

The Watsons Go to Birmingham--1963 Study Guide

**The Watsons Go to Birmingham--1963 by Christopher
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Plot Summary

In *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, the Watsons are a black family living in Flint, Michigan, and the narrator Kenny is the middle child, an intelligent boy who is often made fun of at school. Because Kenny's older brother By continually gets into trouble, the family travels to Birmingham, Alabama, so that By can spend the summer with his grandmother. The family is in Birmingham when segregationists blow up a church, and initially, everyone thinks that By's sister Joey has been killed. Kenny, who sees the destruction at the church, has to come to terms with this act of hatred.

Kenny is the middle child in a black family of five living in Flint, Michigan. Dad has a sense of humor and likes to "cut up." Momma is from Birmingham, Alabama, and the frozen winters in Flint are too cold for her. Kenny's older brother, By, is thirteen, and he is a bully who's been left behind at school. He is so vain that he gets his lips stuck to the side mirror of the car he's supposed to be de-icing because he tries to kiss his reflection. Kenny's younger sister, Joey, is in kindergarten. Kenny is good at reading and his teachers all think he's smart, but the other children make fun of him, especially since Kenny has a lazy eye that makes him look cross-eyed. At Kenny's school, he is sometimes bothered by a bully, Larry Dunn. Kenny also makes friends with Rufus, a poor boy from the South who the other kids make fun of.

By lies to his younger siblings all the time, including telling them that Southerners have thin blood that makes them freeze up dead in the cold, a story that makes Joey stop whining about her mother over-dressing her every day. By gets in trouble for lighting matches in the house for fun, buying food on the family's credit when he's not allowed, and many other "adventures." He finally gets his hair dyed and straightened in a Mexican haircut, and his parents are fed up. They decide to take him to Birmingham to stay with his grandmother until he straightens up.

The family drives down to Birmingham in their old car, the Brown Bomber, that Dad has fixed up for the trip. Down in Birmingham, By seems to start misbehaving less right away. Kenny, though, gets into trouble when he swims where he's not supposed to and almost drowns. He sees the Wool Pooh, a monster By made up in one of his lies, but which Kenny believes is real. Kenny is still recovering when a local church is bombed by segregationists. The whole family thinks Joey has died. Kenny goes to the church and sees a girl trapped under concrete that he thinks is his sister. He sees the Wool Pooh again, and wrenches the girl's shoe from the monster. It turns out that Joey left the church and is fine, but back in Birmingham, Kenny is ashamed that he didn't save the girl he thought was his sister. He struggles with understanding what happened in Birmingham, and his brother By helps him work through some of his feelings.



Chapter 1, And You Wonder Why We Get Called the Weird Watsons

Chapter 1, And You Wonder Why We Get Called the Weird Watsons Summary

In *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, the Watsons are a black family living in Flint, Michigan, and the narrator Kenny is the middle child, an intelligent boy who is often made fun of at school. Because Kenny's older brother By continually gets into trouble, the family travels to Birmingham, Alabama, so that By can spend the summer with his grandmother. The family is in Birmingham when segregationists blow up a church. Initially, everyone thinks that By's sister Joey has been killed. Kenny, who sees the destruction at the church, has to come to terms with this act of hatred.

The novel begins on a freezing cold day in Flint, Michigan, when the furnace isn't enough to heat the Watson house. The family huddles under a blanket for warmth, and Momma is coldest because she is from the South. By, who is thirteen, is too cool to huddle with his family. When they hear on the weather how warm it is in the South, Momma complains that she should have listened to an old boyfriend, Moses "Hambone" Henderson, who told her not to marry Dad. Dad makes fun of "Hambone," pretending that he said Flint was where the film *Nanook of the North* was shot, and where "Chinese" live in igloos. Momma says that Flint is like living in an igloo and that it's nicer in Birmingham, Alabama, which Dad counters with a reminder of the "Coloreds Only" bathrooms.

The family contacts Aunt Cydney, who says to come spend the night at her warm house. Dad finally gets the Brown Bomber, the family's 1948 Plymouth, started and sends Kenny and By out to clean the ice off the windows. As Kenny cleans his side of the car, he is certain By will try to get out of his share of the work. Then, Kenny starts hearing By making strange noises and thinks By is trying to trick him, like when By and his friend Buphead told Kenny they were teaching him how to survive a blizzard, as an excuse for throwing him in the snow and spitting snow on him. It turns out that By's lips are stuck to the rear view mirror; he tried to kiss his own reflection.

Kenny calls the family out, and Momma and Dad can't figure out how to get By free. Dad can't stop laughing at the situation. They try hot water, but it freezes. Then Momma sends Dad inside to call the hospital. When he's gone, she rips By off the mirror. Kenny ends up having to do By's work after all, cleaning off the windows, and on the way, Kenny teases By that he's going to make a mean comic book character called the Liplless Wonder, who is afraid of cold mirrors.



Chapter 1, And You Wonder Why We Get Called the Weird Watsons Analysis

The novel is told first-person from Kenny's point of view, so the world is seen through the eyes of a ten-year-old. Still, there are important problems of race that Kenny, despite his young age, must come to terms with. The novel deals with two primary locations, Flint, Michigan that represents the northern United States and Birmingham, Alabama, which presents the South. The South creates strong emotions, both good and bad, in the characters in the novel. In a community of African-Americans, the South represents home and family as well as a history of slavery, bigotry, and poverty. The author uses the weather to draw this distinction between North and South. The South is hot, and the North is freezing cold. Momma's hatred of the cold links her to the South as much as the southern accent that surfaces whenever she's upset or excited.

Dad makes fun of the South, mimicking Hambone Henderson's southern accent, but also portraying him as ignorant. He confuses Alaska with Michigan and Inuit with Chinese. Dad is trying to be funny, not seriously saying that Hambone believed Flint, Michigan was full of igloos, but at the root of his joking is an association of the South with ignorance. When Dad mentions the "Coloreds Only" bathrooms in Birmingham, Alabama, he is bringing into the story the backdrop of racial unrest that affects the Watsons' life. Kenny is a normal boy with normal boyhood problems, but he will face a world with larger problems that he is only somewhat aware of, since he is only ten.

By is a central character in the novel. When it begins, By is a vain bully. He teases and tortures his younger brother, and he is enamored of his own reflection in the car mirror. By doesn't realize that his behavior is going to bring him bad consequences, but the incident where his lips get stuck to the mirror is an indication that By's misbehavior will lead him into trouble.



Chapter 2, Give My Regards to Clark, Poindexter

Chapter 2, Give My Regards to Clark, Poindexter Summary

At Clark Elementary School, Larry Dunn is the bully who rules the kindergarten through fourth grade. He is only outranked by Byron Watson and his friend Buphead, sixth-graders who don't care about the younger kids. Once, Kenny finds a dollar, and Larry tells him it must be fifty cents that Larry dropped that got together with another fifty cents. Larry makes Kenny break the dollar and give him half. Kenny is convinced that the only reason Larry didn't take it all is because By is Kenny's brother.

Kenny loves to read, which makes teachers treat him differently and makes other kids make fun of him. Two years previously, when Kenny is in second grade, his teacher takes him to the fifth-grade class to read passages from Langston Hughes and show the older students what they can achieve. By is in the class and looks angry, and Kenny tries to read quick to be finished faster. His teacher just turns the book upside down to make him read slower. Afterward, Byron prevents the other kids from beating Kenny up, telling Kenny that he ought to make the teachers pay him for putting on a show. Kenny also has a lazy eye that makes him cross-eyed. Byron teaches him to look at people sideways, so his eyes line up. Even with By at the school, Kenny gets into fights and gets called names.

The worst time for Kenny is when By and Buphead skip school and don't get on the bus. By sends his regards to the school, calling Kenny the derisive nickname Poindexter. On those days, Kenny sits behind the bus driver for protection. One day, the bus driver stops for two kids who are late, though usually the bus driver passes up anyone who isn't on time. The boys are polite, have Southern accents, and are dressed in torn-up clothes, and Kenny realizes that now the kids have someone else to tease instead of him. Kenny thinks of the older boy as his personal saver. The boy says, "Hiya, y'all!" to the bus, and everyone starts making fun of him. Larry Dunn throws an apple core. The bus driver yells at the children and tells the new boy to sit next to Kenny.

Chapter 2, Give My Regards to Clark, Poindexter Analysis

Kenny and By are opposites in some ways. Kenny is teased at school because he is good at reading and because he has a lazy eye. By, instead of being one of the children who is tormented, is a tormentor. By is a bully like Larry, and he is a screw-up in school. Still, By has some affection for his younger brother. He may tease and even torment his younger brother, but he seems to be proud of Kenny also. By is torn between two



aspects of himself. He hangs out with Buphead and gets into trouble, but on the other hand he does things like helping Kenny find a way to talk to others without looking cross-eyed. By needs to find who he is. Is he a bully who will be mean to others, or will he stand up and learn how to be a good person?

The children at Kenny's school reflect Dad's underlying attitudes toward the South. When Rufus comes to Kenny's school, the children make fun of him for being southern. Rufus talks with a southern accent, and the children think of him as a hick, similar to how Dad makes fun of Hambone's southern accent. The children also make fun of Rufus for being poor, and poverty is associated with the South. Blacks in the South at the time of the novel have few opportunities to rise up out of poverty, part of the bigger picture that the children Kenny's age don't see yet.



