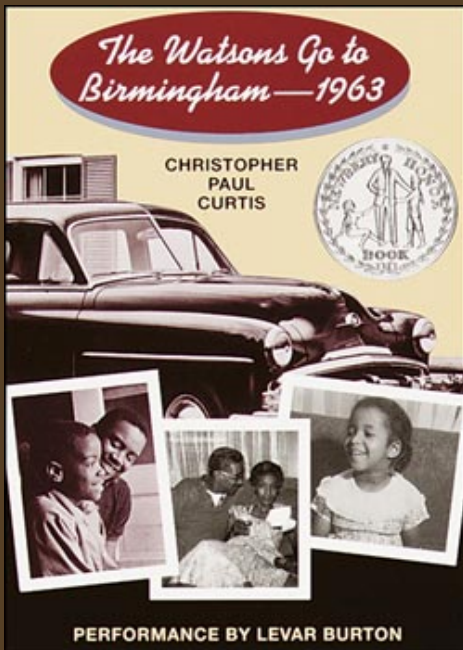


# Watsons Go to Birmingham- 1963 Reading Guide



## Questions and Ideas for Consideration

**Details:** Curtis is a “detail” writer—he develops story and characters through an incredible amount of specific details. What are some examples of this, what does it do for the story, and why does it work?

**Siblings:** Consider the relationship between Kenny and Bryon—what is Curtis trying to say/do with this dynamic? What theme develops?

**Tone and Humor:** How does the book effectively use humor?

**Being Different:** Several characters are picked on in the story for being smart, cross-eyed, country/poor? What is Curtis saying in this?

**Cultural Clash:** Consider the character of Rufus, and the cultural clash that is overcome to create a friendship. What role does Rufus play in the text? Kenny calls him a “saver”—why?

**Ending:** The ending is powerful, yet sometimes seems separate from other parts of the text. Why did Curtis structure his text in this way?

**History:** In what ways does this book meaningfully contribute to a narrative about history in America? Does it portray the time period in a realistic, authentic, and engaging way?

## Daybook Possibilities

- Visit Christopher Paul Curtis’s website and learn a little about him through videos and other resources. Write about what you discover and how it changes your perception of the book.
- Look up and describe other books that have been written about the Civil Rights and the 1960s. Then research the authors of these books and write about what you can learn about children’s literature written about this historical time period.
- Do an internet search for “children” with various terms you associate with past events like Civil Rights. What do you discover about perceptions of children/childhood?
- Do some research into the places described in the text, including Birmingham, Alabama and Flint, Michigan. Research a little about the history of these locations and describe how this fits with the novel.
- How might you use or teach *Watsons Go to Birmingham* or other books about history in your classroom? Brainstorm some lesson plan ideas, and write about limitations or considerations for doing so.
- Check out the film version of *Watsons Go to Birmingham*, and compare how the story is told in this medium. How do the changes in this film version affect its message and ideologies?

## Resources and Critical Reading

“Naïve Narrators and Double Narratives of Racially Motivated Violence in the Historical Fiction of Christopher Paul Curtis” by Jani L. Barker

““Straighten Up and Fly Right”: HeteroMasculinity in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*” by Amina Chaudhri

“An Evolving Past: The Story of Historical Fiction and Nonfiction for Children” by Suzanne Rahn

## Background and Context

Published in 1995, Christopher Paul Curtis’s *The Watsons Go to Birmingham- 1963* tells the story of the “Weird Watsons,” an African American family who travel from Flint, Michigan to Birmingham, Alabama during a pivotal time in American history. A tale of humor and heartache, this historical fiction text tells the story of the family traveling in the “Brown Bomber” (their car) to visit their Grandma Sands, and the tragedy they face in Birmingham that will change all of them (and America) forever.