

# **The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963 Study Guide**

**The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963 by Christopher  
Paul Curtis**

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## Overview

In the opening pages of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963*, all five members of the Watson family are sitting wrapped in blankets against the cold of the apartment. Mrs. Watson is convinced they are going to freeze to death.

Through the eyes of ten-year-old Kenny, the reader learns about the crazy antics of his family. Kenny believes that everyone in his neighborhood and school must think his family is strange—"The Weird Watsons".

Through Kenny's eyes we view his tenuous love/hate relationship with his older brother Byron, often called By. Kenny's feelings about By swing between fear of By's bullying tactics, awe of By's "fantastic adventures," and pleasure in By's sometimes unexpected kindness.

Kenny frequently tries to understand how a bully can have such a great sense of humor. By's craziness includes a narcissistic attitude which freezes his lips to the side-view mirror of the family's car, known to the children as the "Brown Bomber," as he kisses himself one freezing winter morning when the family decides to go to an aunt's house to escape the cold in their apartment. When he has his hair straightened against the express wishes of his parents, Dad cuts it all off and shaves By's head. These and other hilarious incidents draw the reader into the intimacy of this African-American family living in Flint, Michigan, in 1963. Kenny stands on the sidelines sometimes admiring By's rebellion and slow slide towards trouble and other times fearing the consequences of By's not-too-bright choices.

Dad and Momma, as the Watson children call their parents, are determined to raise respectful, well-behaved children who make good choices and possess high moral standards. Realizing they have been unable to instill fully their standards in their oldest child, Dad and Momma decide to take By to Birmingham and leave him with his Grandma Sands, a strong woman who will bring him to his senses. They know there is some violence in the South with the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement, but have been assured by Grandma Sands that it is quiet around her.

In Birmingham, Grandma Sands meets them with arms open wide and a home filled with love for her daughter and family. By's only recollection of Grandma Sands is when he was four years old, and he has convinced Kenny and their kindergarten sister, Joetta, that she is a mean old woman.

Kenny and Joetta have never met her prior to their visit in the summer of 1963, and By's description of Grandma Sands has scared Kenny. Kenny and By both take her measure and decide By can easily take this mean old woman down.

Kenny and his family have gone to Birmingham just as the violence moves into Grandma Sands neighborhood. First, Kenny nearly drowns and By saves him, then the nearby Baptist Church is bombed on Sunday morning. In the remainder of the story,

Kenny must deal with his emotions that are tangled up with the "Wool Pooh" he meets first in his near drowning experience and then a second time in the bombed church.

## About the Author

In 1954, Christopher Paul Curtis, son of Herman and Leslie Curtis, was born in Flint, Michigan, and like the characters in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, Curtis grew up there. Delaying his pursuit of a college education, he went to work on the assembly line at the Fisher Body Automobile Plant in Flint from 1972-85. Curtis also worked at Automatic Data Processing in Allen Park, Michigan, and as an assistant to Senator Don Riegle in Lansing, Michigan, before becoming a full-time author of young adult books.

He finally started college at the University of Michigan on a part-time basis, graduating in 1996. During that time, he started writing stories and won the University's Hopwood prize for a rough draft of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. Confident of his ability, Curtis's wife and family encouraged him to take a year off work and see what he could do with his writing.

Unlike many writers who write from an office at home, Curtis wrote the entire manuscript for *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* in longhand at a table in the children's room at his local library. His son, Steven, typed his handwritten notes into the computer each evening. By the end of 1993, Curtis had completed his story and entered it in a national writing contest where it caught the attention of Delacorte editors.

They enjoyed his story and wanted to publish it. The success of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, Curtis's first book, helped him establish a career as a full-time writer.



## Plot Summary

The Watsons are a loving, funny family who live in Flint, Michigan in the early 1960's. When the oldest brother, Byron, continues down the path to trouble, his parents decide to take him to stay with his strict grandmother in Birmingham, Alabama. The entire family goes on the long car trip, and while they are in Birmingham, a church is bombed, killing several children. Kenny, the middle child, is traumatized by what he sees, and takes a while to recover, with the help of his big brother, Byron.

Kenny and his family live in Flint, Michigan in the 1960's. They are a close-knit family with plenty of humor and plenty of firm parenting. Kenny's big brother, Byron, hangs out with all the thugs and bullies, but he has a good heart and looks out for his younger brother and sister. Their sister, Joetta, is a follow-the-rules girl, who has no qualms about telling on her brothers if it means keeping them from getting in further trouble.

Most of the middle of the book develops the relationships among the family members, particularly Kenny and Byron, through vignettes about various events. There's the time Byron gets his lips stuck to the side mirror on the outside of the car. Kenny has a grand time making fun of his brother, but Byron isn't all that bad. He is proud of Kenny, when Kenny comes into his classroom to read. He helps Kenny learn how to overcome his lazy eye and getting teased about it. Still, Byron seems to be able to find trouble. He disobeys his mother's instructions about setting things on fire and makes paratroopers in the bathroom. Another day, though, when he accidentally kills a bird, Byron gives it a proper burial, when nobody is around. Finally, though, the parents decide they can no longer do anything for Byron. They will take him to Alabama to live with Grandma Sands, who they hope will be able to knock him into shape.

In preparation for the trip, Dad outfits the family car, known as the Brown Bomber, with new tires and other parts, and is particularly proud of the Ultra-Glide, a skip-proof record player. Momma prepares by getting a notebook of organization going with information on all the things they will see, as well as where they will stay and eat. Dad foils all her planning by driving straight through. When they arrive in Alabama, Byron seems to like Grandma Sands and seems to be having fun, in fact. However, the fun turns tragic when Kenny nearly drowns, but Byron saves him. They keep it a secret.

The bigger tragedy is when a church is bombed from a passing car. Joetta was at the church, and the family worries that she may be injured or even dead. Kenny goes into the church to try to find her. He thinks he sees her and leaves without saving her. This haunts him all the way back to Flint, Michigan, even after it turns out Joetta is fine and wasn't even in the church, when the bomb hit. Byron is the one who helps Kenny snap out of his shock and depression in the aftermath of the bombing.



# 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

The Watsons are a loving, funny family who live in Flint, Michigan in the early 1960's. When the oldest brother, Byron, continues down the path to trouble, his parents decide to take him to stay with his strict grandmother in Birmingham, Alabama. The entire family goes on the long car trip, and while they are in Birmingham, a church is bombed, killing several children. Kenny, the middle child, is traumatized by what he sees, and takes a while to recover, with the help of his big brother By.

The book opens in Flint, Michigan on an extremely cold winter day. The Watson family is huddled on their couch under a blanket trying to stay warm. Kenny is the narrator and main character. The rest of the family includes Dad, Momma, Byron (By,) and Joetta (Joey.) Momma, who grew up in Alabama, doesn't like the cold, and she won't let Dad forget that he's the one who brought her to this giant icebox. Dad tells the story of Hambone Henderson, the other man who wanted to marry Momma. He tried to convince Momma that living up north would mean being in an igloo and living with Chinese people. Momma says he's lying.