Chapter 3, The World's Greatest Dinosaur War Ever

Chapter 3, The World's Greatest Dinosaur War Ever Summary

The older new boy from the bus, Rufus Fry, turns out to be in Kenny's class, and the teacher sits them together, to Kenny's annoyance. Kenny is afraid the class will tease both of them twice as much. At lunch, Rufus comes up and talks to Kenny, and Kenny gives Rufus one of his mother's peanut butter sandwiches. Rufus saves half for his younger brother Cody. Rufus asks about Kenny's lazy eye and comments on how fat and slow the squirrels are, telling Kenny that he and his brother used to hunt squirrels for food in Arkansas. Kenny is disbelieving that Rufus has shot a gun before.

Rufus starts sitting with Kenny on the bus every day, and Kenny shares his sandwiches during every lunch. Rufus starts coming over to Kenny's house each evening at 5:30 and they play with Kenny's plastic dinosaurs. Rufus doesn't mind being the Nazi dinosaurs who fight the American ones. Kenny used to play with LJ Jones, but LJ managed to steal a huge proportion of Kenny's massive dinosaur collection.

As Kenny retells it, LJ tells him that they should have a great dinosaur war. Kenny brings his dinosaurs outside, and he and LJ begin to play. Then, since the boys are using atomic warfare on the dinosaurs, LJ says that they should bury the dead dinosaurs so that the live ones don't get radiation poisoning and die. Kenny agrees, and they make mass dinosaur graves marked with rocks. Finally, LJ tells Kenny that they should visit Larry Dunn's fort, since Larry and his friend Banky are away playing ball. Kenny puts his dinosaurs back in a pillowcase, noting that LJ seems to have a T-rex and a triceratops in his back pocket. Kenny sneaks his dinosaur collection back in the house and goes off with Kenny. At nine o'clock, bedtime, Kenny realizes that he never dug up the buried dinosaurs. He takes a flashlight and runs outside only to discover that the graves are empty. Kenny stops playing with LJ after that.

At school, kids start making fun of Rufus instead of Kenny because of how he talks and his worn-out clothes. Rufus and Cody only have two pairs of pants each, and one pair of jeans that they share. One day on the bus, Larry Dunn makes a joke that the boys switch off underwear when they switch who's wearing the jeans. Everyone starts laughing, and Kenny laughs, too. Rufus gets upset and stops talking with Kenny. He doesn't come to Kenny's house anymore. When Kenny goes to Rufus's house, Rufus says he doesn't want to play with Kenny anymore and that he thought Kenny was different. Kenny discovers that he misses Rufus, and when his mother asks him what's wrong, Kenny starts crying and tells her what happened. The next day, Momma goes to Rufus's house, and that night, Rufus and Cody come over at 5:30. Kenny apologizes to Rufus and says that he is different from the other kids. Rufus says that he knows, and that it's his turn to play the American dinosaurs.



Chapter 3, The World's Greatest Dinosaur War Ever Analysis

Kenny doesn't want to associate with Rufus, because he knows that Rufus has characteristics that other kids make fun of. Rufus is in the same boat as Kenny, because he is one of the kids who others pick on. Kenny, instead of feeling empathy, wants to get away from Rufus. He wants to get away from his own problems. However, Kenny keeps his negative feelings to himself, and when Rufus hangs out with Kenny, Kenny doesn't try to make him go away. Kenny doesn't seem to realize that Rufus doesn't bring lunch simply because his family can't afford food. Kenny is startled that Rufus and his brother shot and ate squirrels, and it never occurs to Kenny that hunting squirrels isn't a game for them. It's a matter of survival.

In this chapter, LJ is contrasted with Rufus. LJ only hangs out with Kenny because he envies Kenny's dinosaur collection and wants them for himself. He ends up stealing from Kenny. On the other hand, Rufus wants to be Kenny's friend. He's more interested in friendship than in dinosaurs. Kenny only comes to appreciate this after accidentally laughing at Rufus's poverty. Rufus and his brother can't afford clothes, just like they can't afford food for lunches. The children who tease them don't see the reality behind what they're making fun of. Kenny himself doesn't understand the whole picture of what's going on, but once Rufus is no longer spending time with him, Kenny realizes that he misses Rufus's friendship. Kenny is learning a lesson about life and the consequences of his behavior.



Chapter 4, Froze-Up Southern Folks

Chapter 4, Froze-Up Southern Folks Summary

Because Momma is worried about the cold, Kenny and Joey have to bundle up with too many clothes for school, and Kenny has to help Joey undress. She gets hot and sweats until she's soaked, and Kenny dries her off with a towel. Joey whines when Momma dresses her and says she is the laughing "sock" of the kindergarten. Momma insists they need the protection from the cold. Kenny tells By what a problem taking Joey's coats off is, and By says Kenny was the same way when Kenny was younger. By says he'll help stop Joey from whining so much, though.

By says he'll tell Joey and Kenny a secret and makes them practice acting surprised, so they can seem surprised when Momma finally tells them the truth. By tells Joey that Southern folks have thin blood and freeze up in the winter at night. Trucks disguised as garbage trucks collect them in the morning, before everyone is awake, so the frozen bodies won't litter the streets. Kenny can't help but partially believe the story, even though he knows By is manipulating Joey so that she won't whine anymore.

Because Momma is afraid of the cold, the Watson kids get real leather gloves, two pairs per year. If someone loses a pair, Momma ties the next pair on with string. Kenny gives one of his gloves to Rufus. Then, he decides to give Rufus the pair and say he's lost it, so he gets to wear his second pair. The second pair gets stolen from the school closet, and Larry Dunn starts wearing leather gloves, but they're black instead of brown. Larry gives the kids "Super Maytag Washes," cycles of shoving snow on them. Rufus notices that some black from Larry's gloves rubs off in the snow. Larry has put shoe polish on the stolen gloves. By sees Kenny crying, and Kenny tells what's happened. By beats up Larry to get the gloves back. By tries to make Kenny hit Larry, but Kenny throws the punch. By hits his brother in retaliation and then starts throwing Larry into a fence, pretending Larry is playing a carp in a movie jumping into a net. Kenny notices that Larry's shoes have holes in them, covered over with cardboard. Kenny can't watch and regrets ever telling By what happened.

Chapter 4, Froze-Up Southern Folks Analysis

Kenny doesn't remember acting like Joey a few years ago, when he was in kindergarten. He has already grown up a lot, even though he has a long way to go. Joey is an example of what Kenny used to be like and how he's changed, while By is an example of what Kenny might be like in a few more years, depending on what choices he makes. By makes up the story about thin southern blood to frighten his younger siblings, and Joey is drawn into the story because she is young enough to believe whatever her brother tells her. Kenny is old enough to be a little skeptical. He is starting to think for himself, but he is still drawn in by By's lies. He is still young enough that it's hard to separate what's true and what isn't.



The story of Kenny's gloves shows that Kenny is learning about the world and about how to behave. He wants to share his gloves with Rufus, who has none. However, instead of telling his mother the truth, he tells her a lie. This gets Kenny into trouble, showing that Kenny's negative actions like lying have bad consequences. When Kenny's gloves are stolen, he doesn't know what to do. By's solution is to beat up Larry, and this scene shows the deep anger that By has inside. By's method of dealing with the world is through violence. Kenny is appalled at what he sees, and he is likely learning that he does not want to go down By's path in life.



Chapter 5, Nazi Parachutes Attack America and Get Shot Down over the Flint River by Captain Byron Watson and His Flamethrower of Death

Chapter 5, Nazi Parachutes Attack America and Get Shot Down over the Flint River by Captain Byron Watson and His Flamethrower of Death Summary

Byron is caught lighting matches, and Momma threatens to burn him. Joetta stops her by crying and begging. Momma tells the story of her house catching fire when she was a little girl. She swears to God that she will burn Byron if she catches him again. Still, By starts pretending he's making a movie about Nazi parachutes. He makes toilet paper parachutes that he sets on fire and drops into the toilet. Kenny watches him through the bathroom keyhole. Momma hears the toilet flushing and catches By, then drags him down the stairs.

Momma holds Byron by his throat, scaring Joey and Kenny with her anger. Then, Momma throws By down on the couch and tells Joey to get her some matches. Joey refuses, afraid that Momma will burn By, and Momma tells Kenny to get the matches. Kenny also won't go, and Momma goes herself. Her voice is Southern, as it gets when she is angry. The younger kids beg Byron to run off until Dad is home, but he doesn't. Momma comes back with Vaseline, a Band-Aid, and a book of matches. Kenny finds Byron's movie-making game appealing, but if the punishment is being burned, he thinks it's not worth it.

Joey keeps getting in Momma's way, and Momma sets her down and tries to explain that she doesn't want to hurt By, but doesn't want the kids or their pets getting burned in a fire. She says she needs By to know how dangerous and painful fire is. Momma reminds Joey that she swore to God that she would burn By, and Joey finally admits that since Momma swore, she has to do it. Momma promises to burn only By's fingers. By tries to make a run for it, but Momma tackles him. She lights a match, and it comes closer and closer to his finger. She promises next time to burn his whole hand and send him to a boy's home. At the last moment, Joetta runs up and blows out the match. Joey keeps blowing out the matches, and finally Momma gives up and leaves By to Dad when he gets home.



