

# *Focus* **ON READING**

*The Watsons  
Go To  
Birmingham-1963*

**KYLA BROWN**

**This is a sample not intended for classroom use.**



Three Watson  
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# Introduction/Classroom Management

## WELCOME TO *FOCUS ON READING*

*Focus on Reading* literature study guides are designed to help all students comprehend and analyze their reading. Many teachers have grappled with the question of how to make quality literature accessible to all students. Students who are already avid readers of quality literature are motivated to read and are familiar with prereading and reading strategies. However, struggling readers frequently lack basic reading skills and are not equipped with the prior knowledge and reading strategies to thoroughly engage in the classroom literature experience.

*Focus on Reading* is designed to make teachers' and students' lives easier! How? By providing materials that allow all students to take part in reading quality literature. Each *Focus on Reading* study guide contains activities that focus on vocabulary and comprehension skills that students need to get the most from their reading. In addition, each section within the guide contains a before-reading **Focus Your Reading** page containing tools to ensure success: **Vocabulary Words to Know**, **Things to Know**, and **Questions to Think About**. These study aids will help students who may not have the prior knowledge they need to truly comprehend the reading.

## USING *FOCUS ON READING*

*Focus on Reading* is designed to make it easy for you to meet the individual needs of students who require additional reading skills support. Each *Focus on Reading* study guide contains teacher and student support materials, reproducible student activity sheets, an end-of-book test, and an answer key.

- **Focus on the Book**, a convenient reference page for the teacher, provides a brief overview of the entire book including a synopsis, information about the setting, author data, and historical background.
- **Focus Your Knowledge**, a reference page for students, is a whole-book, prereading activity designed to activate prior knowledge and immerse students in the topic.

The study guide divides the novel into 6 manageable sections to make it easy to plan classroom time. Five activities are devoted to each section of the novel.

## Before Reading

- **Focus Your Reading** consists of 3 prereading sections:

**Vocabulary Words to Know** lists and defines 10 vocabulary words students will encounter in their reading. Students will not have to interrupt their reading to look up, ask for, or spend a lot of time figuring out the meaning of unfamiliar words. These words are later studied in-depth within the lesson.

**Things to Know** identifies terms or concepts that are integral to the reading but that may not be familiar to today's students. This section is intended to "level the playing field" for those students who may not have much prior knowledge about the time period, culture, or theme of the book. It also gets students involved with the book, increasing interest before they begin reading.

**Questions to Think About** helps students focus on the main ideas and important details they should be looking for as they read. This activity helps give students a *purpose* for reading. The goal of these guiding questions is to build knowledge, confidence, and comfort with the topics in the reading.

## During Reading

- **Build Your Vocabulary** presents the 10 unit focus words in the exact context of the book. Students are then asked to write their own definitions and sentences for the words.
- **Check Your Understanding: Multiple Choice** offers 10 multiple-choice, literal comprehension questions for each section.

**Check Your Understanding: Short Answer** contains 10 short-answer questions based on the reading.

## After Reading

- **Deepen Your Understanding** is a writing activity that extends appreciation and analysis of the book. This activity focuses on critical-thinking skills and literary analysis.
- **End-of-Book Test** contains 20 multiple-choice items covering the book. These items ask questions that require students to synthesize the information in the book and make inferences in their answers.

## CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

*Focus on Reading* is very flexible. It can be used by the whole class, by small groups, or by individuals. Each study guide divides the novel into 6 manageable units of study.

This literature comprehension program is simple to use. Just photocopy the lessons and distribute them at the appropriate time as students read the novel.

You may want to reproduce and discuss the **Focus Your Knowledge** page before distributing the paperbacks. This page develops and activates prior knowledge to ensure that students have a grounding in the book before beginning reading. After reading this whole-book prereading page, students are ready to dive into the book.

The **Focus Your Reading** prereading activities are the keystone of this program. They prepare students for what they are going to read, providing focus for the complex task of reading. These pages should be distributed before students actually begin reading the corresponding section of the novel. There are no questions to be answered on these pages; these are for reference and support during reading. Students may choose to take notes on these pages as they read. This will also give students a study tool for review before the **End-of-Book Test**.

The **Focus Your Reading** pages also provide an excellent bridge to home. Parents, mentors, tutors, or

other involved adults can review vocabulary words with students, offer their own insights about the historical and cultural background outlined, and become familiar with the ideas students will be reading about. This can help families talk to students in a meaningful way about their reading, and it gives the adults something concrete to ask about to be sure that students are reading and understanding.

The **Build Your Vocabulary** and **Check Your Understanding: Multiple Choice** and **Short Answer** activities should be distributed when students begin reading the corresponding section of the novel. These literature guide pages are intended to help students comprehend and retain what they read; they should be available for students to refer to at any time during the reading.