Dad decides that they should go to aunt Cydney's house, where the heat actually works. He sends Byron and Kenny out to scrape the ice off the windows. By, whom Kenny calls an official juvenile delinquent, always tries to get out of working, so when Kenny hears By mumbling his name, Kenny isn't inclined to fall for what he thinks is a prank. Yesterday, By and his friend Buphead played a prank on Kenny where By spit a mouthful of snow in his face. Today, Kenny thinks By is trying to do the same thing again. Actually, By's lips are stuck, frozen to the car mirror because of the cold. By is frantic and tells Kenny to go get Momma. When the rest of the family comes out to see what's going on, Dad laughs that his son was kissing himself in the mirror. Momma is worried. They aren't sure how to undo him, so first they try to pour warm water over his mouth, but it freezes on contact, just making the problem worse. Momma tells Dad to go call the hospital and ask what they should do. She doesn't wait for an answer. She decides to pull By's face right off the mirror, and he then runs into the house in pain.

In the car on the way to Cydney's, Kenny decides to tease By. He tells his little sister, Joey, that he's going to write a comic book, and the superhero is going to be named the Lipless Wonder, afraid of nothing except a cold mirror. This makes the whole family, except By, break out laughing.





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

The purpose in this first chapter is to set up the family dynamics. Momma is not happy in the cold, but she does love her family. By is a teenager in the phase where he doesn't want anyone to touch him and thinks he is so cool, which makes the episode with the frozen lips all the funnier. Dad is a funny guy, who likes to good naturedly tease his family. This close-knit family unit will weather struggle and crisis, so it is important to know what they mean to each other.

There is also one hint about the time period. Dad makes one comment about the "Coloreds Only" bathrooms in the south. This tells the reader that the book takes place before civil rights reforms, so probably in the early 1960s. Dad uses stories about their life before living in Flint to show the differences between the south and the north, foreshadowing further, deeper differences to come.



## Chapter 2, Give My Regards to Clark, Poindexter

### Chapter 2, Give My Regards to Clark, Poindexter Summary

Kenny describes the social hierarchy at Clark Elementary School, where he goes to school. A kid named Larry Dunn is the big hot shot of the 4th grade. However, Byron is more like the god of the whole school. Kenny notes that being Byron's brother doesn't exactly keep him from getting bullied, but it does help. One time, for example, Kenny finds a dollar and shows it to Larry Dunn, who splits it with him. Kenny knows that if Byron weren't his brother, Larry would have kept the whole dollar to himself.

Kenny is the kind of kid other kids like to tease. For starters, he likes to read. This makes the teachers at school believe he is smart. They take him around to different classrooms to read aloud, as an example to the other students. One day, he has to read in front of Byron's class. After school, Kenny is sure he is going to get beat up, but Byron actually seems kind of proud of him. Another reason Kenny gets teased is that he has a crossed eye, or lazy eye. It just won't focus the right way, but stays in the corner near his nose. Byron gives him a tip to look sideways at everyone, that way his lazy eye will match his other eye. Even though Byron comes in handy, he doesn't keep Kenny from ever getting teased. Sometimes on the school bus, By and his friend Buphead skip school, and Kenny ends up at the mercy of one group of thugs or another. One day, two new boys get on the bus. They are country kids from the deep south, and Kenny believes they are his own personal saviors, confusing his Sunday school lessons with earthly life. These kids will take the attention off of him, which is fine by him.

### Chapter 2, Give My Regards to Clark, Poindexter Analysis

The relationship between Kenny and Byron is mixed. On one hand, they are not friends and do not run in the same circles. On the other hand, Byron is a little protective of Kenny, which Kenny realizes. It's typical of many brotherly dynamics. Perhaps, Byron is a little jealous, as well as proud, that Kenny is held up as a role model for other students. Byron's motives here to protect his little brother prove stronger and stronger as the novel progresses.

Another clue to the race issue is when Byron's teacher says, "I've often told you that as Negroes the world is many times a hostile place for us." Using "us" indicates that he is including the entire class, suggesting that the whole class, and by deduction, the entire school, is made up of African Americans. This gives the reader further information about

the state of race relations of the time. Segregated schools, even in Michigan, hints at pre-civil rights conditions.



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

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

The older of the two new boys, Rufus, gets put in Kenny's class, and the teacher sits him next to Kenny. At first, Kenny is appalled, because he doesn't want to be perceived as connected with Rufus. He thinks he'll just get picked on twice as much. In fact, he doesn't. At lunchtime, Rufus sits with Kenny on the playground. Rufus tells Kenny how in Arkansas they shoot and eat squirrels for dinner. Kenny is amazed by this and has a hard time believing it. After a while, they become friends. Kenny is not too excited about this at the beginning. LJ Jones is the only other kid Kenny has played with for a while, and LJ stole a great big bunch of Kenny's toy plastic dinosaurs. LJ tricked Kenny by burying the dinosaurs in the yard, then coming back to dig them up later. In comparison to LJ, Rufus is more of a real friend.

Other kids tease Rufus and his brother Cody, because they only have a couple of outfits, and they have to share some of them. One day on the school bus, Larry Dunn teases Cody by asking if he has to share underwear too. Cody looks down at his underwear with a confused look on his face, which makes all the other kids laugh at him. Even Kenny laughs, because Cody doesn't get it. When Kenny laughs, it hurts Rufus' feelings, and he won't play with Kenny or eat lunch with him anymore. The loss of a friend makes Kenny realize that it was nice having a friend who accepted him for who he is. He goes to Rufus's house to try and apologize, but Rufus isn't having it. Eventually, Momma gets the story out of Kenny. She meets the school bus one day at Rufus's stop and talks to him. Soon, Rufus is knocking on Kenny's door, and Kenny apologizes for real. This time Rufus accepts it, and they are back to normal. Kenny realizes his Momma helped repair the friendship.

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

Kenny is a sincere person, an honest and caring friend. He is still young and doesn't always understand how relationships work. Momma is a warm lady who wants to help out. Rufus is the kind of person who expects a friend to be loyal beyond everything. What Kenny learns about interpersonal relationships now will form how he acts in the future.

Kenny learns something from his mistakes, the mistake of making fun of Rufus. He learns that he needs to understand his actions affect others. This is the first of many

steps Kenny will take on the road to growing up, foreshadowing the mistake he makes in the biggest crisis of the book, and how he will deal with that.



# Chapter 4, Froze-Up Southern Folks

## Chapter 4, Froze-Up Southern Folks Summary

Momma, being from the south, thinks cold is deadly. She dresses the kids in many, many layers of sweaters and coats in the winter, so much so that by the time the last layer is on they can barely move. Kenny is in charge of helping Joey out of her clothes when they get to school. It takes a long time and neither one of them likes getting all hot. One day, Joey asks Momma not to have to wear so many layers, but Momma tells her it is too cold. Kenny then asks Byron if he has any ideas. Byron decides to help him out. He tells Joey and Kenny an elaborate story about how the garbage trucks really aren't garbage trucks, but instead they go around picking up the dead, frozen bodies on the sidewalk every morning. He tells them they have to wear so many clothes, because southern people like Momma have thinner blood, so half of their blood is thin and they need extra protection. This keeps Joey from complaining anymore.