Chapter 5, Nazi Parachutes Attack America and Get Shot Down over the Flint River by Captain Byron Watson and His Flamethrower of Death Analysis

Momma reacts extremely to Byron's game of playing with matches, which is essentially childish and harmless. By beating up Larry Dunn is a more serious problem. Momma, however, is controlled by her fears. She is afraid of the cold, so she unreasonably wraps up her children in too many coats and scarves when they go outside. She is afraid of fire, and so she reacts with rage when By continues to disobey and play with matches. Still, Momma's goal is to teach By about the consequences of his actions. She wants to teach By the pain of fire when it burns. By is still living partially in a child's world, where he doesn't see the serious issues of the world around him. Kenny is like By to a certain extent, and he finds By's game with the matches tempting. This again shows that By is an example of one path that Kenny might travel down as he grows up.

Joey is young and doesn't understand the problems that By has. She naively only sees By as a loving older brother, not a troubled young teenager. Joey can't help but stop her mother from hurting By, no matter what the consequences are to herself. This is part of Joey's angelic nature, one that sees little of the real nature of the world as of yet.



Chapter 6, Swedish Cremes and Welfare Cheese

Chapter 6, Swedish Cremes and Welfare Cheese Summary

Momma tells Byron and Kenny to go to the store and get milk, bread, and tomato paste. Byron tries to argue, but Momma just repeats her order. When Byron asks for money, Momma says that they've arranged with the grocery store to sign for their purchases until payday. Byron assumes that they're on welfare and refuses to eat welfare food. Momma scolds him that he's eaten welfare food before, and that this is not welfare. Kenny and By scoot out of the house, and at the store, By gets embarrassed and makes Kenny stand in line and sign for the food, while By looks at comic books. Mr. Mitchell, who is behind the counter, explains to Kenny that it's not a welfare list. The sheet just means Kenny's father will pay for the groceries all at once, after payday.

On the way home, By is cheerful, and he even carries the groceries for four blocks. Kenny decides to take advantage of By's good mood to ask what the word "peon" means. By explains that it means people so poor the "rich folks would just as soon pee on them as anything else." Then, Kenny asks what the welfare food Momma said they'd eaten in the past was. By is certain it's the powdered milk Dad makes in the mornings and cheese that comes in big boxes.

A week later, Kenny sees By near the store, eating Swedish Creme cookies with pink frosting and green apples from a tree. By gives Kenny some cookies, since By has already eaten a bag and a half. After Kenny has incriminated himself by eating some cookies, he realizes By has signed for the cookies at Mitchell's without permission. By sees a mourning dove in a tree and says it's his favorite kind of bird. He starts throwing cookies at it, claiming that nothing bothers mourning doves. Then, a cookie hits the bird in the chest, and it falls down, dead. By sees what he's done and starts crying and throwing up all the cookies and green apples he's eaten. By claims the apples made him sick and drives Kenny away. When Kenny goes back to look at the bird, By has buried it and put a popsicle-stick cross over the grave. Kenny wonders how By can be so mean to kids at school and never worry, but be so upset over a bird.

Chapter 6, Swedish Cremes and Welfare Cheese Analysis

Chapter 6 shows more about By's personality and struggles. By is ashamed of any possible poverty, which is why he's upset about the idea of eating welfare food. He also doesn't understand the workings of the world, which is why he jumps to the conclusion that the arrangement to sign for groceries at the local store really means the family is



getting food on welfare. By's incomplete knowledge is also represented by his definition of the word "peon." By's reaction when he finds out the real arrangement for the groceries shows that By isn't seeing the whole picture. He sees an opportunity to steal groceries, but he doesn't see even the basic consequences of his actions. At the end of the month, when he parents go to pay their bill, they will know what By has done.

By's nature is represented in the incident with the bird. By loves the mourning dove. He thinks it's the best kind of bird because nothing seems to bother it. By wants to be like the bird. He wants to be cool, letting nothing in the outside world bother him. There is a reason, though, why birds fly away when projectiles are thrown at them. Birds are vulnerable, just like people are vulnerable. The mourning dove, though acting cool, puts itself in danger, and By unwittingly destroys what he loves. By, like the bird, doesn't pay attention to the consequences of his actions.



Chapter 7, Every Chihuahua in America Lines Up to Take a Bite out of Byron

Chapter 7, Every Chihuahua in America Lines Up to Take a Bite out of Byron Summary

While Kenny is doing homework and Momma is making dinner, Byron walks in and then, seeing them, turns around and walks out. Suspecting that something is wrong, Momma makes Byron take off his hat, to reveal that Byron has dyed and straightened his hair. Momma makes fun of his hairstyle, calling him Bozo. Kenny laughs, and Byron protests that he thinks Mexican-style hair is cool. Momma warns him that when Dad gets home, By will be sorry. When Joey comes home, she and Kenny go upstairs to see Byron, and Kenny starts making fun of his brother.

Joey begs Byron to wash out his hair, but Byron explains that it won't wash out. It will have to grow out. Joey scolds Kenny for making fun of Byron and asks who got him into this trouble. Kenny says that it has to be Buphead. By tells Kenny that he's like a wolf sensing weakness in the pack leader and attacking him. The children hear Dad coming home, and Momma calls Byron downstairs to show Dad what he's done. On the way downstairs, Kenny keeps making fun of him, pretending to be a reporter interviewing a criminal about to be executed. By hits him in the ear.

When Dad sees Byron's hair, he is furious. He takes Byron upstairs to the bathroom and shaves off all of Byron's hair. Momma calls Kenny downstairs. When they hear Byron scream, Dad calls down that it's just aftershave. Byron emerges with his head clean-shaven. Dad points out that By's ears stick out and says it's from Momma's side of the family, which she denies. By is sent to clean up the bathroom and then go to his room. Dad and Momma send Joey and Kenny outside so that they can talk. When Kenny returns to the house, he hears Dad on the phone with Grandma Sands, Momma's mother, who lives in Alabama. Kenny doesn't realize that more consequences were on the way until a week later, when Dad brings home a TT AB-700.

Chapter 7, Every Chihuahua in America Lines Up to Take a Bite out of Byron Analysis

By gets his hair dyed and straightened and slicked back in a Mexican style, which his parents hate. Momma reacts fairly mildly to By's new haircut, making fun of him and joking with Dad about what By has done. She says that she's in shock. The haircut that By gets is a haircut from a different culture. On one level, By is turning his back on being black, trying to rid himself of the thick, curly black hair that he's inherited. By's father is truly the one who is upset by the hair. By thinks his parents can't do anything about the permanent hair color and straightening, but By's father shows that he still has



the power in the family by shaving By's head. Again, By doesn't think about the consequences of his actions when he gets the hairstyle, which his parents are bound to see and respond to.

Chapter 7 ends with foreshadowing of the future events in the novel. The incident with By's hair is the last straw for his parents, who feel that they must take significant action to change their son's path. The phone call to Grandma Sands hints at events that will soon take place, and the author tantalizes the reader with the mysterious mention of the TT AB-700 at the end of the chapter. The reader is left to wonder what this strange-sounding item might be.



Chapter 8, The Ultra-Glide!

Chapter 8, The Ultra-Glide! Summary

After the incident with By's hair, Momma starts writing in a notebook all the time, and Dad starts buying things for the car: an antenna, tires, spark plugs, oil, antifreeze, and seat covers. Dad says the waxed and polished car needs just one more thing. Kenny guesses that it's a hood ornament, and Joey says that it's perfect. Dad tells Rufus to open the trunk and take out the bag that's there. Joey takes a look inside, and she and Dad make a big deal about revealing the final touch for the car: a pine-tree shaped air freshener.

Dad isn't done buying things for the car, though. One morning, Kenny goes into the bathroom to watch his father shave. When Dad hides his toothbrush, Kenny asks him why. Dad explains that he knows that little boys will use toothbrushes for all kinds of things they're not intended for. Kenny remembers Byron using Kenny's toothbrush to clean quarters and brush the dog's teeth. Dad soaps his face twice, and then asks Kenny if he wants to pretend to shave. Kenny says he's too old and is getting a real mustache. Dad says that if they're going to have to share the mirror in the morning, Kenny will have to let him shave first because Dad is older. When he's done shaving, Dad goes out, and when he comes back, he tells the whole family to come outside for a surprise.

Dad makes them close their eyes, and when they open them, they see something in the car covered in a towel. Kenny gets the honor of pulling away the towel to reveal a car record player. Momma seems upset at the cost and goes into the house, and Dad shows off the True-Tone AB-800 Ultra-Glide record player to the kids. Even By seems impressed, as Dad says that brand-new technology stops the record player from skipping on the bumpy road. He shows the kids the speaker in the back seat, while Byron goes inside to get some records. Momma comes out with Byron and the records, and Dad flirts with her and teases her.