**Deepen Your Understanding** is an optional extension activity that goes beyond literal questions about the book, asking students for their own ideas and opinions—and the reasons behind them. These postreading activities generally focus on literary analysis.

As reflected in its title, the **End-of-Book Test** is a postreading comprehension test to be completed after the entire novel has been read.

For your convenience, a clear **Answer Key** simplifies the scoring process.

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## Focus on the Book

### Synopsis

Kenny Watson is a ten-year-old living with his family in Flint, Michigan. Growing up as an African American in the 1960s, he sees poverty and discrimination. He has a sense of humor and an insightful and cheerful view of life, even when he is picked on for being smart and having a lazy eye. He admires but never really understands his older brother, Byron, who is always getting into trouble.

When Byron dyes and straightens his hair, the family—Momma, Dad, Byron, Kenny, and Joetta—take a trip to Birmingham, Alabama, to show the rebellious Byron the difficulties life presents to African Americans. The unrest and violence they find there teach all of them about the hardships of life and the importance of family.

### About the Author

Christopher Paul Curtis was born in Flint, Michigan, in 1953—like Kenny Watson. After finishing high school, he went to work at the Fisher Body Plant in the automobile assembly line. Because he hated factory work, he began keeping a journal to take his mind off the job. He earned his degree from the University of Michigan.

While driving to Florida to visit his sister-in-law, he was inspired to write a story called “The Watsons Go to Florida.” He was unhappy with the direction the story was taking until his son brought home the poem “Ballad of Birmingham” by Dudley Randall, which described the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church. The poem prompted Mr. Curtis to finish *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*.

### Historical Background

*The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* takes place during the Civil Rights movement. During this time period, the movement was gaining importance in politics. The Supreme Court ruling in the *Brown v. the Board of Education* case allowed black and white children to attend the same school. The Court

declared the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling of the 1800s unconstitutional, decreeing that it is not possible for blacks to be given “separate but equal” treatment. These important rulings stated that black Americans were entitled to the same privileges and rights as all other Americans.

Many African Americans moved to Northern states in the economic boom following World War II, searching for jobs, equality, and better living conditions. Many workers turned to the auto industry, but the factories did not have enough jobs for all the new people. Over 40% of African Americans in Detroit, Michigan, were unemployed, and poverty in the North was as common as in the South.

African Americans who remained in the South faced segregation laws limiting their actions, making it nearly impossible to vote, forcing them into substandard living conditions, and even dictating from which water fountains they could drink.

Birmingham, Alabama, was a central location for leaders of the Civil Rights movement to meet; many meetings took place in the 16th Street Baptist Church—the same church that many African Americans attended for religious services and Sunday school. On September 15, 1963, the church was destroyed by a bomb during a Sunday school session. Four young girls—Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley—were killed in the explosion. Twenty others were injured.

The law was slow to apprehend the people, all white men, who placed the bomb. In 1977, fourteen years later, Robert Edward Chamblis was convicted of murder and later died in prison. Two suspects were not indicted until May 17, 2006. One of them, Thomas Bryant, was found guilty of murder. Bobby Frank Cherry’s trial was delayed until he was found mentally able to stand trial. In May 2002, he was found guilty of conspiracy in the bombing. Herman Cash died in 1994 without standing trial.