Momma is so concerned about the cold that she buys her children real leather gloves with fur lining so their hands will be extra warm. She buys two pair every winter in case one gets lost. Kenny wants to share his glove with Rufus so Rufus can be warm. At first, they each take one glove and try to keep the other hand stuffed up their coat sleeves. Then Kenny gets the idea to tell Momma he lost his gloves, so he gets the second pair while Rufus gets the first pair. Larry Dunn steals Kenny's gloves, or at least that's what he thinks, but the gloves he sees on Larry are black, whereas his are brown. Larry bullies everyone with what he calls a Maytag Wash, where he rubs snow into the other kids' faces. When he does this to Rufus and Kenny, Rufus realizes that the snow is turning black. Kenny cries about this, and Byron notices. When he asks what's wrong, Kenny tells him. Byron has no sympathy for Larry Dunn. Byron finds Larry and bullies the glove back, then forces Larry to smash into the chain link fence around the school over and over. Kenny even feels sorry for Larry over this. He feels so bad that he has to leave, because he can't stand watching Larry get it.

## Chapter 4, Froze-Up Southern Folks Analysis

In this time of history, kids were not constantly supervised the way they are today. Bullies were able to rule the roost, because there was nobody to make them stop. Byron is able to treat Larry this way on the school playground, because there is nobody supervising the playground. Kenny's character continues to develop, and we see a boy who is sensitive even for someone who stole his gloves. He can sympathize with anyone. The way Kenny reacts to even a semi-violent event is evidence of his character, and foreshadows the increased violence near the close of the book.

Irony comes through the acts of Momma to protect her brood against the ravages of winter, when the ravages of human nature have so much more power to damage. However, Byron's protectiveness toward his brother and Kenny's generosity toward his

friend are evidence that despite the hardness of the world, she is raising good people. As any parent can attest, teaching by being is the best way.



# **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 has a history of playing with fire, and Momma tells him if she catches him again she's going to burn him. She tells her children about a time when she was a child and her house caught fire. All the children had to wear clothes that smelled like smoke.

After laying low for a week or two, Byron is at it again. Kenny sees By go into the bathroom and lock the door. He knows something must be up, so he watches Byron through the keyhole. Byron is lighting small pieces of toilet paper on fire and pretending they are Nazi parachute jumpers. They land in the toilet, fizzle out, and get flushed away. Momma hears the toilet flushing over and over. She comes to find out what is going on. Even though the door is locked, she knocks it open, grabs Byron by the neck and drags him downstairs, holding him by the neck the entire time. She sits him down on the couch and tells Joey to go get a book of matches.

Joey tries to protect Byron by refusing. Then Momma tells Kenny to do it, but Joey is holding onto him so tight he can't move. Finally, Momma decides to do it herself. When she leaves the room, Kenny and Joey tell Byron to run to Buphead's house and take Dad's beating later, but Bryon seems hypnotized. Momma returns with matches, Vaseline, and a paper towel. Joey won't let Momma hurt Byron. Momma struggles with her and then comforts her. Finally, Momma reminds the pious Joey that she made an oath to God, and she shouldn't break her word to God. Joey agrees. Byron tries to make a run for it, but he doesn't get very far. Momma is too fast for him. She tackles him and lights a match. She lectures him while the match moves ever closer to his fingers. Just when it's about to touch his skin, Joey runs over and blows out the match. This scenario is repeated several times before Momma gives up. Byron has to deal with 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**

A relatively normal, although exaggerated, episode of a child misbehaving and the parent administering discipline aptly depicts the family dynamics at the Watson home. Since Momma has warned Byron on numerous occasions and punished him, but never followed through, it is clear she can be a little lenient. However, this scene shows she is not someone to cross. She is like a mother bear.

The other characters are also developed. Byron is the disobedient, but cool, kid whose cool is shot under the threat of real physical damage. Kenny is the bystander who doesn't get in trouble mostly, because his mistakes aren't as big as Byron's. Joey is oddly protective of her big brother, with a kind, soft heart. With such a simple scene, the family dynamics, particularly the character of Joey, come through.



# Chapter 6, Swedish Cremes and Welfare Cheese

## Chapter 6, Swedish Cremes and Welfare Cheese Summary

Momma sends Kenny and By to the store for a few things as she's making dinner. Byron doesn't want to go, but he knows better than to push too hard. Byron asks for some money, and Momma tells him he can just sign for it. He doesn't understand what she means, so she repeats her instructions. He thinks that signing for the food means they are on Welfare. Kenny finds this upsetting, because it's just another reason for other kids to tease him. Momma insists that they are not on Welfare, but Byron doesn't seem to believe her. When the boys get to the store, Byron hides in the comic book section, forcing Kenny to do the embarrassing act of signing for the food. Kenny tells the store owner, Mr. Mitchell, to put their food on the Welfare list. Mr. Mitchell is confused, until he realizes that Kenny is talking about the other list.

After they leave the store, Byron is happy to know they're not on Welfare. He's even happier with the idea that he can go into the store and get anything he wants just by signing. A week later, Kenny feels something hit his head. He discovers Byron throwing Swedish Crime cookies at him. Byron offers him some. Kenny sees an empty cookie bag on the ground and realizes that Byron has eaten one and one-half bags of cookies already. Kenny feels close to Byron in this brotherly enjoyment of forbidden pleasure. When Kenny realizes that Byron has signed for these cookies without permission. However, he is not sure. Byron reminds Kenny that he has eaten some of the illegal cookies, so tattling will only implicate him, as well.

Byron sees a mourning dove on a telephone wire. He starts throwing cookies at it until he hits the bird, knocking it to the ground. At first, Kenny thinks this is cool, especially because he has never hit a bird in all his life of throwing rocks at birds. Byron, however, is upset, like he really didn't expect to hurt the bird. He is so upset that he vomits. Kenny tries to comfort him, but Byron lashes out at him, so Kenny leaves. The next time Kenny walks by that spot, he sees that Byron dug a hole and buried the bird, even put a little popsicle stick cross on the grave. Kenny says he really doesn't understand this brother of his, who can tease and torture kids at school without a second thought, but who is moved to bury a bird he accidentally hurts and kills.

## Chapter 6, Swedish Cremes and Welfare Cheese Analysis

The plot of this novel is not the straight linear narration of events in a sequence that tells a story from start to finish. In fact, it's more like a series of vignettes that provide insight



into the characters of the Watson family, especially Kenny and Byron. This makes the novel "character driven," meaning that the characters themselves are the focus, not so much the plot. The setting is in the background, giving some support to the events and the characters, but not performing a really integral role.

Byron is a complicated person to figure, as Kenny realizes. By can be mean and bullying, tough and hard, but he can also be tender and loving. What is his real character? Juxtaposed upon the American 1960's, one could ask the same of the nation's character. No one knew at the time whether the country would stand up for the downtrodden, mostly African Americans, or whether the majority would allow abuse and murder to continue. By symbolizes the American public, and Kenny the American psyche.



## **Chapter 7, Every Chihuahua in American Lines Up to Take a Bite out of Byron**

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

Byron has straightened his hair, which makes Momma really upset. At first Momma doesn't have much to say, but she gets on a roll after a few minutes. She taunts Byron about his hair, until Byron sticks up for himself by saying he wanted to have Mexican style hair. Byron is sent to his room. When Joey gets home, Kenny tells her what happened and they go up to Byron's room. Kenny teases Byron by pretending Byron is a death row inmate who is about to be executed. Joey thinks Byron can just wash his hair and it will go back the way it was, but Byron tells her it's permanent and will have to grow out. He is rather smug about the fact that his parents can't do anything except let it grow out.

