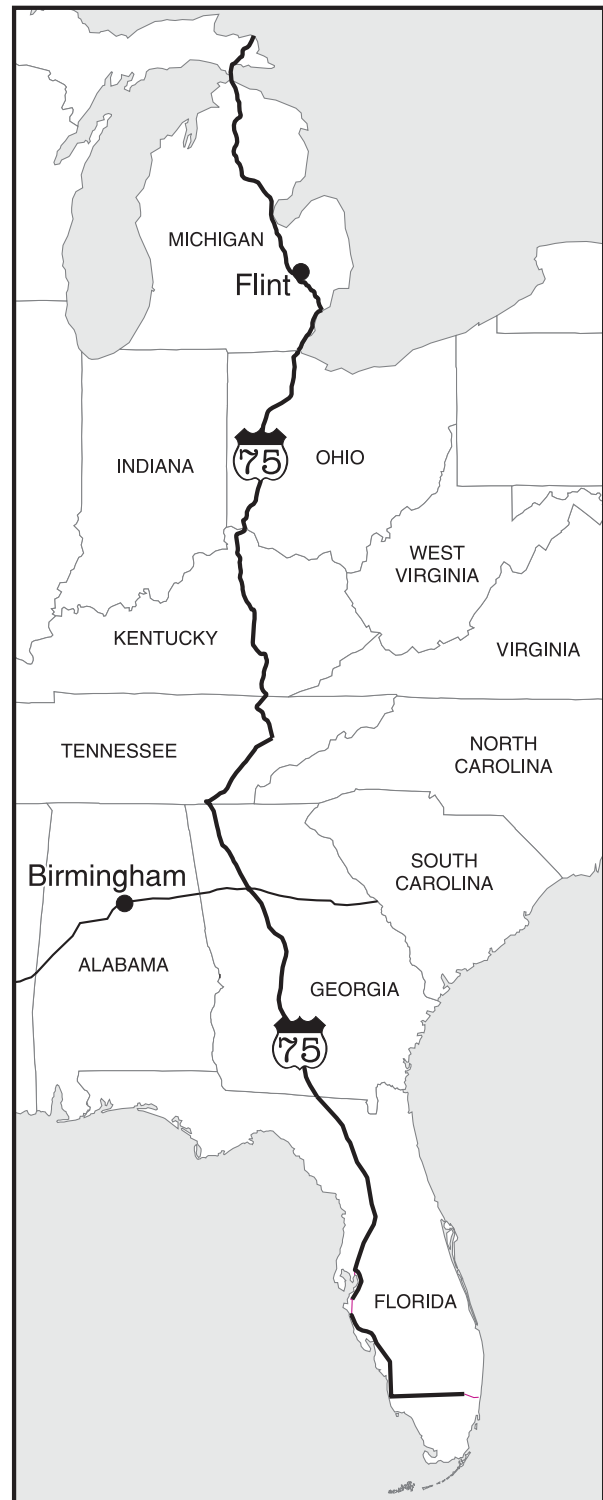
## The Importance of Setting

After the end of the Civil War, many parts of the South enacted Jim Crow laws to deny African Americans their rights to vote, fair housing, equal education and employment. Rosa Parks helped spark the civil rights movement against segregation; a seamstress from Alabama, she refused to give up her bus seat to a white passenger on a bus, leading to the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-56. This led to a wave of boycotts of stores and bus companies throughout many parts of the South. African-American students enrolled in previously segregated schools and universities in the South.

When the federal government stepped in to protect African Americans, many white students protested. Because many of the civil rights movement's leaders were associated with African-American churches, some Southern whites saw these churches as troublemakers. On September 15, 1963, racially-motivated terrorists bombed a black church in Birmingham, killing four young girls and maiming other church members. This bombing is a pivotal event in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963*.

In 1957, ministers and others joined together to form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and

elected Martin Luther King, Jr. as president. The civil rights era essentially began with the Montgomery Bus boycott, and has been credited with launching a 10 year nationwide struggle for freedom and justice.



## Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963* include these aspects:

### Themes

- growing up
- identity
- racism
- parent-child relationships
- acceptance
- guilt and repentance
- responsibility
- facing reality

### Motifs

- friendship
- being away from parental control
- coping with peer pressure
- the humor of everyday life
- facing adversity
- understanding the point of view of others
- adapting to new environments and circumstances

## Meaning Study

1. He was king because he was a lot older than anyone else. (Chap. 2, p. 20)  
*(Larry Dunn is the king of Clark Elementary from kindergarten to fourth grade. He is considered king because he is older and stronger than most of the other children, having failed a few grades. He is also one of the biggest bullies at Clark. Larry likes to bully Kenny. But Kenny's brother is Byron, the biggest bully at Clark. Byron is in sixth grade but has also failed a grade or two. One day after Larry had stolen Kenny's gloves and pushed him around in the snow, Byron catches up with Larry and gives Larry a big beating by repeatedly throwing him into a fence.)*
2. I'd wanted my personal savior to be as far away from me as he could get. (Chap. 3, p. 32)  
*(Because Kenny is smart and has a lazy-eye, he is the target of bullies at Clark Elementary. He is at first glad that Rufus shows up because he instantly recognizes that Rufus will be the new target of the relentless teasing by others. Thus, Rufus is his personal savior. But when Rufus becomes friendly with him, Kenny is immediately worried because he does not want the two of them to be teased together; therefore Kenny wants to get away from Rufus. In the beginning, Kenny tries his best to avoid him but Rufus is unavoidable. Kenny and Rufus become friends. But to his surprise, Kenny does not get teased more than usual just because he associates with Rufus.)*

3. I looked at the squirrel, it didn't look fat or dumb to me. (Chap. 3, p. 34)  
*(Kenny does not know what Rufus is talking about when he excitedly points to the squirrels in Flint, Michigan. Rufus considers the squirrels in Michigan dumb because they seem unafraid of humans. Such squirrels in the South, according to Rufus, would have been shot and eaten.)*

4. "That's why me and Joey were the warmest kids at Clark Elementary School." (Chap. 4, p. 47)  
*(Kenny's mother is from Alabama and although she has spent fifteen years in Michigan, she can never get used to the weather. As a result, she dresses her children much too warmly with layers upon layers of clothes.*

*Joey becomes hidden in a bundle of clothes and she complains about being too hot and sweaty. In fact, Wilona gives her a towel to carry so that Kenny can help wipe her dry after taking off her layers of clothes when they get to school. Kenny, however, is upset that other children at school laugh at him for dressing so strangely. He tells his mother that the layers of clothes are making him the laughing "sock" at school, but Wilona is unconvinced by his pleas.)*

5. "Grandma Sands is going to keep Byron for the summer and if things don't work out he'll stay there for the next school year." (Chap. 8, p. 118)  
*(What Wilona means when she says "if things don't work out" is that, if, after a suitable trial period in Alabama, Byron is still not behaving himself, the Watsons will leave him in Alabama for the next school year.*

*Wilona then recites a list of adventures Byron participated in. Wilona and Daniel think that leaving him in Alabama away from the bad influences of his friends in Flint will improve Byron's behavior and academic record.)*

6. "Maybe, but I know that angel's name isn't Joetta Watson." (Chap. 9, p. 129)  
*(Mrs. Davidson, a neighbor, gives Joey an angel doll as a parting gift before the Watsons leave for Alabama. She gives this doll because Joey is her "favorite girl." When Mrs. Davidson tells Joey that she named the doll after her because she looks like it, Joey is not entirely happy. The doll is a white angel with blue eyes and Joey is unhappy because she doesn't want to be compared to a white angel. However, she does not reveal her true feelings to Mrs. Davidson. Instead she thanks her politely and excuses herself.)*

7. "Mr. Johnson says that there are some clean, safe rest stops there so we can spend the night in the car." (Chap. 9, p. 131)

