



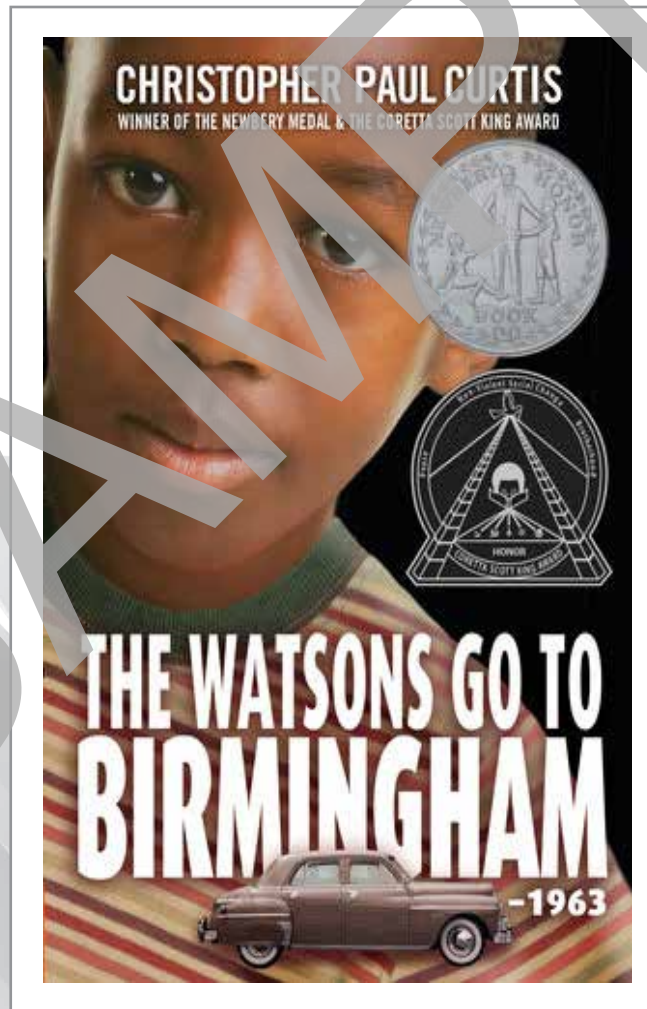
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 6-8**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# **The Watsons Go to Birmingham**

Christopher Paul Curtis



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# The Watsons Go to Birmingham

Christopher Paul Curtis

## TEACHER GUIDE

**NOTE:**

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Skills and Strategies

### Comprehension

Predicting, summarizing, identifying attributes, cause/effect, inferring, creative thinking

### Literary Elements

Figurative language, conflict, story mapping, character analysis, theme, tone, genre

### Critical Thinking

Compare/contrast, pros/cons, research, decision-making, evaluation, invention/design, brainstorming

### Vocabulary

Synonyms, analogies, sentences, root words, word sort

### Writing

Journal entries, acrostic poem, persuasive letter, directions, essay, story, interview

### Listening/Speaking

Dramatization, discussion, debate, presentation

### Across the Curriculum

Social Studies—the Civil Rights Movement, geography, welfare, public assistance, Birmingham tourist attractions, Birmingham church bombing; Science—whirlpools; Art—bulletin board, collage, illustration, book cover, manual; Health—amblyopia, bullying, water safety; Recipe—cookies

**Genre:** fiction

**Setting:** Flint, Michigan and Birmingham, Alabama in 1963

**Point of View:** first person

**Themes:** family, friendship, love, respect, loyalty, discipline, prejudice, tragedy, despair, injustice, courage

**Conflict:** person vs. society, person vs. self, person vs. person

**Style:** narrative

**Tone:** conversational, humorous, serious at times

**Date of First Publication:** 1995

### Summary

The Watsons are a contentious but loving African-American family from Flint, Michigan. After Byron, the oldest son, goes one step too far with his adolescent antics, Momma and Dad decide the only cure for him is a long-term visit with Grandma Sands. So, the family sets out in their “Brown Bomber” for the trip of a lifetime to Birmingham, Alabama. Along the way, the children (Byron, Kenny, and Joetta) have many new experiences and learn a great deal about the world outside of Flint. The catastrophic bombing at a Birmingham church provides the ultimate lesson for the entire family and undoubtedly changes each of them forever.

### About the Author

Christopher Paul Curtis was born and raised in Flint, Michigan. While working at Flint’s Fisher Body Plant No. 1, he attended the University of Michigan-Flint. Curtis originally wrote *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* in longhand, and his son typed his drafts on their computer. His son was also the first to read the novel. The University of Michigan-Flint awarded Curtis a Jules Hopwood Prize for a preliminary draft of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. Later, the published version received a Newbery Honor and Coretta Scott King Award in 1996. Curtis received both the Newbery Medal and the Coretta Scott King Award for his second novel, *Bud, Not Buddy* (2000). *Elijah of Buxton* (2007) won a Newbery Honor, Coretta Scott King Award, and the Scott O’Dell Award for Historical Fiction. Today, Curtis lives with his wife and children in Detroit, Michigan.