Dad comes home and they all get nervous. Momma greets Dad and tells him there is a surprise waiting. She calls Byron down so Dad can see his hair. After a short inquisition, Dad decides he can do something after all. He takes Byron upstairs to the bathroom. He shaves Byron's head. Later, Dad and Momma are on the phone with Grandma Sands, Momma's mother who lives in Alabama. They seem to be making some kind of plans.

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

Even though Kenny is the narrator, and thus really the main character, Byron seems to be the center of attention a good share of the time. Instead of the story being narrated by Byron, though, it's told from Kenny's point of view. This keeps Byron at a distance, which seems to be the way Byron would prefer it.

Dad gets so upset about the hair, because it's By's way of dishonoring his heritage. It's an insult. Instead of some horrible punishment, Dad meets out a refreshing consequence by shaving By's head. It's like giving By a clean slate, a new start, symbolic of many things. There's the new start he hopes By will get in the south, the new start for Kenny later in the book, and even a new start for the American people, once they can conquer their bigotry. Dad is saying his sons should be proud of their heritage, as should all people.



## Chapter 8, The Ultra-Glide!

### Chapter 8, The Ultra-Glide! Summary

All of a sudden, Dad is getting the car, known as the Brown Bomber, all fixed up. They get a new antenna, new tires, new fluids. Dad calls the whole family around to make a big show of putting on the final touch, which turns out to be nothing more than a air freshener for the car.

One Saturday morning, Dad gets up, shaves, and brushes his teeth. Kenny stands by the sink, because he likes the smell of Dad's shaving soap. They share some good conversation. Then Dad goes outside to the car. When Dad comes back in, he gets the whole family lined up and makes an even bigger show out of unveiling the latest new thing. It is a drive-around record player, supposedly designed to keep from skipping when the car hits a bump in the road. Even as cool as Byron thinks he is, he thinks this is really great. Dad demonstrates the device as if he was a car salesman, and Kenny was the father, and Joey was the mother. They play along. Dad plays Momma's favorite song, and they all spend more than two hours playing records in the car, fascinated by this technology. Then, Momma reveals why the car is getting all fixed up. They are going to travel to Alabama where they will leave Byron for the summer, if not longer, to live with the strict Grandma Sands.

### Chapter 8, The Ultra-Glide! Analysis

Here is where the plot starts to become more important. All the vignettes about Byron's trouble-making lead to this moment when they decide to let the stern grandmother have a try with him. Now the different threads start to come together as the author weaves them into one large plot construction. The Ultra-Glide sounds silly and outdated, but at the time was probably the top of the line technology. That Dad bought it indicates that he is preparing for this long drive by securing some form of entertainment.



# Chapter 9, The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963

## Chapter 9, The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963 Summary

One morning, Kenny wakes up and sees Dad sitting out in the car listening to records, so Kenny goes out and sits with him. Kenny asks Dad if they truly are going to leave By in Alabama. Dad tells him that Byron needs to live the slower life of the south for a while and learn how to be an adult without all the bad habits he's learning in Flint. Kenny says he doesn't know how grown-ups know everything and he's scared of not knowing what he needs to know, but Dad reassures him that he'll learn.

Mrs. Davidson, a neighbor who adores Joey, comes over one day before they leave. She gives Joey an angel, and even though Joey really doesn't like it, she is polite and tells Mrs. Davidson thank you. Later, Momma tells Joey how proud she is that Joey didn't hurt Mrs. Davidson's feelings. Joey keeps the angel in her sock drawer.

Momma starts getting everyone packed to leave for Alabama. The night before the trip, Momma and Dad make Byron sleep in their room - apparently Joey told them Byron was planning to try and run away. The next morning they take off for three days of driving to Alabama. Momma has the whole itinerary planned out in a notebook. She knows where they will spend each night, where each child will sit, who will eat what sandwiches - everything. Momma had gone to the library before they left and learned all the facts about all the sights along the way. She wanted them to learn something.

Kenny is most interested in watching Byron, because two days before they left, Kenny had overheard By telling Buphead how he wasn't going to talk the whole trip. When they are driving, though, Byron can't manage it. He asks how they are going to take turns picking what to listen to on the record player. Kenny gives him a hard time about how he talked when he wasn't going to, Byron retaliates, and Dad puts a quick stop to their bickering. Kenny feels victorious, because he thinks he bothered Byron more than Byron bothered him.

## Chapter 9, The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963 Analysis

Because this chapter shares its title with the book, the reader is clued in on the importance of this moment. The Watsons are leaving their home, going to the volatile South, and though they think it will be "quiet" and slow, they may find things are quite a bit different. This is perhaps the most momentous time of their lives, and it starts with this chapter. Dad hints at the perils that await when he comments about how they can't

expect to just show up at any hotel in the south and expect to get a room. He reminds his children that life for an African American (known as coloreds or Negroes at that time) can be dangerous down south. Also, when Dad tells Kenny before they leave why they need to give Byron this experience, it foreshadows the growing up each child will go through as a person of color in 1960s America.



# Chapter 10, Tangled Up in God's Beard

## Chapter 10, Tangled Up in God's Beard Summary

The Watsons stop at a rest stop in Ohio with pit toilets. The kids are disgusted. They've never used an outhouse before. Dad and Momma tell Byron to get used to it, because his Grandma only has an outhouse. Dad keeps on driving while the rest fall asleep. Joey lies across the back seat while Kenny and Byron trade off having her head or feet on their laps. Even though Momma had the whole trip planned out perfectly, Dad has other ideas she doesn't know about. He is thinking of driving through the night while everyone sleeps. Kenny knows about this, because he heard Mr. Johnson and Dad talking about it before they left.

They go through Ohio, Kentucky, and into Tennessee. before they get out for a break. The children are afraid of the mountains, the Appalachians. Byron scares Kenny by telling him the hillbillies will eat Negroes. Everyone is glad to be back in the car. They got too spooked by the unfamiliar scenery. Dad puts on Kenny's choice of record, "Yakety Yak." They stick their arms out the window feeling the cool night air at this high elevation. Kenny recalls this as the "best part of the trip so far."

## Chapter 10, Tangled Up in God's Beard Analysis

These are happy family moments, but it is the calm before the storm. Things are going along too smoothly. They are too happy. Something is bound to happen. The novel has gone from the beginning where it was primarily character driven to this section where the plot takes center stage more and more. The title of the chapter is one indication, implying entanglement and something bigger than themselves.





# Chapter 11, Bobo Brazil Meets the Sheik

## Chapter 11, Bobo Brazil Meets the Sheik Summary

As it turns out, Dad manages to drive straight through to Alabama, while the family sleeps on and off in the car. Kenny notices that they have been in the car long enough for Dad's whiskers to start growing. Dad sees everyone wake up, so he teases them a little by pretending they are all southern now. He says he's going to give them all southern names. Momma plays along, still a little mad that he messed up her precise planning, but not too much, since they've saved a lot of money by not sleeping in hotels.