*(Before the civil rights movement and certainly before the Fair Housing Act of 1968, racism in the South was institutionalized. Many restaurants, hotels, and motels in the South did not serve African Americans.*

*Consequently, a black family such as the Watsons wishing to drive from Michigan to Alabama faced many obstacles. They had to pack all the food in the car in the event they could not find a restaurant that would serve them. They had to be prepared to sleep in their car if they could not find a motel that would house African Americans. In the end, however, Daniel Watson decides to drive non-stop to Alabama and did not spend the night at a rest stop.)*

8. "A guy just came by and said someone dropped a bomb on Joey's church." (Chap. 14, p. 183)  
*(During the civil rights era, many of the leaders of the movement were associated with the churches in the South. On September 15, 1963, unknown terrorists bombed an African-American church in Birmingham, killing four young girls and injuring many others. Spike Lee's 1997 documentary Four Little Girls investigates the circumstances surrounding this bombing.*

*While the case of the bombing remains unsolved, the movie helped spark renewed interest in the 1963 racist attack and the FBI re-opened the case for investigation. Bombing of black churches has not, however, disappeared entirely.)*

## Comprehension Study

Answer these questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your evaluation is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages from the work.

### Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

1. Describe why Byron thinks that his family is on welfare.  
*(Byron's mother asks Byron and Kenny to go get groceries at the local store owned by Mr. Mitchell. She tells him to sign for the groceries since the family has made an arrangement with Mr. Mitchell to pay for their groceries only once a week. Although she tells him that they are not on welfare, Byron refuses to believe her. He thinks the large jug of milk and the big box of cheese his parents served him were too large to be considered normal food. For Byron, welfare food must be inferior and comes in bulk. Little Kenny believes what he has to say regarding this welfare food. However, Mr. Mitchell sets them straight by explaining that their parents had made an arrangement where the family pays for food on credit and they are indeed not on welfare.)*

2. Why does Wilona try to burn Byron's fingers?  
*(Byron plays with matches by burning tissue paper and throwing them down the toilet, all the while trying to reenact a movie about Nazi paratroopers invading Flint, Michigan. After Wilona catches him playing with the matches, she decides to teach him a lesson by burning his fingers with matches. This might well seem like child abuse from our perspective.*

*But Wilona is at her wits' end about how to teach her child that fire is dangerous. In the end, however, Joey comes to the rescue by blowing out all the matches. One wonders whether Wilona would genuinely burn her son's fingers had Joey not intervened.)*

3. What causes Rufus to start ignoring Kenny and how does Kenny feel?  
*(Rufus and Kenny were "secret friends for a couple of weeks before people really started getting on them [Rufus and Cody] about not having a bunch of clothes." One day, Larry Dunn walks up to Rufus and Cody and starts to hassle them about their clothes. He tells them that he notices how Rufus and Cody share the same pair of jeans, each wearing them on a different day. And he asks them whether they share the underwear as well. Every kid starts to laugh at this joke, including Kenny. Rufus is very hurt by Kenny's laughter. He starts to ignore Kenny. After a few days of the silent treatment, Kenny shows up at Rufus' place and asks to play with him. But Rufus refuses, telling him that he thought Kenny was different from the rest of the kids, and then shuts the door on Kenny.*

*Kenny immediately feels very dejected. He wants to tell Rufus that he is different but is much too embarrassed. It remains for Kenny's mother to arrange for an apology from Kenny to patch things up between the two.)*

4. Why does L.J. steal most of Kenny's dinosaurs?  
*(Before Rufus arrived, L.J. Jones was Kenny's only friend. Whenever they play with Kenny's dinosaur figures, L.J. would cheat and then try to steal Kenny's toys. When Kenny tells Byron about it, his older brother tells him not to worry as forfeiting one or two toy figures is not a high price to pay for having a friend. However, L.J. is not contented with one or two toy dinosaurs. He plans to steal all of them. One day, he urges Kenny to play the biggest dinosaur battle ever.*