Finally, Dad puts a record on the record player. He plays "Under the Boardwalk," Momma's song. The sound is fantastic. The family sits in the car playing records for two hours, taking turns playing their favorites. Then, Momma makes them turn down the sound and then get out of the car while she and Dad play romantic songs. Finally, Momma asks if Dad has told everyone what's happening. She tells the kids that they're all going down to Alabama, so Byron can stay with Grandma Sands for the summer, and maybe for the next school year if his behavior doesn't improve. Everyone is shocked that Momma and Dad are actually going through with the threat to send Byron to Grandma Sands, who is very strict. Byron runs into the house, swearing, and Momma notes that he won't get away with that at Grandma Sands' house.



Chapter 8, The Ultra-Glide! Analysis

The children don't interpret the signs of what's going to happen in their own home, just as they don't fully see the realities of the world they live in. As Momma starts writing in her notebook and Dad starts fixing up the car, clearly something is about to occur. Though Kenny isn't old enough to fully understand everything going on around him, he is beginning to grow older. He tells his father that he's too old to begin to shave, and he believes that he's already starting to grow a mustache, a symbol of adulthood.

The Ultra-Glide is a surprise to Momma, who is worried about the cost of the gadget. It's a new technology, predating the cassettes and CDs that will come later, and looking back on it from a future perspective, the Ultra-Glide is doomed to have problems. Part of Dad's personality is revealed by his purchase of the Ultra-Glide. The reader already knows that Dad likes to make jokes and tease his family. The Ultra-Glide shows a little more about him. Dad likes technology and gadgets, and he doesn't act fully as a partner with his wife, who has no say in the decision to buy the record player. However, Dad and Momma do act as partners in the more important decision to send By away to live with Grandma Sands in Birmingham.



Chapter 9, The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963

Chapter 9, The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 Summary

On Sunday, Kenny gets up early and sees Dad listening to music in the Brown Bomber. Kenny goes out to sit with him and asks if Byron really has to go to Alabama. Dad says Byron is learning the wrong things in Flint. He asks if Kenny's heard about what's happening in the South. Kenny has seen pictures of angry white people yelling at little black kids trying to go to school. Dad says that Byron needs to be ready for the world and that spending time in the South will show Byron what the world can be like.

Kenny tells his father that making adult decisions seems scary, and he's not sure he'll be a good parent. His father compares growing up to Kenny sitting on Dad's lap to steer the car. At first, Kenny thought it was scary, but after practice, it gets easier. Dad says he hopes Kenny gets a lot of practice being an adult before becoming a parent. Dad's sure Kenny will be a good parent. Finally, Kenny asks to put on his favorite record, "Yakety Yak," but before he gets it he asks why Dad bought the record player. Dad says he and Momma made a deal that if one of them listened to country music, the other could get a divorce, and country music is all that's on the radio in the South.

A neighbor, Mrs. Davidson, brings Joey a white, blue-eyed angel figurine that she's named Joetta, because the angel's smile reminds her of Joey. Joey thanks her but isn't pleased. Joey brings the angel upstairs and puts it under her socks. When Mrs. Davidson is gone, Joey explains that she doesn't think the angel looks like her because it's white. Momma laughs. All angels are white.

Meanwhile, Byron acts like he's not going to Alabama. The night before they leave, Momma and Dad make Byron sleep in their room, so he doesn't try to run away. The next morning, they start out, and Momma reads from her notebook. The trip should take three days. The first night, they'll stay in a motel for the first time. The second night, they might sleep in a car at a rest stop in Tennessee. They'll stop once each day for hamburgers, plus the cooler in the trunk is full of food. Momma's notebook is titled "The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963" and Momma drew a flower and a bee on it, which Kenny at first thinks is a strange looking bird. Momma also has a lot of trivia about the trip and the roads they're taking. Before they left, Byron told Buphead that he wasn't going to talk to his family at all during the trip, but he asks about the record player right away. Dad says he can have the first turn picking a song. Kenny makes fun of Byron for giving up on not talking, and they get into a fight that Dad quickly quells. They're on their way.



Chapter 9, The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 Analysis

Kenny's conversation with Dad in the car shows that one of the major issues Kenny is dealing with is growing up. Kenny isn't sure how adults know the difference between right and wrong, and he is also only dimly aware of some of the larger issues of the world he's living in. Kenny's father asks him if he's aware of what's going on in the South. Kenny doesn't really know. He's seen pictures of white people yelling at little girls trying to go to school.

Though Kenny doesn't understand what's going on, it's an important element of the novel. At the time of the story, in the South, many black children still had to go to all-black schools, which were usually poor and didn't provide as good an education as white schools. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation, specifically forcing blacks and whites to have separate education, was illegal. However, in 1963, blacks were still struggling to get equal education with whites. In many communities, whites reacted violently to blacks who wanted equal rights.

Kenny has seen images of some of the violence, but he doesn't understand the issues of racism that will affect his future and, in fact, affect his experience of life in Flint, as well. The angel that Mrs. Davidson gives Joey shows the conflict between black and white throughout the United States. The angel is white because all angels are white. Joetta can't relate to the angel and can't see herself as being angelic because she is black. Blacks are relegated to being second-class.

In the midst of racial turmoil in the country, Kenny is just a little boy, trying to understand how to grow up to make good decisions. He finds it scary, and his dad confirms that being a grown-up has a lot of scary responsibilities. Just like anything in life, Kenny will need to practice making decisions and learn from his mistakes, as well as his parents' mistakes.



Chapter 10, Tangled Up in God's Beard

Chapter 10, Tangled Up in God's Beard Summary

Outside of Toledo, Ohio, the Watsons pull into a rest stop and eat some food from the cooler. The boys find that the bathrooms are outhouses, not real toilets, and they go to the bathroom in the woods instead. The water Momma pumps to make Kool-Aid also tastes funny to them. Momma tells By that Grandma Sands also has an outhouse instead of a toilet. Grandma Sands thinks it's better than having a toilet inside the house. By is horrified when his father tells him about using a Sears catalog as toilet paper and takes some toilet paper from the rest stop to bring with him to Birmingham.

Once the family leaves the rest stop, Joey is the first to fall asleep, stretched out between By and Kenny, who argue about who gets to hold her drooling head. Next, Kenny falls asleep and wakes up when he feels Joey drooling on his pants. He's relieved that he didn't wet himself. By takes over Joey's head, and Kenny takes off her shoes. Inside, he sees a Buster Brown logo. Kenny falls asleep again, and wakes up to hear his father say that instead of finding a motel, he wants to stop in Cincinnati for some gas and move on. Momma seems worried about not stopping according to schedule.

Kenny knows that Dad is planning to drive straight through to Birmingham, because he overheard Dad talking to Mr. Johnson about it when Mr. Johnson, who knows a lot about cars, was looking over the Brown Bomber. Dad knows it will save money, but he doesn't tell Momma about the plan because it would upset all her plans. Dad makes fun of his wife's careful planning to Mr. Johnson.

Kenny sleeps most of the way through to Tennessee, where the family stops at a pitch-black rest stop with no bathrooms at all. The family is in the Appalachian Mountains, and the kids find the darkness frightening, with black mountains looming all around them. The darkness shows them a sky full of stars, though. After a nervous snack, By and Kenny go into the woods to relieve themselves. By tells Kenny that what's really scary about Appalachia are the rednecks who would hang and eat black folks. When the family is back in the car, they drive through the clear, cool air with the windows down, and they all stick their hands out to feel it rushing by. Momma calls it tickling God's beard.

Chapter 10, Tangled Up in God's Beard Analysis

As the children travel out of Flint, they begin to expand their knowledge of the world. The outhouse is one of the first inklings of this. The boys can't imagine a world without flush toilets and indoor plumbing, but they're traveling into a world that still holds on to much of the past. The more impoverished the area is, the more likely it is to have old technology as well as other problems that linger from past times.

When By travels away from his environment, his behavior also changes. By tells his friend Buphead that he won't talk to his family at all during the trip, but this idea soon falls by the wayside. By is very young, still. He is influenced by his surroundings and by his friend Buphead instead of making decisions on his own. As his environment changes, By's attitude begins to change.

Dad's attitude toward his wife is revealed further in Chapter 10. Dad buys the record player without consulting his wife, and he also plans to make the trip in one long stretch without consulting her. He undermines her power and authority, demeaning her position in the family. When Dad talks to Mr. Johnson, he makes fun of Momma, and part of that is making fun of her southern accent. His attitudes are influenced by prejudice against the South and a lack of respect for Momma as a true partner. However, Dad doesn't mean harm, and his prejudices don't make him a bad person. He is affected by his culture.



Chapter 11, Bobo Brazil Meets the Sheik

Chapter 11, Bobo Brazil Meets the Sheik Summary

When Kenny wakes up next, he is in the front seat. The Ultra-Glide is stuck, repeating the same phrase. Kenny falls asleep again and wakes up in the morning, with Joey drooling on him. Kenny asks when they'll get there, and Dad says that everyone's asking. He also says the record player isn't working right anymore. Kenny promises to stay awake but falls asleep again. By the time they arrive in Alabama, Dad is looking exhausted. He's got stubble on his face, and he's even listening to country music on the radio. He jokes about changing everyone's names to country names.