When they finally reach Birmingham, Kenny's first observation is that it looks a lot like Flint. He was expecting log cabins, but it has real houses. Momma honks the car horn until Grandma Sands comes out of her house. She is a tiny, frail woman, at least to look at her. They all give her a hug, and Byron is polite to her. Kenny can't believe he has submitted so easily. Kenny thinks by the end of the summer either Byron or Grandma Sands will be defeated. Grandma mentions somebody named Mr. Robert, and Momma is quite curious to know who that is. Grandma won't let on just yet. Grandma starts Byron right off working. She sends him to the store to get some food so she can feed everyone. Byron does whatever she says, and Kenny just can't figure that one out.

## Chapter 11, Bobo Brazil Meets the Sheik Analysis

Finally meeting Grandma Sands is both disappointing and intriguing. The children have heard how mean and stern she is, but her looks are deceiving. She looks like something you could knock over with a big breath. Byron seems subdued for the moment, but mostly, because he doesn't want to hurt her, not because he's afraid of her. The author is setting up a big showdown, or at least that's what the reader is expecting. There is a change in By for the better already. Perhaps it's fear or maybe just a change of place, or a sense of returning to his roots.



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

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

The humid heat is hard for the Watsons to get used to. Sleeping is too hot. Kenny has no energy in the daytime either. When he wakes up the first day, he goes outside where Mr. Robert, Dad, and Byron are standing and talking. They're talking about the old hunting dog named Toddy. Mr. Robert and Toddy are both old and can't hunt anymore. Mr. Robert tells them about how he saved Toddy when a 'coon drowned him. Kenny goes inside to get some breakfast. Momma and Grandma Sands are talking at the table, catching up. Finally Momma asks about Grandma and Mr. Robert. Momma clearly doesn't approve of their living together, but Grandma pretty much lets Momma know it's none of her business. The men and Byron come inside to see if Joey and Kenny want to go to the lake to see the best fishing spots. Byron seems to be enjoying himself with the men, and even the blazing heat doesn't seem to bother him.

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

In this episode, Grandma's character is further revealed. She may be strict about some things, but she is not a prude, and she seems to feel completely justified in seeking out a male companion. Momma is the one who seems upset over that. Kenny gets the rare opportunity to see Momma taken down a notch by Grandma, an experience that he finds fun to watch. The fact that Byron seems to be having such a good time instead of dreading his punishment has Kenny intrigued. It is ironic that the south seems to suit Byron, who is supposed to be here to be reformed. In contrast, the south seems more threatening to Kenny in the next couple of chapters.



## **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**

Byron, Kenny, and Joey are heading to the lake for a swim. Grandma warns them not to go to Collier's Landing, because a little boy died in the whirlpool there. The children walk to the lake and see a sign pointing one way to a public beach and the other way to Collier's Landing. Kenny is eager to see Collier's Landing. He wants adventure. Joey reminds him about Grandma's warning. Out of character, Byron says he won't go there. He give Kenny and Joey a story about "Wool Pooh," the supposed evil twin of Winnie-the-Pooh. They believe him, but Kenny still wants to go.

While the other two go to the public beach, Kenny takes the path toward Collier's Landing. Little by little he makes his way into the lake, eventually getting caught in the whirlpool, but he truly believes it's the Wool Pooh and that he is going to die. He thinks he sees Joey as the angel Mrs. Davidson gave her before they left on the trip. He thinks he hears Momma and Dad. Byron appears and gets him out of the water. He holds Kenny upside down, until he starts to breathe. Then, Byron starts crying and holding Kenny, kissing the top of his head.

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

In a turn about of roles, Kenny is the one who disobeys, and Byron is the one who gets him out of trouble. In this chapter, the reader sees an unexpected part of Byron, a caring side. While Byron has protected Kenny in the past, it was as much for his own reputation as it was for Kenny's welfare, or was it? Obviously, Byron is a good person at heart.

When Kenny sees Joey as an angel, it foreshadows a scene in the next chapter where he thinks he sees Joey's angel again. Kenny believes By's tall tales about the Wool Pooh, even though he is old enough to know better. Fear will do that to a person. It will make them believe all kinds of things.



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

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

It is Sunday morning. Joey is going to Sunday school with the neighbors. Kenny goes out into the back yard, already tired out by the heat. Suddenly, a huge boom like the loudest thunder rips through the air. Dad comes outside wondering what is happening, and he immediately assumes Byron is up to some sort of trouble. Byron appears and says he just got out of bed, so it wasn't him. Then Kenny hears Momma scream, a horrifying scream. Kenny runs into the house where Byron tells him that someone just came to tell Momma that a bomb was dropped on the church where Joey was at Sunday school. Kenny goes into shock, unable to move. As if in slow motion, he follows the swarms of people down to the church. He walks inside, noticing the people carrying dead children outside. He sees a foot with a shiny shoe. When he tries to pull on the shoe, something pulls back, and he thinks it is the Wool Pooh.

Kenny takes the shoe and goes back home. He is still in shock. Then he hears Joey talking to him, only he thinks she is dead and this is her spirit coming to say good-bye. She finally convinces him that she is alive by showing her both of her shoes. Joey is confused, because she thinks she saw Kenny waving at her from across the street at the church. She followed him, only he teased her and kept running away. He was wearing different clothes though, and she can't figure out how he would have got home before her. Grandma Sands wakes up, having slept through all this commotion. Kenny begins to figure out that Joey really is alive, and he thinks the Wool Pooh is having trouble taking away any of the Weird Watsons. Then, he runs to tell the rest of the family that Joey is okay.

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

This chapter has a surreal quality to it. The loud boom is mysterious and seems to happen without any signs other than the sound. Then somehow the Watsons get the message that the bomb has been dropped on the church. Kenny goes into slow motion, as if he's in some alternate reality. His vision of the Wool Pooh as a sort of angel of death is hard to figure out. Is he seeing a real person? Or is he seeing something he only imagines? When Joey appears he thinks she is an angel and the Wool Pooh is taking her to visit all her family before she goes off to where, he's not sure. Even when she proves she's alive, her tale about seeing Kenny in other clothes running down the street is eerie. Who was it really? Was it an angel, or was it just coincidence that she wasn't in the church when the bomb went off? The uncertainty of the scene, the surreal

quality, indicates the uncertainty of the state of the country during this time of violence and horror. No one knows what to expect or what to think. It was a confusing and awful time in history, but like Kenny, the country was able to heal.



# Chapter 15, The World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital

## Chapter 15, The World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital Summary

Back in Flint, Kenny is the one who seems most affected by the bombing in Birmingham. The family left the same night so that Joey would never hear about the tragedy. Kenny is troubled by the things he saw in the church that day. He hides behind the couch, because it has always been called the World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital. Whenever one of their pets was injured or sick, it would go behind the couch and wait to either get better or die. Byron had told Joey and Kenny that there were magical fairies, genies, and angels behind the couch. Pretty soon, everyone in the family figures out that Kenny is staying back there. Byron comes to sleep on the couch. Momma and Dad sit on the couch and talk about how proud they are of Kenny. Even Joey peeks back at Kenny once in a while. Nobody knows that Kenny had gone into the church after the bombing. They all think that he only went to tell them Joey was okay, so they don't really know what Kenny saw. During his time behind the couch, Kenny finds himself getting very annoyed with Joey. He thinks she is a crybaby and a snitch. He says he hates her.