*In the middle of their nuclear battle, L.J. suggests that they dig a grave to bury the "radioactive" dinosaurs before continuing their battles. Then L.J. distracts Kenny by proposing they go over to Larry Dunn's secret hideout. Kenny takes his bait. When he returns, he completely forgets about the buried toys. When he finally tries to dig them out, the graves are empty.)*

## Questions 5-6 (Interpretative Level)

5. Why does Kenny think Clutch Cargo is the “worst cartoon ever made” ?  
*(Clutch Cargo features some of the worst animation in any kind of cartoon. The cartoon figures move in a stiff non-animated way while their lips are actually images of moving human lips superimposed on a cartoon face. The adventures of Clutch Cargo and his sidekick are usually rather lame as well. All in all, even for a young child in 1963, this cartoon appears rather uninspired.)*
6. Why does Daniel Watson decide to drive straight to Alabama instead of stopping overnight somewhere along the way?  
*(Besides the fact that he might not be able to find a restaurant or motel that would serve African Americans, Daniel wants to save money by driving straight to Alabama. Indeed they had originally planned to stay in Cincinnati, Ohio, a city north of the Mason-Dixon line with hotels that would serve blacks. However, they pass that city and keep on going. In Tennessee and beyond, Daniel does not bother to stop for more than a brief rest. But perhaps, beyond just saving money, Daniel, an African American who grew up in the North, does not want to subject his family to the unpleasant experience of trying to find a restaurant or hotel that would serve blacks. He wants the journey to be over as quickly as possible.)*

## Questions 7-8 (Critical Level)

8. What image of the Southerner does Curtis portray in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963*?  
*(In The Watson Go to Birmingham - 1963, the African-American Southerners tend to talk with thick accents, are unusually friendly, and poor. Rufus, for example, is much too talkative and friendly, and is totally unprepared for the reception he receives from his cruel classmates in Flint, Michigan. He also talks with a strong Southern accent, making him a target of taunts. He does not wear the right clothes and is stereotyped as someone who shoots and eats squirrels. Daniel Watson likes to make fun of Southerners, including the way his wife talks. The jokes he makes sometimes point out how stupid Southerners can be, as in the case of Hambone who apparently tells Wilona that people in Flint live in igloos and look like Chinese. There are few mentions of white Southerners, and the references Curtis makes to white Southerners suggest that they are all racists who deprive blacks of their rights and kill them.)*
9. How does Byron achieve a sense of maturity in the novel?  
*(Byron changes from a delinquent to a more mature teenager almost immediately upon reaching Grandma's home. His parents had threatened to leave him in Alabama if he does not behave himself. In the eyes of Kenny, Byron backs down from confronting Grandma Sands upon meeting her, even though she appears to be a frail old woman. Byron tells Kenny that he could*

*not battle with her but Kenny senses that something has changed in Byron. Furthermore, Byron seems much more responsible, refusing to explore the dangerous Collier's Landing even after Kenny urges him to go.*

*Byron also has enough sense to return and save Kenny from drowning. However, the most important event which jolts him from his complacency and irresponsibility is the bombing of the church in Birmingham. Byron begins to see himself as having a role in the rearing of Kenny. When Kenny becomes emotionally paralyzed from this tragic event, it is Byron who comes to his rescue. Byron explains to Kenny about the hatred that exists in the real world. He tells Kenny about how Kenny saved Joey. And he tells him about the need to face facts and disregard the make-believe.)*

## Questions 10-12 (Creative Level)

10. Pick your favorite song from the Motown era of the 1950s and 1960s. Write new lyrics for your song.
11. Create a role for a social worker who visits the home of Larry Dunn. Recreate this visit with a skit. Suggest activities that would help his mother raise Larry better. In particular, how do you think Larry can change? What kinds of problems do you think he has at home?
12. Create a skit stereotyping how people talk in your neighborhood. What kind of accents do they have? In what ways are these stereotypes inaccurate?