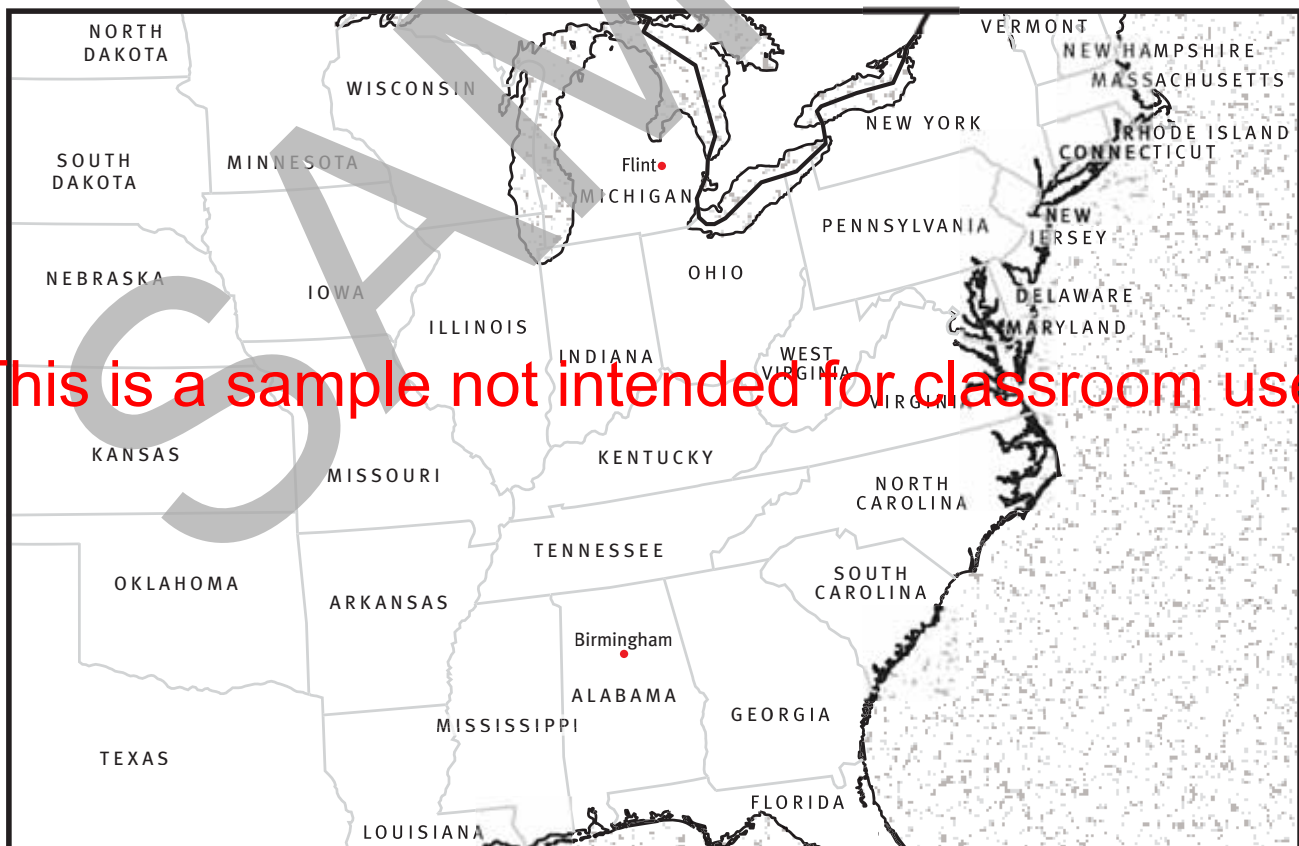
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## Focus Your Knowledge

During the 1960s, black Americans were fighting for equal rights and desegregation—the right to share the same privileges and facilities as white Americans. This struggle is called the Civil Rights movement.

- Look at a map of the eastern United States. Find Flint, Michigan, and Birmingham, Alabama. What do you know about these two places? How might these two places be different? How might they be the same? How does their location on the map affect these conditions?
- What do you know about the Civil Rights movement? How will this knowledge help you to understand the life of a young black boy in the United States in the 1960s?
- How does the Civil Rights movement affect life today? Why might knowing about civil rights be important?
- What is terrorism? How did it affect life in the 1960s? How does it affect life today? What can Americans do to stop terrorism?



## Focus Your Reading

### Vocabulary Words to Know

Study the following words and definitions. You will meet these words in your reading. Be sure to jot down in your word journal any other unknown words from the reading.

**juvenile delinquent**—a young person who breaks rules set by parents and authorities

**vital**—necessary; important; required

**numerous**—very many; a great number of

**miraculous**—wonderful; incredible; like a miracle

**intimidate**—to scare, threaten, or bully

**emulate**—to copy the actions or behavior of someone

**cockeyed**—crossed-eyed; having a squinty eye

**thug**—a mean person; a bully

**punctual**—on time; prompt

**radioactive**—giving off radiation, usually thought of in connection with certain kinds of explosions or reactions

### Things to Know

Here is some background information about this section of the book.

**Narcissus** is a young man in Greek mythology who falls in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. He becomes so obsessed with the reflection that he forgets to eat and drink. He eventually dies and is turned into a flower.

**Langston Hughes** (1902–1967) was a novelist and poet who wrote about racial relationships and difficulties. He was one of the first black writers to make a living by writing.

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A **twenty-two** (usually written **.22**) is a type of gun that uses bullets with a 22-millimeter diameter.

The **Nazis** were a group of people who came to political power in 1933 in Germany. Their leader was Adolf Hitler, a man who wanted to rule the world. In 1939, the Nazis became involved in World War II, with Germany, Italy, and Japan fighting Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States.



## Focus Your Reading

### *Questions to Think About*

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The following questions will help you understand the meaning of what you read. You do not have to write out the answers to these questions. Instead, look at them before you begin reading, and think about them while you are reading.

1. How is Rufus Kenny’s “personal saver”?
2. In what ways are Kenny and Byron different? In what ways are they similar?
3. What does Rufus mean when he says Kenny is “different”?
4. How is Kenny and Rufus’s friendship different from Byron and Buphead’s?
5. What do you think Momma says to Rufus to help him forgive Kenny?