Finally, Byron takes Kenny upstairs to the bathroom to show him the beginnings of his chin whiskers. Kenny looks in the mirror to see if he has any hairs on his face, and seeing himself brings on a river of tears. Byron doesn't tease him or put him down. He just lets Kenny cry. Byron thinks Kenny is crying, because it was sad and scary, or because he's afraid something like that will happen in Flint. What Kenny is really crying about is that he is ashamed for taking the shoe of the little girl in the church, thinking it was Joey's shoe, but not staying to rescue her. When he mentions the Wool Pooh, Byron tries to convince him that there is no such thing. Byron gives Kenny a lecture about how there are no magical powers or angels, that it's all just made up. He tells Kenny that no matter what, it was part of him that got Joey out of that church. Somehow, his presence was there. Kenny says it's not fair that other children died, and Byron says nothing is fair, and Kenny needs to learn to keep going anyway. He tells Kenny he will be all right now.

After Byron leaves the bathroom, Kenny thinks about what he said. Kenny thinks Byron is right about some things and wrong about others. He thinks there is magic in the world, just magic in the ordinary things like a father smiling at "you even after you'd messed something up real bad." He thinks Byron is right that Kenny is too old and smart to believe that magical powers live behind a couch. Kenny knows things will be okay now.



## Chapter 15, The World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital Analysis

It's not surprising that Kenny is the one most affected by the bombing, since he saw the inside of the church and the dead bodies, and since he thought he saw his dead sister's angel. The Watsons handle the situation in their own loving way. They don't whisk Kenny off to therapy. Even if they could afford it, they would just let things take their time to get worked out. The wonderful thing is that Byron acts in such a caring and big-brotherly way to Kenny. Byron seems to have forgotten his "too cool" persona and seems like a real kid again, although he still has his influence with the other kids when he makes them play basketball with Kenny. Telling the truth is what finally helps Kenny resolve his pain. Once he tells Byron that he really was in the church and what he saw, Byron helps him realize that he did make a difference. His hiding behind the couch is much like a moth in a cocoon, and he comes out to morph into a new creature, with knowledge of all that has happened, and affected by it, but still able to keep living.



# Epilogue

## Epilogue Summary

The author tells readers about some of the events in the civil rights era of the 1960s. He talks about some of the famous people who worked and sacrificed for civil rights, and the laws that were passed because of them. He also says there are many ordinary people who were heroes, and they may be living right along side of us. They may even be us.

## Epilogue Analysis

Although this book isn't really about the civil rights movement, it is about one family and their experience of one piece of that time in history. Every family had an experience of injustice and hatred to deal with, and each individual can be a hero by doing what is right.





# Characters

## Kenny

Kenny is the narrator of the story. He is 11-years-old and the middle child in the Watson family. He has a lazy eye and is considered smart, because he is a good reader. He likes the song "Yakety Yak." He nearly drowns in a lake in Alabama and sees the aftermath of the bombed church.

## Byron

Byron is Kenny's older brother. He is, according to Kenny, an official juvenile delinquent. Byron has some behavior issues, which is why the family goes to Alabama. They are taking Byron to live with Grandma Sands, who they hope will straighten him up. Despite his tough guy persona, Byron is a protective big brother.

## Joetta

Joetta is Kenny's little sister, usually called Joey. She is very religious. She tries to do what she thinks is right, which often involves snitching on her big brother for his own good.

## Momma

Momma was raised in Alabama, and she has a hard time living in Flint, Michigan, where it gets so cold. When she is upset or stressed, she reverts to her southern dialect. She is a loving, kind mother, but stern when she needs to be.

## Dad

Dad likes to joke around and make his family laugh. When he is fixing up the car for the trip to Alabama, he gets excited about each new item, especially the Ultra-Glide. His method of discipline is fair consequences, so that when Byron gets a funky hairstyle, Dad just shaves his head.

## Grandma Sands

Grandma is Momma's mother, who lives in Alabama. She is a small woman with a big person inside. She has a reputation for being mean, but she seems much nicer in person.



## **Buphead**

Buphead is one of Byron's thug friends, who likes to tease Kenny.

## **Rufus**

Rufus is a new friend to Kenny. He is from the south, and a lot of the other kids make fun of him. However, he is a loyal and true friend to Kenny.

## **Mr. Robert**

Mr. Robert is Grandma Sands' live-in companion. It is not clear how intimate their relationship is, but he clearly makes Grandma happy.



# Objects/Places

## Flint, Michigan

The Watson family lives in Flint, Michigan, where it can get quite cold in the winter, as it is when the novel opens. As Momma is from the south, it seems extremely cold to her.

## Birmingham, Alabama

Grandma Sands lives in Birmingham, and that is where the Watsons are going on the long car trip. It is the actual site of a church bombing in which four young girls died. In the fictional account in this novel, it is a different church and different children.

## The Brown Bomber

Dad has a name for his car, The Brown Bomber. It is an old car, but it runs. He gets it all fixed up for the long car trip. He is proud of the car. Kenny likes the comfortable seats in the car that make it easy to sleep.

## Momma's Notebook

Momma has a notebook titled "The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963." She has recorded all the information she plans to use for the car trip, including what food she has brought along, where they will spend the nights, how often they can have restaurant food, and information about the points of interest along the way.

## The Wool Pooh

Byron makes up the monster called The Wool Pooh, which is supposed to be Winnie-the-Pooh's evil twin. He's doing a play on words, because Grandma Sands tells them to watch out for Collier's Landing where the whirlpool is. Kenny becomes convinced the Wool Pooh is a real thing that tries to snatch him in the lake and tries to take away Joey at the church after it is bombed.

## Collier's Landing

When Kenny goes to the lake, instead of listening to Grandma, he searches out adventure and goes to Collier's Landing. Children have drowned there, and Kenny almost drowns, too. Byron saves him.



## **The Church**

In Birmingham, a church is bombed. Apparently some white men throw a bomb from a car. Since the church was a Negro church, the act was obviously racially motivated. In the novel, Kenny goes into the church and sees all the people hurt and killed. He thinks his sister, Joey, is dead. This deeply affects him.

## **The Ultra-Glide**

Dad installs a special kind of record player in the car for the trip. It's called an Ultra-Glide, and it is designed so the record won't skip while the car is going. This would have been high technology at the time, and it seems to have cost a lot.

## **Clark Elementary School**

The Watson children all attend Clark. Byron is still in elementary, even though he is a teenager, because he has been held back a couple of times.

## Setting

In *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, Kenny and his siblings are part of a strong family unit that provides a secure home and high standards for behavior. The story is set in Flint, Michigan, during the winter of 1963 and moves down Interstate 75 to Birmingham, Alabama, and Grandma Sands' home for a few days in the summer of 1963.

1963 is the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Kenny's environment is secure and peaceful in his Flint home and school community with the exception of the abuse he receives from By and his bully friend, Buphead. Kenny is easy prey for bullies because of a lazy eye that always pulls in next to his nose, making it crossed.

The setting is integral to the story. It sets the stage for conflict in Flint and Birmingham. In Flint, there are gangs to entice Kenny and By. By is being pulled into the gangs through the influence of his friend, Buphead, much to the dismay of his parents, and Kenny is looking to By as an example of how a teenager acts.

The story progresses from a lighthearted, carefree tone to a more somber, tragic tone when Dad and Momma take the family to Birmingham. The trip to Birmingham provides the Watson children with their first real experience with prejudice and hate towards black people. A church bombing near Grandma Sands' home frightens and confuses Kenny, so much so that he goes through a period of withdrawal and hiding when the family returns to Flint.