## Across the Curriculum

### Art

1. Draw your family tree and illustrate the various family members as best you can.
2. Create a drawing depicting a scene from one of the movies Byron imagines himself directing.

### Geography and Math

1. Locate I-75 on the map. I-75 runs from Michigan to Florida. Pinpoint all the major towns the Watsons would have passed on their trip to Birmingham.
2. If Daniel Watson took 18 hours to drive from Flint to Birmingham, disregarding all the rest stops, how fast was he driving on average. (Hint: first, look at a road map to measure the distance between the two towns.)

### Science

1. Research why stars appear brighter in the open country. Why do they appear brighter when one is



up in the mountains? What is “light pollution” and why are planetary observatories located on top of mountains?

2. At first, Daniel thought the bombing sound was a sonic boom. Investigate how a sonic boom is created.
3. What causes a whirlpool?

## Language Arts

1. Create a list of slang words which appear in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963*. Are these words or terms you would use today?
2. Create a talkshow program wherein a host invites the various characters from the novel to tell their side of the story. Have the students in the class play the various roles.
3. Write a report discussing Kenny’s belief in the Wool Pooh, the Pet Hospital, and the Watsons being on welfare. How does he form his opinions and beliefs about these matters?
4. Imagine that you are a DJ for a radio station. Create a playlist of the type of songs favored by the different members of the Watson family. How would you introduce each song?

## History and Current Events

1. Research the migration of African Americans to the north in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Describe the different waves of migration. What opportunities awaited them in the northern part of the United States?
2. Using newspaper articles in your local library, research and write a report about the series of church-bombings in the South in the mid-1990s and the recurring rash in 2005.
3. Describe in a timeline the various Civil Rights Acts passed by Congress. How do you define civil rights? Do all Americans now enjoy equal rights? Why or why not?

## Media

1. Watch Spike Lee’s 1997 documentary *Four Little Girls*. How does his film contribute to your understanding of the Sixteenth Avenue Baptist Church in Birmingham?

2. Construct a class web site devoted to the cultural heritage of different members of the class.

## Student Involvement Activities

1. Write a report about the success of Motown Records in the 1950s and 1960s and its impact on the music industry.
2. Discuss whether Kenny’s belief in the Wool Pooh helps him deal with the trauma of the bombing.
3. Christopher Paul Curtis did not intentionally write his novel for a targeted audience. Discuss why the novel appeals particularly to younger readers.
4. Write a different epilogue for the novel. What do you imagine Kenny is like as a teenager?
5. Discuss whether Wilona’s reaction to Byron’s playing with matches constitutes child abuse.
6. Develop a skit to depict your favorite scene from the novel.
7. Create a role for a psychologist to counsel Kenny. Discuss how children cope differently with traumatic events.
8. Compose a definition of family. Share your definition with the rest of the class. In what ways are the Watsons a typical American family? In what ways are they not?
9. Discuss why Byron makes up stories and explanations for his brother.

## Alternate Assessment

1. Create illustrations to depict the major events in Curtis’ novel.
2. Create a list of adjectives which describe Kenny, Joey, and Byron.
3. Compose a scene depicting how Byron would react upon learning how he has been described in the novel.
4. List examples of how Kenny’s imagination can run wild.

# The Watsons Go to Birmingham- 1963 Christopher Paul Curtis

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## Vocabulary

Using the terms below, complete each sentence with one or more details from *The Watsons Go to Birmingham -1963*.

dispersal	Housing	lazy	phonic
emulate	Hughes	miraculous	pinnacle
Gandhi	intimidate	<i>Nanook of the North</i>	radioactivity
haphazardly	jabbering	peons	reinforcements