Dad admits that he tricked the family and jokes about how he drove on, despite the kids' unhappiness. He tells them that he read in Scientific Popular magazine how a vacuum cleaner puts babies to sleep. He says that he started making noises like a vacuum cleaner once they got to Alabama, to keep the family asleep. The kids fall asleep again, and when they wake, the family is at Grandma Sands' house. Kenny imagines that Grandma Sands is a big, mean troll with a giant cane, but she turns out to be a tiny old woman.

Momma embraces Grandma Sands, and then Grandma Sands calls all the kids to her and hugs them and cries. She looks so fragile that Kenny is afraid to hug her hard. Kenny has imagined that Grandma and Byron will be engaged in a battle to the death, but now that he's seen Grandma Sands, he's afraid that she can't stand up to Byron. Byron is polite but a little distant when he greets Grandma Sands, who says he's grown up strong and will be able to help around the house. Grandma Sands mentions someone called Mr. Robert, and Momma immediately asks who that is. Grandma Sands doesn't respond, but it turns out Mr. Robert is living with her. Grandma sends By to the store for food, correcting him fiercely when he doesn't call her "ma'am." Kenny is startled at how quickly By seems to cave in to Grandma Sands.

Chapter 11, Bobo Brazil Meets the Sheik Analysis

Grandma Sands isn't at all as Kenny envisioned her. This is another gap in Kenny's view of the world. He knows that his brother has described Grandma Sands as mean and strict, but Kenny is so young that he never knew his grandmother. Kenny, without any real knowledge of his grandmother, has built her up in his mind as something that she isn't. She's not a troll or a monster. She's a woman. Her quality of authority that makes her difficult to disobey is not what Kenny expects, and at first, he underestimates her.

Kenny is somewhat disappointed in the reality Grandma Sands, and he also doesn't understand By's reaction to Grandma Sands because he doesn't see By for the young and somewhat insecure boy that he really is, under all his bluff. When By arrives in



Alabama, he is polite and lets himself be corrected by his grandmother into calling her "ma'am." He doesn't object to going to the store like he did earlier with his mother in Flint, even though the store here is farther away. By reacting differently, in part, because he is less comfortable in his new environment and away from the influences that cause him to misbehave.



Chapter 12, That Dog Won't Hunt No More

Chapter 12, That Dog Won't Hunt No More Summary

The children find Birmingham sweltering hot. By sleeps on the floor to keep cool and is gone when Kenny wakes up in the morning. Kenny sees By, Dad, and Mr. Robert outside talking and goes to join them. By complains about how much Kenny sweated during the night. Dad and Mr. Robert are talking about a dog, who is too old to hunt anymore. Mr. Robert says both he and the dog lost their desire to hunt in their old age. Mr. Robert says the dog, Toddy, was the best coon dog (raccoon hunting dog) in Alabama when he was younger, and people used to pay \$100 for breeding rights with him.

Mr. Robert tells a story of how Toddy chased a raccoon into the lake. Mr. Robert found the dog drowned and revived him by breathing into his nose. Byron is impressed with the story. Kenny asks about breakfast, and Dad sends him inside to eat. In the kitchen, Momma is talking to Grandma Sands about all the changes in Birmingham. Kenny thinks Grandma Sands' laugh sounds like the Wicked Witch of the West, and he has trouble understanding the Southern accent that she and Momma are talking with.

Kenny gets some cereal, bread, and bacon, and sits down with Grandma Sands, Momma, and Joey. Momma is asking Grandma Sands about people she remembers. Momma is talking more and more with a Southern accent. Momma finally asks about Mr. Robert, and Grandma laughs. Momma asks why she doesn't know anything about Mr. Robert, and Grandma reminds her that Momma's daddy has been dead for twenty years. She calls Mr. Robert her dearest friend, putting a lot of meaning into those words, as if giving Momma a scolding.

Dad, Byron, and Mr. Robert come in, and they say that they're heading to the lake. Dad invites Kenny and Joey along, saying that Momma and Grandma want some time to talk. Outside, the heat makes Kenny and Joey tired. Kenny doesn't want to walk, but he's forced to go. Byron seems to be enjoying himself, though, walking and laughing with Dad and Mr. Robert. Back at the house later, Kenny falls asleep under a fan.

Chapter 12, That Dog Won't Hunt No More Analysis

The heat in Birmingham contrasts with the cold of Flint. Just as Momma is always uncomfortable in the Flint winters, the children, who are used to the cold weather, are uncomfortable in the Birmingham summer. One of the themes that surfaces during the novel is culture. The characters are comfortable in the cultures they live in, and it's hard to see outside of one's own culture. The temperature differences and the levels of

comfort associated with them are a metaphor for cultural differences and the levels of comfort characters experience within and outside of their own cultures.

When Momma talks to her own mother, she becomes less like a mother and more like a daughter. Kenny notices this change in his mother, and he finds it strange to see her being scolded and acting embarrassed. He is seeing that his mother exists in different contexts, aside from what he's used to. As a small boy, Kenny only sees one aspect of his mother, her role in their relationship to each other.

Momma has some problems adjusting to the changes that have happened while she's been gone. She has pictured Birmingham as she left it. While she's away, she doesn't have a way to acclimatize herself to the changes that have been happening. One of the most immediate changes that affect Momma when she arrives in Birmingham is the addition of Mr. Robert to her mother's household. Like Kenny, Momma will have to see her own mother in a new light, in a context outside of their mother-daughter relationship.



Chapter 13, I Meet Winnie's Evil Twin Brother, the Wool Pooh

Chapter 13, I Meet Winnie's Evil Twin Brother, the Wool Pooh Summary

The next day, as Kenny, Joey, and Byron leave for the lake, Grandma Sands warns them against a whirlpool at Collier's Landing that drowned a little boy. On the way to the lake, the sign to Collier's Landing has big warning messages on it. Kenny sees it and begs to go, but Joey says they're not allowed, and asks what the thing was that got the little boy. Kenny says it was a Wool Pooh, Winnie the Pooh's evil brother, who hides under the water and catches little kids. By takes Joey down to the public beach. Kenny is disappointed that his brother isn't breaking the rules, as usual.

Kenny figures that By's story about the Wool Pooh is a lie, and he heads off to Collier's Landing by himself. There's another danger sign near the landing that says six people have been killed there, but the water is beautiful and cool. Kenny doesn't see any signs of a Wool Pooh and figures that Joe Collier probably just wants to keep the lake to himself. Kenny says that when you get into trouble, there are little warning signs on the way, like By and Joey going to the public swimming area, and the knots not coming out of his shoes. Kenny has to take his shoes off with the laces still tied.

Kenny wades into the lake. He tries to grab the little fish that swim around his feet, but they slip away. Kenny sees a big turtle swimming in the water, and he goes further in to try to catch it. The turtle escapes his grasp, and suddenly the ground falls off below his feet. Kenny tries to swim to shore, but something is holding him in the water. He gets pulled under water and comes up again with a mouth full of lake water. He starts to get scared when his head goes down a second time. He knows from cartoons that if you go under three times, you're dead.

Kenny tries to calm down and swim to shore, but he's pulled under again. He sees the Wool Pooh in the water, a big, gray monster with hard, square fingers, and it starts to pull Kenny downward. Kenny struggles in the water. Then he sees Joetta, who looks like the angel Mrs. Davidson gave her, pointing upwards. Kenny struggles up one more time, but he is pulled down again. Then, Kenny sees Byron in the water. By fights the Wool Pooh and pulls Kenny out of the water, where Kenny vomits up water and food. Kenny thinks Byron will make fun of him, but instead Byron holds him, kisses him, and cries.



Chapter 13, I Meet Winnie's Evil Twin Brother, the Wool Pooh Analysis

The whirlpool at Collier's Landing represents the realities of the world. The whirlpool is a real danger, and Kenny cannot recognize it because he doesn't know enough about the world. He's too young to distinguish the real consequences of his actions. Kenny's world is small, and through the trip to Birmingham, it will begin to grow. This development is hazardous, as Kenny discovers when he's sucked into the whirlpool in the lake. Kenny is beginning to take on some of the attributes of By when he misbehaves by going to Collier's Landing, and like By, Kenny's actions lead to trouble.

By is still operating in a child's world when he makes up the story of the Wool Pooh instead of explaining the real dangers of the whirlpool. Kenny sees the Wool Pooh, and on one level, it is a hallucination Kenny experiences while he is drowning, along with seeing his sister as an angel. On another level, the Wool Pooh represents all the dangers of the world that exist outside of his protected child's world. Kenny's mind gives these dangers a form suggested by By's story.

By also grows up a little when he rescues Kenny. He's faced with a very grim reality, and a near tragedy that he could have prevented sooner. By's behavior after he pulls Kenny from the water shows that he recognizes the seriousness of what he's done. He is beginning to learn to make adult decisions and weighing what he chooses to do.