## Social Sensitivity

Kenny is growing up at the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, and although his home is far from the marches, protests, and violence that ensue, Curtis weaves the two together seamlessly. The Watsons' reaction to the bombing is one of horror, confusion, and disbelief. By helps Kenny gain perspective on his feelings, and the statements he makes help the reader gain some perspective, too.

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? How's it fair that even though the cops down there might know who did it nothing will probably ever happen to those men? It ain't. But you just gotta understand that that's the way it is and keep on stepping.

# Literary Qualities

Christopher Paul Curtis has written a first novel that speaks in a lively fashion.

Through the eyes of Kenny we meet a deThe Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 lightful tight-knit family. Curtis employs some black dialect in his portrayal of By and Southern dialect to portray Momma when she gets worried and upset. After their arrival in Birmingham, Momma's speech is especially tinged with Southern flair, just like Grandma Sands' speech. His candid use of dialect, even poking fun at Momma from time to time, adds to the authenticity of the characters. Young people will find in Kenny a delightful friend whose approach to dealing with bullies, friends, and parents is one they can appreciate and understand.

Curtis very ably moves the reader from hilarity in the beginning chapters of the book to a sense of foreboding, danger, disaster, fear, and disquietude as the story builds to the bombing climax. Curtis's portrayal of the Watson family's ordeals is honest. He weaves a factual event, the church bombing, into his story without exploiting the horror.

# Themes

## Family

Even though Kenny's family doesn't always get along and they have a son who gets into trouble, they are a close and loving family. Byron looks out for the younger kids. Momma and Dad are fair parents with kind hearts, but not afraid to take drastic measures to help Byron before he becomes a criminal or something worse. The whole family has a great sense of humor, encouraged by Dad's frequent teasing and jokes.

The opening scene where the family huddles on the couch freezing, because the landlord hasn't fixed the heat is a good example of the closeness the Watsons have. Other moments include when Byron tells Kenny how to make both his eyes look the same way. He's just helping his brother learn how to get along in the world that will see him differently because of his eye. Then there's the time they all sit in the car listening to records on the Ultra-Glide enjoying togetherness. The fact that they don't just give up on Byron, as well as the whole family going with him to Alabama, indicates how much they care for each other. The way they support but don't hound Kenny in the end while he is trying to get over the bombing shows their strength as a family.

Within the family, there are special bonds between and among the siblings as well as with each child and each parent. For example, By may appear to be a troublemaker and a bully, but he helps Kenny out all the time. In the end, he helps Kenny learn some facts about growing up. Particularly moving are the times when By's tender heart comes out, such as when he buries the dead bird or when he kisses Kenny's head after rescuing him from the whirlpool. Joey also shows a tender side, especially when By is about to get burned by Momma. Although Joey is usually a rule follower, and even assents to Momma's reminder that this is necessary, at the last minute, her concern for her brother outweighs her moral sense.

Momma cares deeply for her family in the ways she knows how. She makes them wear oodles of warm clothes in the winter, punishes them when they do wrong, and does not give up on her juvenile delinquent son. She has humor when dealing with her children, while at the same time teaching them to be polite and nice. To the children, she will always be Momma, and they have a good laugh when they see her mother put Momma in her place.

Dad is a good man. He takes care of his family, but he has a unique humor about him. While he can be a strict disciplinarian, it is not mean or brutal, as in the scene where he shaves Byron's head. He provides opportunities for family closeness, perhaps not deliberately or consciously, but huddling on the couch against the cold, sitting in the car listening to records, or hanging out with the men in the south are all times and places conducive to family accord and love.





## Race

Although race is not an overt theme throughout the book, it is an underlying theme at all times. Dad makes mention of things in the south, such as "Coloreds Only" bathrooms. The teacher in Byron's class makes a point of telling the students that Negroes have to work harder and learn as much as they can in order to achieve in a world that will automatically try to keep them down. When they are driving to Alabama and Momma describes where they will sleep each night, it is made clear that African American families can't just drive up to any motel and expect to get a room.

Certainly, the most obvious moment of racial tension in the book occurs when the church is bombed in Birmingham. Kenny has a hard time understanding why anybody would want to harm children or anyone else. While a bombing did happen in Birmingham in 1963, this one is fictional, but it symbolizes the fact that everyone, no matter where they lived or who they knew, was affected by the civil rights movement. Everyone experienced violence in some form or another. Everyone lost, when children were killed because of racial hatred. This knowledge and his own reaction to it haunt Kenny severely. It is a rude coming of age, gaining knowledge of the way his world operates in this way. It is symbolic, too, of the coming of age of the American public to the horrific events that were taking place all the time, leading the country to transform its laws, its culture, and its treatment of people of all ethnic origins. It truly was a new beginning for the country, just as it is for Kenny.

## Growing Up

Sometimes children start to grow up when they see and understand the harsh realities of the world. That happens to Kenny in this novel. He has a violent and rude initiation into the goings on of the adults. It takes him some time to get over the intensity of seeing how cruel adults can be. Even though he's been dealing with bullies all his life, he hasn't had to face anything terribly brutal, certainly nothing racially motivated, since his entire world involves other African Americans. Plus, Byron helps protect Kenny from ever being in any real danger. However, in Birmingham, Byron can't protect Kenny from the realities of the white racists.

Kenny also has a long talk with Dad about how hard it must be to be a grown-up and how scared he is that he won't be able to do it. Dad is reassuring, explaining that Kenny will have plenty of time to practice and learn from other people's mistakes. He does. Terrible mistakes like the bombing of the church precipitate a huge change in Kenny, a time to see what horrors other people can inflict, to assess his own response to it, and to accept the world as it is while trying to live as a good person should.

By grows up as well. He stops acting like a bully and starts acting like a human being. Inside, he has always had a tender place and a kind heart, and by the end of the novel, he has come to understand that his supposed tough guy exterior wasn't protecting him or proving his manhood. Rather, the opposite is true. He is more of a man when he lets his outside match is inside, when he becomes more the kind of man his father is.



## Themes/Characters

Curtis writes mainly about the theme of relationships, especially those relationships between parent and child and between siblings. Kenny has a close and open relationship with his parents and senses when it is appropriate to ask them questions and go to them with problems. Dad and Momma respect Kenny and his questions, giving him simple, truthful answers. When Kenny offended his only friend, Rufus, Momma was sensitive to the subtle change in Kenny and helped him talk about what was troubling him. He even asked for her advice.

After discerning that Kenny had tried to apologize to Rufus, she advised Kenny to try again and give Rufus time to forgive him. Without fanfare, she interceded on Kenny's behalf with Rufus, and the two boys were able to make amends.

In the relationship between Kenny and By, Kenny alternates between fear of and fascination for By. By is a bully and Kenny is frequently the object of his bully tactics.

Kenny tries to avoid By, but likes to get his licks in, too, when he knows By cannot retaliate. By demonstrates a teen role model that both fascinates and scares Kenny and disappoints his parents. They do not want Kenny following By's path into gang activities and disobedience. Unlike Kenny's, By's relationship with his parents is one of rebellion.

There is a strong love between the parents, and they agree on matters of discipline in raising their children. They practice what we call today a "tough love" with By.