## Chapters 1–3

Kenny is a ten-year-old boy who lives with his family in Flint, Michigan. One freezing night, the family huddles together and Kenny's father tells how he proposed to Kenny's mother. Kenny remembers a time when his older brother Byron and Byron's friend bullied him. Byron gets his lips frozen to the family car's outside mirror, giving Kenny and Dad the opportunity to tease him. Kenny explains how he is bullied less for having a lazy eye and being smart because Byron (the school's "god") is his brother. Rufus and Cody Fry ride the bus and are picked on by the other children because they have southern accents, wear tattered clothes, and are friendly. Rufus and Kenny become close friends.

### Vocabulary

generate  
juvenile  
respectable  
proposed  
pouting  
tortured  
passionate  
hostile  
vital  
miraculous  
incapable  
punctual  
desperate  
reinforcements  
twitching  
infect

### Discussion Questions

1. What effects does the freezing weather have on the Watsons? *(The Watsons' furnace is broken, so they huddle together to keep warm. Since Momma was born and raised in Alabama, she is not accustomed to the freezing temperatures in Flint and often blames Dad for them moving there. Dad then tells the story of how he was in competition for Momma with a man named Moses Henderson. The family bonds at home because of the weather, even though they are forced to stay the night at a relative's house.)*
2. How does Dad and Momma's conversation about Birmingham become serious, and why do you think Dad quickly ends the conversation? *(When Momma praises Birmingham, saying "life is slower [and] the people are friendlier...more honest...respect their parents" [pp. 5–6], Dad reminds her about the racism and segregation that exist there. Answers will vary, but students might believe Dad ends the conversation because it might lead to an argument regarding reasons the family moved to Michigan rather than staying in Alabama. Dad may not want his children to witness an argument or know about the racism in other parts of the country.)*
3. How did Byron and his friend Buphead prank Kenny one night? How does the prank affect Kenny? *(Byron and Buphead said they were going to "teach" Kenny how to survive a blizzard. They threw Kenny into the snow, spun him around and pushed him into the snow again, and Byron spit snow into Kenny's face. Byron and Buphead's prank causes Kenny to doubt that Byron's lips are stuck to the car mirror. Kenny initially thinks it is "How to Survive a Blizzard, Part Two" [p. 8].)*
4. Who are the three main bullies at Clark Elementary? Which ones are referred to as a "king" and a "god," and why? *(Larry Dunn, Byron, and Buphead are the three main bullies at school because of their age and size. Larry Dunn is called "the king of the kindergarten to fourth grade" [p. 20] because he has failed several times and is older and bigger than the other kids. Answers will vary. Byron is likely referred to as a god because he is the oldest and strongest of both Buphead and Larry. Students may also suggest Byron is given this title because he is the most powerful and revered of the three.)*
5. What two characteristics is Kenny ridiculed for? According to Kenny, who helps to lessen the mockery? *(Kenny is ridiculed because he is smart and has a lazy eye. Kenny's teachers treat him differently because he can read well, but Kenny dislikes the extra attention. When he was in second grade, Kenny's teachers had him read in front of different classes in order to inspire the other students. Kenny says if it were not for Byron he would be beaten up and teased a lot more. This is why Kenny is nervous about Byron going to junior high school.)*

6. How does Byron act when Kenny comes to Mr. Alums’s classroom to read, and why? *(He doesn’t laugh when Kenny drops his book, but he stares at Kenny. When Kenny reads, Byron never looks at him. Answers will vary. Byron is probably embarrassed that his younger brother is a better reader than he is.)*
7. What kind of relationship do Byron and Kenny have? *(Answers will vary. Some students may think Byron and Kenny have a normal brotherly relationship. They tease each other but still care about each other. Although Byron bullies Kenny, it is apparent he cares about him when Byron defends Kenny against his friend Buphead, indirectly shows he is proud of Kenny’s reading skills, and gives Kenny advice about his lazy eye. Other students may think their relationship is negative or even slightly abusive because of Byron’s bullying and name-calling.)*
8. Why do you think the bus driver stops for the two boys? Why might Kenny think the older boy is his “personal saver”? *(Answers will vary. The bus driver probably sees the boys’ appearances and realizes they are new students. Kenny might call the older boy his “personal saver” because the boy is different, too. After observing the boy’s accent, clothes, and friendly demeanor, Kenny judges that the other children will tease the new boy and leave him [Kenny] alone.)*
9. Why is Kenny upset that Mrs. Cordell has Rufus sit next to him in class? How does Kenny treat Rufus, and what ultimately happens? *(Kenny believes if he and Rufus are close together that they will both be teased twice as much. Kenny is annoyed at first and tries to avoid talking to Rufus, but Rufus continues to talk to Kenny and eats lunch with him. The boys eventually become close friends.)*
10. Who is LJ Jones? Why does Kenny enjoy playing dinosaurs with Rufus more than with LJ? *(LJ Jones is the only other person Kenny played dinosaurs with. Kenny likes sharing his toys with Rufus because Rufus doesn’t mind being the “Nazi” dinosaurs and he doesn’t steal from Kenny.)*
11. Why do the other kids make fun of Rufus, and why does Rufus stop talking to Kenny? *(Rufus talks with a southern accent and only has a few items of clothing, some of which he shares with his brother. When Larry makes fun of Rufus and Cody on the bus one day, Kenny joins in the laughter and hurts Rufus’s feelings. Rufus believes Kenny is making fun of them and is hurt because he thought Kenny was his friend.)*
12. **Prediction:** How will Rufus and Kenny’s new friendship affect their lives at school?