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*Build Your Vocabulary*

Read the sentences below. On the line, write your definition of the word in bold type. Then, on another sheet of paper, use that word in a new sentence of your own.

1. “Byron had just turned thirteen so he was officially a teenage **juvenile delinquent** and didn’t think it was ‘cool’ to touch anybody or let anyone touch him, even if it meant he froze to death.”

juvenile delinquent: \_\_\_\_\_

2. “I’ve often told you that as Negroes the world is many times a hostile place for us. . . . I’ve pointed out time and time again how **vital** it is that one be able to read well.”

vital: \_\_\_\_\_

3. “I’ve stressed on **numerous** occasions the importance of being familiar and comfortable with literature.”

numerous: \_\_\_\_\_

4. “I want you to carefully note how advanced this second-grade student is. . . . I want you to be aware that some of our kids read at **miraculous** levels.”

miraculous: \_\_\_\_\_

5. “If, instead of trying to **intimidate** your young brother, you would **emulate** him and use that mind of yours, perhaps you’d find things much easier.”

intimidate: \_\_\_\_\_

emulate: \_\_\_\_\_

6. “See? You ain’t **cockeyed** no more, your eyes is straight as a arrow now!”

cockeyed: \_\_\_\_\_

7. “We’d be standing on the corner waiting for the bus, Byron, Buphead and all the other old thugs in one bunch, Larry Dunn, Banky and all the other young thugs in another bunch, the regular kids like you in a third bunch and me off to the side by myself.”

thugs: \_\_\_\_\_

8. “This is the only way you little punks is gonna learn to be **punctual**. I hope that fool has a pleasant walk to school.’ Then no matter how hard the late kid banged on the side of the bus the driver would just take off, laughing out the window.”

punctual: \_\_\_\_\_

9. “. . . instead of digging each one of the couple hundred dead dinosaurs a grave we dug one giant hole and buried all the **radioactive** ones in it, then we put a big rock on top so no radioactivity could leak out.”

radioactive: \_\_\_\_\_

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# Check Your Understanding

## Multiple Choice

Circle the letter of the best answer to each question.

1. Why does Momma always cover her mouth when she smiles?
  - a. to hide the gaps in her teeth
  - b. so the kids won't see her laughing
  - c. to keep from laughing out loud
2. What is the Brown Bomber?
  - a. one of Kenny's dinosaurs
  - b. a nickname for Byron
  - c. the Watsons' car
3. How can Kenny tell when Momma's worried?
  - a. She repeats herself.
  - b. She talks Southern-style.
  - c. She wrings her hands.
4. What two things does Kenny think are wrong with him?
  - a. his accent and his eyes
  - b. his clothes and his looks
  - c. his intelligence and his eyes
5. How does Byron tell Kenny to hide his lazy eye?
  - a. look at people sideways
  - b. put a hand over the lazy eye
  - c. squint his eyes
6. Why do the kids call Kenny "Poindexter"?
  - a. because of the way he dresses
  - b. because they admire him
  - c. because he's smart
7. Where is Rufus from?
  - a. Michigan
  - b. Alabama
  - c. Arkansas
8. What is Kenny's favorite game?
  - a. playing How to Survive a Blizzard
  - b. playing Nazis and Americans with toy dinosaurs
  - c. playing on the swings
9. What two things does Kenny say are wrong with Rufus?
  - a. his accent and his clothes
  - b. his eyes and his intelligence
  - c. his teeth and his walk
10. Why does Momma give Kenny extra sandwiches and apples?
  - a. He asks for them.
  - b. She thinks he needs to eat more.
  - c. He shares them with Rufus and Cody.

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## Check Your Understanding

### Short Answer

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Write a short answer for each question.

1. Why does Dad say the kids could have been “the Hambonettes”?
2. Why are the Watsons going to Aunt Cydney’s house?
3. What happens to Byron while he and Kenny are scraping the windows of the Brown Bomber?
4. Why doesn’t Kenny believe Byron is in trouble when he hears By mumbling for help? What convinces him?
5. Why does Kenny call Byron the Lipless Wonder?
6. Who is the king of Clark? How does Kenny compare him to Byron?
7. Why is Kenny nervous about Byron going to junior high school?
8. In what ways does Kenny think Rufus will be his personal saver?
9. How does Kenny lose his dinosaurs?
10. Why does Rufus stop playing with Kenny? Why does Rufus come back?

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## *Deepen Your Understanding*

*Hyperbole* (hy-PER-buh-lee) is the use of exaggeration, or making things seem more extreme than they really are. When Kenny says, “It was about a zillion degrees below zero,” he is using hyperbole.

Choose a passage in which Kenny uses exaggeration. Below, try rewriting that passage without using hyperbole. Then write a paragraph explaining which version of the passage you prefer, and why.

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