Chapter 14, Every Bird and Bug in Birmingham Stops and Wonders

Chapter 14, Every Bird and Bug in Birmingham Stops and Wonders Summary

On Sunday, Joetta gets ready for Sunday school. Kenny wakes up in time to say goodbye, and he tells Joey that she looks pretty in her dress and shiny black shoes. One of the people taking Joey to Sunday school asks Kenny why he isn't coming, and Kenny says he forgot to get up in time. Kenny has some cereal and goes outside to rest in the shade. Kenny is tired and weak after almost drowning, but he hasn't told anyone about the incident. Momma tells him that the heat is better than winter in Flint, and Kenny disagrees, wishing he were in their igloo at home. After Momma goes back inside, there is a sound like thunder, and everything stops. People start coming outside to see what happened.

Dad worries that Byron's done something, but he was asleep. Kenny is too tired to find out what happened. He starts to go to sleep again, but then he hears Momma scream. Kenny runs inside, and By tells him that someone bombed the church where Joey's Sunday school is. Kenny seems in shock, thinking only about how much trouble By will be in for slamming the door as he runs out. Kenny follows By outside. Momma, Dad, and By are holding each other. People are crying, and the church is destroyed. A man is pulling girls out of the wreckage and setting them on the ground. Kenny walks into the church and sees a shiny black shoe through the smoke, crushed under concrete. He pulls on the shoe and sees the Wool Pooh pulling against him. Finally, he tugs it free and walks in a daze back to Grandma Sands' house.

Kenny makes his bed and sits down. He takes the shoe out of his pocket and sees that it's ripped. The Buster Brown logo is visible inside, torn in half. Joey walks in and asks how Kenny got home so fast, and Kenny is afraid to look at her, thinking she's a ghost. Kenny tries to thank her for helping By save his life when he drowned, but Joey thinks he's acting crazy. She sees the shoe and asks what it is, and Kenny says it's her shoe. Joey thinks he's trying to scare her. Joey leaves the room, but Kenny gets scared and calls her back. He says he loves her, and she throws the shoe at him. Kenny finally looks up and sees that Joey looks normal. He asks her what happened at Sunday school, and she says she went outside because she was hot and thought she saw him across the street, but in different clothes. She followed him back home. Joey starts having a tantrum, asking where Momma and Dad are and why Kenny is acting so strange. Grandma Sands wakes up and tries to calm her. Joey rushes out to get Momma and Dad and tell them Joey is alive, slamming the door behind him.



Chapter 14, Every Bird and Bug in Birmingham Stops and Wonders Analysis

The bombing of the church is the ultimate intrusion of reality on the safe world of childhood. Kenny is suddenly confronted with death, hatred, and violence. Kenny is completely unprepared to deal with the shock of what's happened. His mind is still operating in the world he's used to, at first. He worries that By runs outside without his socks and slams the door. These are the types of problems that exist in Kenny's everyday world. The world of segregationists bombing the church is a whole new reality that Kenny's only been slightly aware of.

Kenny confronts the Wool Pooh again at the church, a representation of death. He struggles against the Wool Pooh for the shoe, but Kenny's hard-won fight is not a fight that's worth winning. When Kenny goes back to his grandmother's house, the shoe is not a trophy but a reminder of his own helplessness. His sister's appearance is a condemnation of him, at first, because he believes she is dead and that he did not have the strength to save her. Kenny isn't able to process his own feelings or what's happening. He's too young, and the situation that he's been thrust into is too adult.



Chapter 15, The World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital

Chapter 15, The World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital Summary

The Watsons leave for Flint the night of the bombing. The police say two white men in a car threw the bomb into the church, or set it to go off on a timer, and it killed four little girls. The family keeps the bombing a secret from Joey. Momma and Dad are worried about Kenny. For hours at a time, he hides behind the couch. Though Kenny told the family he didn't leave the house until Joey came back, Momma and Dad suspect Kenny may have gone into the church.

By calls the area behind the couch the World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital, because when a cat or dog is sick, it hides behind the couch and either gets better or dies. Kenny believes there are magic powers behind the couch that the cats and dogs make deals with. If the pet dies, Dad takes away the body before the kids can see it. If a dog gets better, it is friendlier, but if a cat gets better, it hates people afterward. Kenny wonders if he'll be more like a cat or a dog if he gets better.

Momma tries to get Kenny to play with Rufus, but Kenny can't have fun with Rufus anymore. He gives Rufus his dinosaurs. Momma makes By take Kenny to play basketball, but Kenny knows By doesn't want him there. Kenny hates it when Momma tries to make him play with Joey, who he finds irritating. Kenny starts spending all his time behind the couch, except to eat and go to the bathroom. By figures out where Kenny is, and then the rest of the family finds out somehow. Momma and Dad pretend they don't know where he is, but they talk differently while they're on the couch, saying nice things about Kenny. By starts sleeping on the couch, near Kenny, and he tries to get Kenny to spend time out from behind the couch.

One day, By takes Kenny upstairs and shows him a facial hair that's started growing on his chin. Kenny sees himself in the mirror and starts crying. Kenny asks By why anyone would hurt little kids like the bombers. By thinks the reason is hate. Kenny confesses that he went to the church and thought Joey was killed. He's ashamed that he took the shoe and left Joey in the church with the Wool Pooh. By tells him the Wool Pooh isn't real, and neither are magic powers behind the couch. By says that a part of him saved Joey, because Joey thought she saw him across the street. If Kenny didn't exist, Joey wouldn't have followed the stranger out of the church. By says that life isn't fair, but you have to keep living, and warns Kenny that his time behind the couch is over. Momma, Dad, and Joey are outside listening, and By tells them Kenny is going to be fine. Kenny knows By is wrong about the Wool Pooh, and that there are magic powers, like the way your father smiles at you. Joey is begging to come in the bathroom, and Kenny leaves, thinking of ways to get half his dinosaurs back from Rufus.



Chapter 15, The World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital Analysis

Chapter 15 deals with the consequences of the bombing for the Watson family. Joetta is still fully a child. She does not know what happened, and her parents protect her by keeping her isolated in a child's world, where she does not have to be aware of death and violence. Kenny is still a child, too, but his eyes have been opened to some of the deeper problems of the world around him. He's seen violence and death. Even though his sister didn't die, Kenny blames himself for not being able to fight the Wool Pooh, or ward off death. He hides behind the couch as he tries to process what's happened and his own feelings of guilt and shame.

By is older. He has confronted the realities of the world and come away from the situation with a better knowledge of himself and of what's needed to grow up. He is ready to become an adult, because he's faced the truth about actions and consequences. By's experiences in Birmingham help him to talk to Kenny and help Kenny recover from what's happened. The facial hair that By finds on his chin is a symbol that By is beginning to grow up, reflecting his inner growth as well as his physical growth. By will never be a child again. He is moving to the world of adulthood a little wiser than he was before. Meanwhile, Kenny still has some growing up to do, and he still has some time to be a child. Kenny must return to the world of childhood while he accepts some of the realities of racism and hatred, and the fact that he thinks of his dinosaurs at the end of the novel shows that Kenny is doing just this.



Characters

Kenneth

Kenny Watson is the narrator of the novel. He is a ten-year-old boy living in Flint, Michigan, and his view of the world is not complete. Kenny doesn't understand all the problems of racism that he sees in the news. He doesn't even understand his own brother By, who seems to have two different sides to him. Throughout the novel, Kenny learns lessons about life through his experiences.

Kenny is made fun of at school for reading well and having a lazy eye, so he's pleased when Rufus joins his class. Kenny knows the kids will pick on Rufus instead of him, since Rufus talks funny and is poor. However, Rufus starts to become friends with Kenny. When Kenny accidentally laughs at a joke about Rufus's poor clothes, he loses Rufus's friendship. Kenny begins to learn about the consequences of his actions and the way he should treat other people.

When Kenny goes to Birmingham, he decides to play at Collier's Landing, despite the warnings that children have drowned there. By has told Kenny a story about a "Wool Pooh" that lives in the water, and when Kenny almost drowns, he sees a vision of the Wool Pooh in the water. This monster symbolizes the real dangers of the world that Kenny has been shielded from in childhood. Kenny sees the Wool Pooh again at the bombed church. He is too young to understand death and violence, yet he is confronted by them. Kenny is upset and ashamed that he didn't do enough to save Joey at the church, and he hides behind the couch at home to try to heal. Kenny can't heal in isolation, though. He needs his brother By to help him work through his feelings.

Byron

Byron is Kenny's older brother. He's thirteen, and Kenny calls him a juvenile delinquent. By's family sometimes calls him "Daddy Cool" because By always tries to act cool and pretend that nothing bothers him. Byron's parents are very worried about their son because they think he's gone down the wrong track. By has been left behind at school and is the school's biggest bully along with his friend Buphead, who encourages Byron to get into more trouble.

By has a good side to his personality. He helps Kenny figure out a way to look at people so that his lazy eye isn't so apparent, and he keeps the other kids from bothering Kenny about his reading exhibition in By's class. By seems proud of his brother, and he seems to want to protect Kenny. He beats up Larry Dunn to get Kenny's gloves back. By gets upset and cries when he sees he's accidentally killed a mourning dove, a type of bird he especially admires for its cool behavior.