1. When Kenny is asked to read in Byron's class, Byron is not happy and tries to \_\_\_\_\_ him with his stare.
2. Byron's teacher, Mr. Alums, asks Byron to \_\_\_\_\_ or imitate Kenny.
3. In Kenny's big dinosaur war, the toy figures are dying left and right so Kenny has to bring out more \_\_\_\_\_ to continue his war.
4. Rufus seems to talk non-stop, \_\_\_\_\_ away at Kenny all through class.
5. For Byron, the powerless people in society are the \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Daniel jokes that the height or \_\_\_\_\_ of Western civilization is the cardboard air freshener he hangs on the rear view mirror of his car.
7. While trying to sound scientific, Daniel tells the kids that in the past, record players in cars were bad because road vibrations distort "an accurate \_\_\_\_\_ of the \_\_\_\_\_ interpretations.
8. Daniel tells Joey that the speakers in the car are not placed randomly or \_\_\_\_\_ on the rear deck.
9. L.J. tells Kenny that the dead dinosaurs killed by the atomic weapons have been infected by \_\_\_\_\_.
10. Mr. Alums tells Kenny to read from a book by Langston \_\_\_\_\_, one of the poets of the Harlem Renaissance.
11. Daniel tells his family that Hambone incorrectly thought a movie called \_\_\_\_\_ was about Flint, Michigan.
12. Kids call him Cockeye Kenny because one of his eyes is \_\_\_\_\_.
13. Mr. Alums thinks that some students can read at a \_\_\_\_\_ level.
14. In 1968, Congress passed the Fair \_\_\_\_\_ Act which insures that people would not be denied a place to live because of their sex, age, race, or religion.
15. Some Civil Rights leaders adopted the non-violent philosophy of \_\_\_\_\_ to fight segregation.

## Comprehension Test A

### Part I: Matching (30 points)

Match the following descriptions with characters. You may use some answers more than once and some not all.

- |              |               |              |               |
|--------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| A. Mr. Alums | D. Miss Henry | G. Cody      | J. L.J. Jones |
| B. Byron     | E. Mr. Robert | H. Joey      | K. Rufus      |
| C. Kenny     | F. Wilona     | I. Wool Pooh | L. Daniel     |

- \_\_\_ 1. throws Larry Dunn into the school fence.
- \_\_\_ 2. drops burning tissue paper down the toilet.
- \_\_\_ 3. helps Joey with her clothes when they get to school.
- \_\_\_ 4. hides the gap between her teeth with her hand when she smiles.
- \_\_\_ 5. likes to play "Yakety Yak" over and over again.
- \_\_\_ 6. asks Kenny to read to Byron's class.
- \_\_\_ 7. asks Kenny to read the Bible aloud to her class.
- \_\_\_ 8. is Grandma Sands' best friend.
- \_\_\_ 9. is Rufus' little brother.
- \_\_\_ 10. goes to Sunday school in Birmingham.
- \_\_\_ 11. ignores warnings and goes swimming alone at Collier's Landing.
- \_\_\_ 12. repeatedly steals Kenny's toys.
- \_\_\_ 13. quickly becomes Kenny's friend.
- \_\_\_ 14. buys a record player for his car.
- \_\_\_ 15. talks about shooting and eating squirrels.

### Part II: Cause and Effect (20 points)

Finish each of these statements.

- 1. Joey walks away from the church because \_\_\_\_\_.
- 2. As a punishment, Wilona tries to burn Byron's fingers because he \_\_\_\_\_.
- 3. Wilona packs food for the trip because \_\_\_\_\_.
- 4. Byron gets upset at Wilona's order that he sign for the food at the grocery store because \_\_\_\_\_.
- 5. Kenny shares his lunch with Rufus and Cody because \_\_\_\_\_.
- 6. Byron "conks" his hair and is punished because his parents are \_\_\_\_\_.
- 7. Kenny lets L.J. steal his toys because \_\_\_\_\_.
- 8. Kenny almost drowns because he thinks \_\_\_\_\_.
- 9. Wilona hates the cold weather in Flint because she is \_\_\_\_\_.
- 10. Joey does not like the white angel doll because \_\_\_\_\_.

## Comprehension Test A (Page 2)

### Part III: Identification (10 points)

For each of the following details below, write a paragraph to explain its significance.