### Supplementary Activities

1. **Literary Analysis:** Begin the Story Map on page 23 of this guide. Add to the chart as you read.
2. **Geography:** Locate Flint, Michigan and Birmingham, Alabama on a U.S. map. Then, use an almanac to find the average high and low temperatures for these cities throughout the year. Explain why you think Momma complains about the weather in Flint so often.
3. **Figurative Language:** Find at least two examples of hyperbole, or exaggeration, in this section. For example, “might as well have tied me to a tree and said, ‘Ready, aim, fire!’” (p. 45). Then, write two hyperboles of your own.
4. **Research:** Research the clinical name for “lazy eye” (amblyopia). What causes this condition? How is the condition treated?
5. **Character Analysis:** Use the Venn diagram on page 24 of this guide to discuss the similarities and differences between Kenny and Byron.

## Chapters 4–6

Byron makes up a story meant to scare Joetta so she will not complain about having to wear layers of warm clothes to school every day. Kenny shares his extra pair of leather gloves with Rufus until Larry steals Kenny's pair. Byron takes Kenny's gloves back from Larry, punches Kenny in the stomach when he won't punch Larry, and then humiliates Larry in front of the other kids by throwing him into a fence multiple times. After Momma catches Byron playing with fire for a second time, Momma is about to burn his finger but Joetta intervenes. Byron accuses Momma of accepting welfare. Byron accidentally kills a bird and feels great remorse afterward.