Despite By's better qualities, he also has a lot of anger and is prone to violence. By's way of helping Kenny is to beat up Larry, although Kenny is upset and appalled. By tells



his younger siblings lies to tease and trick them, and he's vain enough to kiss his own reflection. By doesn't consider the consequences of his actions, and he gets into so much trouble that his parents want him to live with his grandmother in Birmingham for the summer, or longer, until his behavior improves. When By goes to Birmingham, he is removed from Buphead and the city, and his behavior seems to improve. He has to face the real world, and real danger, when Kenny almost drowns and when the church is blown up. By seems to come back to Flint with a more adult understanding of the world and of consequences.

Joetta

Joey is Kenny's younger sister, still in kindergarten. Joey is young enough that she doesn't appreciate a lot of aspects of the world. She thinks of By as her older brother who will love, help, and protect her. She protects By when she stops Momma from punishing him for lighting matches. Joey is quick to turn in her brothers if they are doing anything wrong, but she also cries and gets upset if she thinks anything bad will happen to them. Joey whines and complains when Momma wraps her up in too many coats to go to school, but By gets her to stop whining so much by scaring her into believing that southern folks with thin blood freeze to death in the Michigan winters all the time.

Wilona

Momma is from Birmingham, Alabama, and when she gets upset she starts speaking with a southern accent. She hates the freezing cold winters in Flint, Michigan, which she can't get used to. Because Momma is always cold, she wraps up her kids in too many layers of clothes so that they stay warm. She also has a gap between her front teeth that embarrasses her, and when she starts to smile, she covers her mouth with her hand. Momma goes to a lot of trouble to plan the trip to Birmingham in great detail, but Dad overrides all her plans without telling her.

Daniel

Dad likes machines and mechanical things. He buys an expensive record player for the car without telling his wife, and he also plans to drive straight through to Birmingham without stopping without telling her. He likes to joke around with his family, and he makes fun of southern accents, even though his wife has one. Dad even makes fun of Momma when he's talking to a friend about the car. Dad seems to love his wife and children, and he's good humored and good natured. He doesn't seem to realize that he's not treating his wife well by making fun of her and not including her in his plans. Dad takes the time to have a heart-to-heart talk with Kenny about growing up, and he says that Kenny will learn from the mistakes that he and Momma make as parents.



Moses

Moses is a former boyfriend of Wilona Watson, who warned her not to go to Flint, Michigan, where the weather is so cold.

Aunt Cydney

Aunt Cydney is a relative of the Watsons whose house is always warm, and the family goes there when their house is too cold.

Buphead

Buphead is By Watson's friend in Flint, Michigan. Buphead is a bully and seems to be a bad influence on By.

Larry Dunn

Larry Dunn is the school bully in Flint, Michigan among the younger students at Clark Elementary School.

Rufus Fry

Rufus is an impoverished boy from Arkansas who moves to Flint along with his younger brother. Rufus ends up in Kenny's class, and Kenny is glad that the other kids have someone else to make fun of. Rufus has no lunch, and Kenny starts sharing his lunches with Rufus and his younger brother. Rufus ends up being Kenny's only friend, until Kenny laughs at Rufus one day. Later, Kenny apologizes, and Rufus and Kenny become friends again.

Cody Fry

Cody is Rufus's younger brother.

LJ Jones

LJ is a former friend of Kenny's, who stole half of Kenny's dinosaur collection.

Mr. Mitchell

Mr. Mitchell runs the grocery store near the Watsons' house in Flint, Michigan.



Mrs. Davidson

Mrs. Davidson is a neighbor of the Watsons in Flint who brings Joey a white, blue-eyed statue of an angel.

Theo Johnson

Mr. Johnson is an expert about cars, who Dad talks to about his plans to drive the Brown Bomber straight through to Birmingham in one stretch.

Grandma Sands

Grandma Sands is Momma's mother. She's a tiny old woman with a reputation for being mean and strict, but she is also affectionate and greets her family with tears of joy. Grandma Sands has authority when she talks to her daughter and her grandchildren, and she is quickly obeyed. Momma is surprised and upset to find Grandma Sands living with a man, Mr. Robert.

Mr. Robert

When the Watsons arrive in Birmingham, they find that Grandma Sands is living with a man named Mr. Robert.



Objects/Places

Flint, Michigan

Flint, Michigan is where the Watsons live, and the winters get much too cold there for Momma Watson's tastes.

The Brown Bomber

The Brown Bomber is the Watson family's 1948 Plymouth.

Clark Elementary School

Clark is the school that the Watson children attend in Flint, Michigan.

Plastic Dinosaurs

Kenny has a large collection of plastic dinosaurs. His former friend LJ stole half of the dinosaurs, and when Kenny and Rufus become friends, Rufus plays with the dinosaurs with Kenny.

The Mourning Dove

Byron accidentally kills a mourning dove and then is overcome with regret. He buries the dove and marks its grave with a popsicle-stick cross.

The True-Tone AB-700 Ultra-Glide

The True-Tone AB-700 Ultra-Glide is a car record player, intended not to skip in the car due to vibrations. Dad buys the record player for the drive down to Grandma Sands' house.

The Angel

Mrs. Davidson gives Joetta a ceramic angel that's white with blue eyes. Joey dislikes it, thinking that the white angel can't look like her.



The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 Notebook

Momma keeps a notebook to plan out the trip to Birmingham, including how much money it's going to cost and how many miles they'll travel each day. The notebook is labeled "The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963" and Momma has drawn an awful looking flower and bee on it.

Birmingham, Alabama

Birmingham is where Momma grew up, and where her mother still lives. The Watsons travel to Birmingham so that By can stay there and learn some lessons about the world. Momma and Dad think Birmingham will be safe, despite the unrest in the South, but while the family is visiting, segregationists bomb a nearby church, killing four black girls.

Collier's Landing

Collier's Landing is a dangerous part of the lake with a whirlpool that drowns people who swim near there.

The Wool Pooh

The Wool Pooh is a story that By makes up about a monster living in the water that kills swimming children. When Kenny is pulled under the water, he sees the Wool Pooh, a big, gray monster with hard, square fingers and toes, and he sees the Wool Pooh again inside the bombed church.

The Shoe

When Kenny goes into the destroyed church, he pulls a black shoe off a girl trapped under concrete. Kenny believes that the shiny, black Buster Brown shoe is his sister Joey's and that she's dead.

The World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital

By calls the space behind the Watsons' couch the World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital, where their cats and dogs go to hide and heal when they are injured. Kenny hides here after returning from Birmingham.



Themes

Race and Culture

Race is an important element in the novel, and it is related to the idea of culture. The characters in the novel are black, and they live in a black community. There are two black cultures portrayed in the novel, though. The black culture of Flint is urban and lower-middle-class. The black culture of the South is poverty stricken and family oriented. The people in Flint, like Dad and Kenny's classmates, make fun of southern accents, southern ignorance, and poverty. This is a way of railing against the oppression of blacks in the South. The history of slavery and segregation results in a kind of self-hatred. Behind Dad's jokes about the South is a hatred of the racism that has created poverty and ignorance in the southern black community.

Even Joey feels the unfairness of racial inequality, though she's too young to fully understand it. Joey hates the angel figurine that Mrs. Davidson says reminds her of Joey. The angel is white; it's not like Joey. Joey's mother laughs. All angels are white. This is a pervasive cultural idea. Angels, which are close to God, are naturally white. Somehow, black people are left behind, blocked from being angelic. Joey, as adorable as she is, cannot be an angel because she is black, and on some level, she feels and appreciates this.

Kenny doesn't understand the hatred and racism of America in 1963, and for most of the story he is isolated from it. His parents are more aware of what is going on, and they want to prepare their children to face a broader culture with racist elements throughout it. When By straightens his hair, his mother's attitude indicates that she feels By is rejecting his black heritage, the curled hair given to the children by their parents. By does not understand that embracing Mexican culture is a kind of rejection of African-American culture. The church bombing in Birmingham, though, brings the issue of race into focus for both By and Kenny.

Growing Up

The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 is a coming of age story. Simply put, it is a story about growing up. Two of the characters in the novel are beginning to grow from children to adults, but they are both at different points in their lives. Kenny is ten years old. He is just beginning to grow out of his childhood. He doesn't understand a lot of things about the world, because his world is protected and limited to his home and his school. Kenny sees racism on the news, but he doesn't understand the force of racism in the world. He doesn't even put the term "racism" to it. He sees only hatred.

Kenny also doesn't understand what his older brother is going through. He sees that By has different sides. On one hand, By is a bully and a juvenile delinquent. On the other side, By has deep feelings and affection for his brother. By is the other character who is



growing up. He has gotten onto the wrong path, one where he believes he must be cool and never let anything bother him. Meanwhile, he has deep feelings of rage that he takes out in violence.

The trip to Birmingham is a trip of growth for both Kenny and By. Kenny is faced with danger, violence, and hatred, and he has to deal with an adult world that he barely understands. The Wool Pooh comes to symbolize the danger of the world that Kenny cannot process as a young boy. By is older and can begin to see that his actions have consequences and that he will need to deal responsibly with a world full of danger and difficulty. At the end of the story, By has learned enough to help his younger brother through feelings of guilt and shame after the church bombing.