1. World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital
2. Sixteenth Avenue Baptist Church bombing
3. Byron's lips stuck to the car mirror
4. The Ultra-Glide
5. Angel Doll Joetta

### Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Discuss why Byron is considered the biggest bully at Clark Elementary.
2. Explain why Rufus becomes upset at Kenny.
3. Why does Kenny have such a strong belief in the Wool Pooh and magical powers?



## Comprehension Test B

### Part I: Settings (20 points)

Identify the settings that fit the following descriptions. Select your answers from the list on the right. You may use some answers more than once and some not at all.

- |   |                                    |
|---|------------------------------------|
| ___ 1. hometown of the Watsons                    | A. Collier's Landing               |
| ___ 2. where Wilona grew up                       | B. Flint, Michigan                 |
| ___ 3. where Rufus and Cody are originally from   | C. Arkansas                        |
| ___ 4. mountain chain the Watsons drive across    | D. Birmingham                      |
| ___ 5. place where Kenny goes swimming alone      | E. Appalachian                     |
| ___ 6. name of the school Kenny attends           | F. Family Brown Bomber             |
| ___ 7. Byron throws Larry into this               | G. backyard                        |
| ___ 8. site of the bombing                        | H. Sixteenth-Avenue Baptist Church |
| ___ 9. place where Kenny buries his toy dinosaurs | I. Clark                           |
| ___ 10. where the Ultra-Glide is installed        | J. chainlink fence                 |

### Part II: Fill in (20 points)

Complete each sentence below with the correct answer.

- Hambone Henderson tells \_\_\_\_\_ that people in Flint live in \_\_\_\_\_.
- After Wilona catches Byron playing with \_\_\_\_\_, she tries to punish him by burning his \_\_\_\_\_.
- Byron thinks that by \_\_\_\_\_ for the groceries at Mr. Mitchell's shop, the family is on \_\_\_\_\_.
- Daniel and Wilona want to send \_\_\_\_\_ to stay for a while in \_\_\_\_\_ so that they can get him away from the bad influences in Flint.
- Wilona packs the family car with food so they they can \_\_\_\_\_ money and because many restaurants in the South at that time would not serve \_\_\_\_\_.

## Comprehension Test B (Page 2)

### Part III: Character Identification (20 points)

Place an X by any statement that is true of Kenny.

- 1. likes to bully other kids
- 2. other people think he is smart
- 3. has one lazy-eye
- 4. likes to play with toy dinosaurs
- 5. hates the song "Yakety-Yak"
- 6. teaches math to Byron
- 7. hides behind the family couch
- 8. believes in the existence of the Wool Pooh
- 9. thinks his mother dresses him too warmly for winter
- 10. is Larry Dunn's best friend

### Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. What causes a change in Byron's attitude once the family reaches Birmingham?
2. Describe some of the ways Civil Rights leaders fought segregation in the South.
3. Discuss whether Wilona is a good mother.

## Answer Key

### VOCABULARY

- |                      |                         |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. intimidate        | 9. radioactivity        |
| 2. emulate           | 10. Hughes              |
| 3. reinforcements    | 11. Nanook of the North |
| 4. jabbering         | 12. lazy                |
| 5. peons             | 13. miraculous          |
| 6. pinnacle          | 14. Housing             |
| 7. dispersal, phonic | 15. Gandhi              |
| 8. haphazardly       |                         |

### COMPREHENSION TEST A

#### Part I: Matching (30 points)

- |      |       |                |
|------|-------|----------------|
| 1. B | 6. A  | 11. C          |
| 2. B | 7. D  | 12. J          |
| 3. C | 8. E  | 13. K          |
| 4. F | 9. G  | 14. L          |
| 5. C | 10. H | 15. G and/or K |

#### Part II: Cause and Effect (20 points)

- she sees someone who looks like Kenny waving to her and running away
- he throws burning tissue paper down the toilet
- they could have difficulty finding a restaurant that would serve African Americans and they want to save some money
- he thinks that his family is on welfare
- they seem too poor to have money for lunch
- are upset that his new hairstyle seems to reject his African-American heritage
- it is a small price to pay for having a friend
- that the Wool Pooh is trying to kill him
- originally from the South
- Mrs. Davidson tells her that Joey looks like the doll