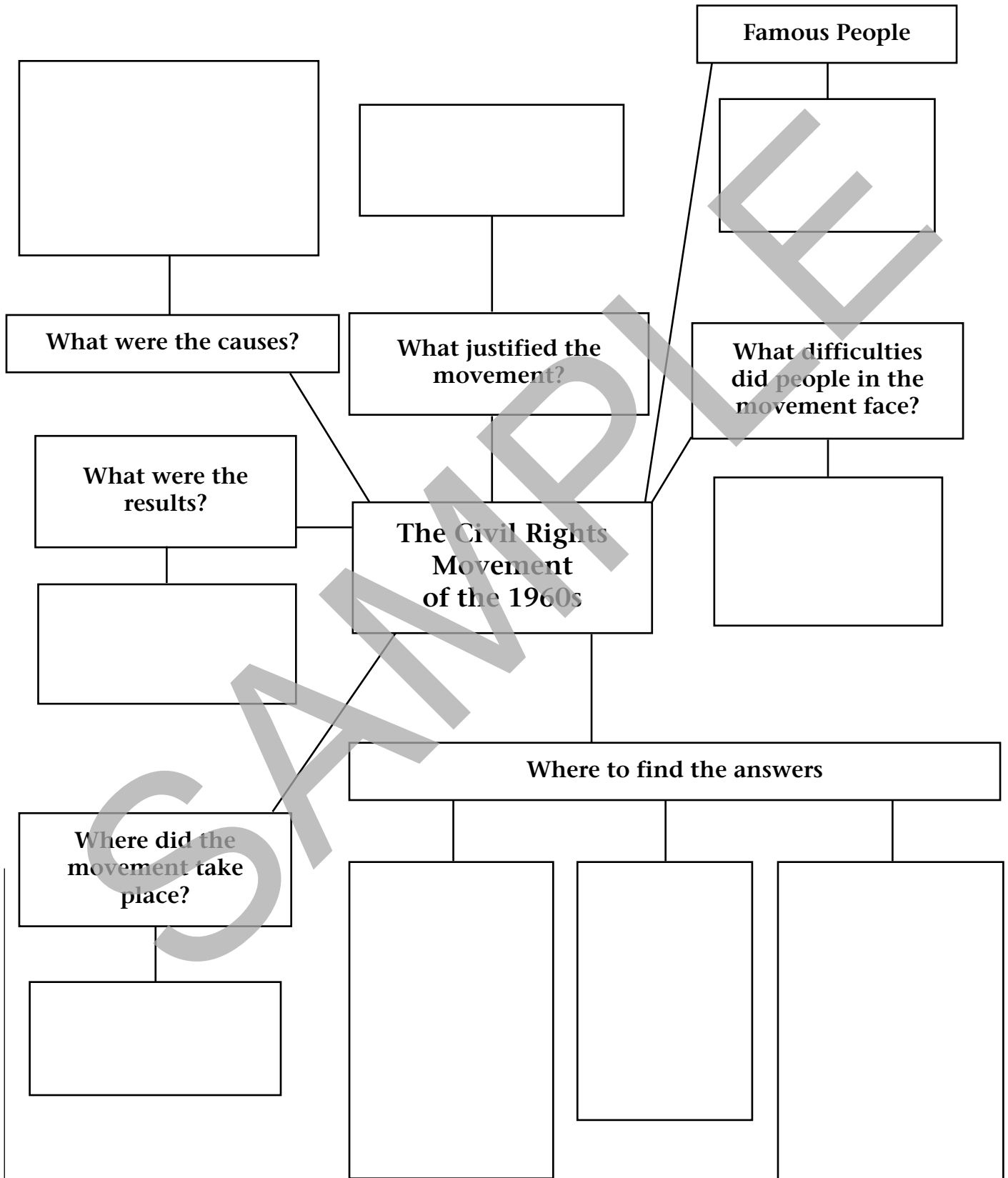
### Vocabulary

mature  
hypnotized  
frostbite  
obvious  
witness  
hiss  
huddled  
religious  
traitor  
tempted  
welfare  
generous  
conscience

### Discussion Questions

1. How does Momma feel about the cold weather? How do Kenny and Joetta feel about Momma's actions, and what lie does Byron tell to stop their complaining? (*Momma doesn't like the cold weather and is overly cautious. She dresses Kenny and Joetta in many layers of warm clothes and tells them the clothes are necessary because the "cold is very dangerous, people die in it all the time" [p. 49]. Kenny dislikes having to help Joetta out of the layers of clothing because she whines and cries. Joetta dislikes having to wear all the clothes because she is sweaty when they get to school. Byron tells them that the garbage trucks in the morning are full of people who have frozen on the street. He says that southern people have thin blood, so they freeze easily, and that since Joetta and Kenny are half-southern they could freeze and be put in the garbage trucks. After hearing Byron's story, Joetta doesn't complain anymore when she has to get into her winter clothes.*)
2. What does Byron do when he finds out Larry stole Kenny's gloves? Why do you think he goes to such extremes? (*Byron confronts Larry and takes Kenny's gloves back. When Kenny refuses to punch Larry, Byron punches Kenny in the stomach. Instead of walking away afterward, Byron stays, determined to take revenge on Larry. Answers will vary. Byron might choose to harm and humiliate Larry because Byron is older and feels he must uphold his reputation as the top bully. Byron might also act this way in order to defend Kenny and their family name and possibly prevent further mockery.*)
3. Why doesn't Larry fight back against Byron? (*Answers will vary. It seems that Larry understands there is an order of seniority at the school. He probably believes it would be pointless to fight back because he cannot beat Byron and he might be punished worse if he tries. Being a bully himself, Larry must know there will be consequences if he messes with an older kid.*)
4. What game does Byron play with fire? What does Momma do about it, and why? (*Byron pretends to make a movie called "Nazi Parachutes Attack America and Get Shot Down over the Flint River by Captain Byron Watson and His Flamethrower of Death" [p. 65], where he sets toilet paper parachutes on fire and flushes them down the toilet. Since Byron has already been warned about playing with fire, Momma is extremely upset. She is adamant about Byron staying away from fire since her house caught fire when she was a little girl and she does not want the same thing to happen to their house. As punishment, Momma tries to burn Byron's finger, but Joetta blows out every match Momma lights.*)
5. How does Momma react to Byron's accusation that the family is accepting welfare? What do Kenny's and Byron's reactions express about welfare? (*Momma becomes angry because Byron continues to accuse her even after she tells him they are not on welfare, and she does not like to repeat herself. Momma is also upset because Byron is acting as if he is too good for "welfare food."*)

# Concept Map





# Feelings

**Directions:** Choose a character from the novel, and complete the chart below.

Describe the character in the beginning.

Summarize important events in the boxes below. Describe how the character feels after each one.

Event #1:	The character feels...
Event #2:	The character feels...
Event #3:	The character feels...
Event #4:	The character feels...
Event #5:	The character feels...
Event #6:	The character feels...

Describe \_\_\_\_\_ at the end.