Actions and Consequences

Throughout the novel, By and Kenny must learn to come to terms with the consequences of their actions. By rarely takes into account what will happen because of the way he acts, much like the mourning dove that is so busy being "cool" that it lets itself be hit in the chest and killed. By gets his hair colored and straightened, and he knows how his parents feel about straightened hair. He also knows that his parents will have to see what he's done to his hair. Yet, he doesn't seem prepared for the consequences of his actions. Similarly, when he kisses his reflection in the mirror, he doesn't pay attention to the consequences of what he's doing.

Kenny has a similar problem. When he goes to swim at Collier's Landing, he knows he's not supposed to. He ignores the warning sign on the road as well as the warning sign that's near the water. He ignores his grandmother's warning and By's reluctance to swim at Collier's Landing. Kenny acknowledges that he had many warnings and opportunities to turn back, but he does not listen to them. His instinct is to do what he wants and not face the consequences his actions will bring him.

Kenny learns lessons about consequences. He learns that if he is mean to Rufus, he could lose a friend, and he learns that it's important to pay attention to the warning signs of danger when he gets caught up in the whirlpool. By also begins to learn about consequences by almost losing his younger brother. By hasn't told Kenny the truth about the dangerous whirlpool, and he could have stopped his brother from going to Collier's Landing. Having to rescue his brother is an important point in By coming to terms with the dangers of the real world and the consequences of his actions.



Style

Point of View

The novel is told in the first person, from Kenny's point of view. Kenny is ten years old, and so he has a child's view of the world instead of an adult's. The things that are important to Kenny are important in the novel: his family and his school. Those are the central parts of Kenny's life. Because he's young, Kenny makes mistakes in life. He lies to his mother about sharing his gloves with Rufus, for example, and he doesn't tell his mother about By's misuse of the grocery store credit line. Kenny doesn't realize that his parents would probably help him with both of these situations. Instead, he sees himself as being complicit with By's crime, even though he didn't know the cookies were stolen when he first ate one.

Kenny doesn't appreciate his own reading ability. He hates his talents because other students make fun of him. At Kenny's age, his ability to fit in with other kids is more important to him than his intelligence. He doesn't realize how valuable his intelligence will be to him in the broader world that he only sees part of. Kenny finds the adult world frightening, and he's worried about his ability to make adult decisions.

Most of all, Kenny doesn't understand racism and oppression. He has seen pictures of white people screaming at little black girls trying to go to school, but he doesn't understand why this would happen. He doesn't realize how complex, dangerous, and unfair the world can be. Kenny's youth makes it difficult for him to tell the difference between what's real and what's not, and for him to process violence and death.

Setting

The novel is split between two main settings, Flint, Michigan and Birmingham, Alabama. Flint, Michigan is an urban setting, one where black families try to better their lives. Flint represents the world of the future and how life is changing. Birmingham, Alabama is a setting that represents the world of the past. Segregation and racism and extreme poverty are still active forces in Alabama, the place where Momma comes from and therefore where the family's past is rooted. The two settings are contrasted with weather. Flint is freezing cold while Birmingham is burning hot.

As important as the locations of the novel is the time of the novel. During the early 1960s, blacks in the South were fighting for their rights for equal education and voting rights. Many whites retaliated with hatred and violence. Kenny, as a young boy, doesn't fully understand the significance of what's going on in the world. Still, he is affected by it, and when he comes face to face with violence, he has to come to terms with it.

During the time of the novel, the world is changing in many ways. The Civil Rights Movement is one element of change. Another element of change is reflected in By's behavior. He uses a new type of language, and he is in touch with a new culture



developing among younger people, evidenced by the hairstyle he tries to adopt. The car record player is another indication of changes that are happening, and even more changes that are soon to come. Technology is on the rise in the early 1960s. The moon landing isn't very far away, nor are computers and other new technologies. The record player is an indicator of the technology that will soon grow rapidly and change the world.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple, for two reasons. One reason is that the narrator, Kenny, is ten years old, and he speaks with the language of a ten-year-old. The other is that the novel is meant for middle school reading, and the language is aimed at middle school students. However, the characters who are older use words that Kenny sometimes doesn't understand and words that reflect their personality. The teacher in By's fifth grade class when Kenny is called in to read uses academic language, talking far above the vocabulary of his class.

By, on the other hand, uses slang and the word "ain't," which his parents object to. By is speaking the language of the young delinquent, rebelling against his parents. He latches on to the word "peon," which he says means someone the rich would just as soon pee on as treat with any respect. Through By's definition is untrue, it captures the general meaning of the word. By's interest in class divisions is reflected in him latching on to this word.

When Dad describes the Ultra-Glide, he uses long words and scientific terms. He is making his family laugh with the long words, but also reveling in the high-end technology. On the other hand, Dad makes fun of southern accents in a much more derogatory way. He makes fun of one of Momma's former suitors, imitating his accent, giving him a funny-sounding nickname and making him sound completely ignorant. Dad also makes fun of Momma, imitating her voice and being derisive toward her desire to plan. Dad's humor implies that he has negative feelings about both the South and women.

Structure

The novel is divided into fifteen chapters. It begins in Flint, Michigan in the winter. Kenny is a young boy, and his brother By gets into trouble. The beginning of the novel chronicles Kenny's life in Michigan, his troubles at school, his brother's problems, and Kenny's relationship with his family and friends. Kenny's world is fairly small, and he doesn't understand a lot about the world outside of his small community and family in Flint.

By straightening and coloring his hair is a turning point in the plot, moving his parents to take action that will affect the entire family. By's problems force the family, and the story, outside of Kenny's home in Flint. The family makes a trip to Birmingham. The trip itself takes the Watsons across many miles. They cross through Ohio and the Appalachian Mountains. On the way, Kenny's world is expanded, and he sees both good and bad



things outside his comfort zone. He sees a sky full of stars and feels the air of the mountains, but he also hears about rednecks who might kill and eat black people and has to use an outhouse, something completely outside of Kenny's narrow experience.

In Birmingham, Kenny enters a different world, one that is more dangerous than it appears at first. He encounters the forces of nature in the whirlpool at Collier's Landing. Then, Kenny must confront the forces of mankind, in the bombing at the church. Kenny's experiences are frightening and difficult to understand, since he's so young. The final chapter chronicles Kenny coming to terms with the violence that he's witnessed and his own behavior.

Quotes

"'Oh yeah,' Dad interrupted, 'they're a laugh a minute down there. Let's see, where was that 'Coloreds Only' bathroom downtown?'" Chap. 1, p. 5

"Man! Some of the time I wished I was as smart as these teachers thought I was because if I had been I would have dropped that book and run all the way home." Chap. 2, p. 22

"I wanted to knock on his door and tell him, 'I am different,' but I was too embarrassed so I walked the dinosaurs back home." Chap. 3, p. 45

"I wished I hadn't told Byron about what happened, I wished I just could have gone the rest of the year with one glove." Chap. 4, p. 62

"Momma's real voice was coming back. 'So, Joetta, don't you see how Momma has to help Byron understand how dangerous and painful fire can be?'" Chap. 5, p. 72

"Momma flicked some more of Byron's hair back up porcupine-style—'is this straight mess more attractive than your own hair? Did those chemicals give you better-looking hair than me and your daddy and God gave you?'" Chap. 7, p. 88

"Even cool old Byron forgot how cool he was and screamed out, 'Awww, man, this is too, too hip! No one's got one of these.'" Chap. 8, p. 109

"I'd seen the pictures but I didn't really know how these white people could hate some kids so much." Chap. 9, p. 122

"The toilets in Ohio weren't anything like Michigan toilets. Instead of a white stool with a seat there was just a seat on a piece of wood with a great big, open, black hole underneath with the sound of flies coming out of it." Chap. 10, p. 139

"I thought Grandma Sands would be bigger than Dad, I thought she'd be foaming at the mouth like she had rabies." Chap. 11, p. 156

"Who could understand Byron? Here was a chance for another Fantastic Adventure and he was going in the wrong direction." Chap. 13, p. 170

"It also seems like the worse the trouble is that you get into, the more steps it takes to get there. Sort of like you're getting a bunch of little warnings on the way; sort of like if you really wanted to you could turn around." Chap. 13, p. 173

"I could see a shiny, shiny black shoe lying halfway underneath some concrete, then it got covered with smoke, and then the lightbulb flickered out again." Chap. 14, p. 185



"Byron let go of my ear and thought for a second. 'Kenny, things ain't ever going to be fair. How's it fair that two grown men could hate Negroes so much that they'd kill some kids just to stop them from going to school?'" Chap. 15, p. 203



Topics for Discussion

What do Momma and Dad hope that By will learn in Birmingham, and does By learn what he needs to?

How does Kenny see the events of the story differently than an adult might?

How is Kenny similar to and different from By?

Why does Kenny get upset when Rufus stops being his friend, even though Kenny didn't want to be Rufus's friend to begin with?

Why do the other kids make fun of Rufus for speaking southern-style and being poor? How do the characters in the novel feel about the South, and why do they feel that way?

What does the Wool Pooh represent? Why does Kenny see the Wool Pooh?

Why does Kenny react the way he does when he finds out the church has been bombed?

Why does Kenny hide behind the couch when he gets back from Birmingham? Why are his parents so worried about him?