#### Part III: Identification (10 points)

- This is an area between the couch and the wall that the Watson pets like to go to when they are not feeling well. Byron tells Kenny that this area harbors secret magic that heals animals. Kenny hides in this area after the bombing in Birmingham because he feels scared and awful. After several days, Byron pulls him out and tells him that there are no such things as genies and magic. Byron teaches him that although the world is not fair, he should face reality, and things will be fine.
- On September 15, 1963, unknown terrorists bombed the Sixteenth Avenue Baptist Church in a racist attack. Four young girls were killed and sev-

eral others sustained permanent injuries. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, civil rights leaders fought to end segregation in the South with campaigns involving sit-ins, boycotts, and demonstrations. Many of these leaders were from the black clergy. With the tide turning against the advocates of segregation, some whites used violence to counter the civil rights movement. The Sixteenth Avenue Baptist Church is perhaps the most famous of the many black churches bombed. The author used this incident as the backdrop to a novel about growing up black in America and learning about responsibility and racial consciousness in an unjust America. In 1997, Spike Lee made an Oscar-nominated documentary about this bombing which renewed interest in this important incident in civil rights history. That same year, the FBI reopened its investigation of the unsolved bombing.

- While scraping ice off the family car, Byron, in an act of vanity, kisses his reflection on the outside mirror. However, the weather is so cold that his lips are instantly frozen to the mirror. His family tries to pour hot water over the mirror but fails to pull him away because the hot water freezes. Wilona asks the rest of the family to go call the hospital but Kenny stays to watch. Wilona reassures Byron she will not hurt him; but with a quick pull, she yanks his head away from the mirror, and rips the skin of his lips away.
- The Ultra-Glide is a record player installed into the Watson family car. It was the height of American technology in 1963. Before the Ultra-Glide, record players could not be used properly in cars because the road vibrations cause the needle to jump. The new machine apparently solved the problem by dampening road vibrations. Daniel Watson installs one of these machines into the family car much to the joy of the family. It was much used by them during their trip to Alabama.
- Mrs. Davidson, a neighbor, gives Joey a parting gift before the Watsons leave for Alabama. The gift is a white angel doll which Mrs. Davidson names Joetta because she feels it looks like Joey. Although Joey thanks Mrs. Davidson politely, she is unhappy because she does not think she looks like a white doll. It is an act of racial pride and consciousness on the part of young Joey. Even though Joey is still in kindergarten, she can recognize that she is not white and cannot identify with a white doll.

**Part IV: Essay: (40 points)**

Answers will vary.

**COMPREHENSION TEST B**

**Part I: Setting Identification (20 points)**

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. B | 6. I  |
| 2. D | 7. J  |
| 3. C | 8. H  |
| 4. E | 9. G  |
| 5. A | 10. F |

**Part II: Fill in (20 points)**

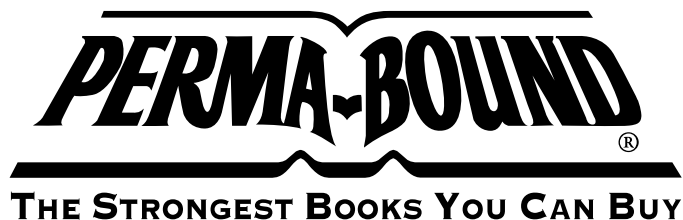
1. Wilona, igloos
2. matches or fire, fingers
3. signing, welfare
4. Byron, Birmingham, Alabama
5. save, African Americans

**Part III: Character Identification (20 points)**

- |      |      |
|------|------|
| 1.   | 6.   |
| 2. x | 7. x |
| 3. x | 8. x |
| 4. x | 9. x |
| 5.   | 10.  |

**Part IV: Essay (40 points)**

Answers will vary.



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