They are determined to rescue By from himself and the influence of his tough "gang" type friends, willing to take drastic measures, even if it means shipping him South to Birmingham where the low rumble of the Civil Rights Movement is beginning. In rescuing By, they hope to set a strong example for Kenny, guiding him in a different direction towards independence and responsibility.

Ten-year-old Kenneth (Kenny) Bernard Watson is a boy with two problems: a lazy eye that turns in towards his nose in spite of everything his parents have tried to correct it and a quick, intelligent mind. Because of his reading ability, he is used as an example before other students and as a result becomes the butt of their jokes and abuses. In addition, Kenny feels a bit out of place at home, being the middle child, not old enough to do By's "fantastic adventures" and too old to play pretend games like Joetta, his five-year-old sister. Although he knows By is frequently getting himself in trouble, it seems to Kenny some of those "fantastic adventures" would be enough fun to be worth the punishment meted out by his parents.

Kenny's only friend turned out to be a thief, so he has been without a good friend for sometime when a new boy boards his bus and joins Kenny's fourth grade class.

He is as much an outcast as Kenny, and Kenny sees him as his "saver," thinking the kids will stop making fun of him when they direct their taunts towards Rufus, the new



boy. At first Kenny joins the school crowd in teasing Rufus but soon decides it is okay to be different. It is not long before Kenny learns about friendship and the price one pays to be a friend.

Kenny is a thinker and asks his Dad some serious questions. Kenny fears he does not know all the answers and when the time comes, will not know how to be a good parent like his parents. His emotions run deep for his family and learning to handle them helps Kenny change and grow. Because he is a thinker, he frequently sees through By's frightening stories, and although he has a strong sense they are just that, stories, he still finds himself more like Joetta, believing By's stories against his better judgment.

Byron (By) Watson at thirteen is an "official juvenile delinquent," a status he works to maintain. He wants everyone to think he is tough and "Mr. Cool." He is determined to rebel against his parents and teachers and does so by skipping school, refusing to study, starting fires, and straightening his hair. By is an all-around bully, making life miserable for Kenny, keeping Kenny on the edge between fear and admiration. He fabricates frightening stories which he tells to Kenny and Joetta. He takes advantage of his parents' love and pushes their patience to the limit. By finds gang life exciting and enjoys harassing younger children.

Dad and Momma have tried over and over to get By to change his ways, threatening to take him to Grandma Sands' house in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* Birmingham. When Momma threatens to burn By the next time she catches him playing with fire, By promises to change but always backslides. Eventually, Dad and Momma make good on their threat and take By to Birmingham to Grandma Sands' home. By drops the tough boy attitude when, after nine years, he sees Grandma Sands, a petite lady with white hair and a cane. A near tragedy with Kenny and the church bombing near Grandma Sands' home turn By around. He even becomes protective of Kenny, helping him pull out of a depression following the bombing.

Joetta, often called Joey or Jo, is a typical five year old, attending kindergarten and trying to keep up with her two older brothers. She adores both of them and frequently tries to intervene on their behalf, especially By's, with Dad and Momma. She is a happy, carefree little girl who easily believes the tales By makes up about fake garbage collection trucks that pick up all the frozen bodies of dead people every morning and his story about the "Wool Pooh" in the water.

Both Momma and Dad play crucial roles in the *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*.

Dad is from Michigan and works hard at his factory job. He loves and provides for his family, having a wonderful sense of humor as well as a determination to instill strong character traits and high moral values in his children.

Momma moved from Birmingham to Flint fifteen years ago when she married her husband. She is an independent spirit, loves her children fiercely, and along with her husband is determined to raise her children with lots of love and a firm hand.



# Style

## Point of View

The point of view in this novel is first person from Kenny's point of reference. Kenny is the one who has the ultimate crisis, when he sees the dead bodies in the bombed out church and doesn't help save anybody. It is his issue to deal with, so it makes sense to tell the story through his eyes. Kenny is also the age that the book is intended for, so naturally, having the story told from his point of view is a good choice. In addition, Kenny is the most sympathetic of the three children. He is the one who is often teased and bullied, he is the one who has the lazy eye, he is the one who is still childlike enough to believe in crazy scare tactics like the Wool Pooh. He has the most to gain and the most to lose. Using first person to tell his story gives his voice more power, allowing the narrative to be told not just by his actions but also by his thoughts and musings about the events going on around him.

Using Kenny's voice as the narrator also allows a depth of insight into Byron's character through the eyes of someone else. If told through Byron's viewpoint, the story would likely portray him as a smart kid who has an annoying little brother. It would downplay his tender heart and make him seem macho and sophisticated. As it is, Byron comes off as tough, tender, kind, and mean all at the same time, which is a much more rounded character than he would be if the story was from his point of view.

## Setting

The contrasting settings of Flint, Michigan and Birmingham, Alabama serve to highlight the difference between the north and the south in how African Americans were treated in the pre-civil rights era. In the early 1960s, much of the south was still heavily segregated and the treatment of African Americans was abominable. The choice of Birmingham, Alabama as the home of Grandma Sands brings the Watsons right into the thick of events that changed America. The setting makes national events feel personal, through the eyes of Kenny and his family.

The setting also symbolizes the strident conflicts over civil rights in the United States. While the north since the Civil War has focused less on harassing and oppressing the African Americans, life in the north was not equal for all. Kenny's world is not one of integration, or of material abundance, indicated from the opening scene of the book where the heat is not working. Kenny's teachers use him as an example to the entire school of learning to read and taking education seriously as a means of getting their fair share of the American dream. So while racially motivated lynchings are not taking place in Flint, neither is equality present.

The setting in the early '60s puts the action at the rising point in conflicts over civil rights. Certainly, the decades preceding this time were fraught with moments of progress



through hardship, but this point of the nation's history was like the crest of a tidal wave. Kennedy had been killed, Vietnam was making the news, and Americans, black and white, were more and more vocal about the atrocities against African Americans. Still, here is Kenny, innocent of most of that, a child still, with a child's understanding. His chance to grow up coincides with the nation's growth.

## Language and Meaning

One of the most telling uses of language is the words used to describe people of African descent in this novel. In the south, the term "Coloreds" was still often used, and Dad makes mention of this when he teases Momma about how the south isn't all that great. There were many other more demeaning words used for African Americans in the south, and sometimes they are still used. In other parts of the country, the politically correct term of the time was "Negroes." Use of these words in the novel help to set the stage and indicate the historical time period of the novel.

Another interesting use of language is the humorous, tongue-in-cheek, light-hearted chapter titles. They are often long for chapter titles, and sometimes seem to have little to do with the action of the chapter. For example, the title of Chapter 5, Nazi Parachutes Attack America and Get Shot Down over the Flint River by Captain Byron Watson and His Flamethrower of Death, is a long one about By getting in trouble for playing with fire. Is it just merely a light-hearted expression of By's still boyish ways of playing with his paratroopers? Or does the reference to Nazis imply something more, such as a comparison of events later in the novel to the horrors the Nazis perpetrated? Of course, one can read too much into titles, but clearly, they are meant to catch one's eye and attention.

## Structure

While the novel is structured in the traditional numbered chapters, they are not necessarily contiguous events told in order. Each chapter is almost a stand-alone short story, more like a slice of life vignette that shows some little bit of the family interacting. While the pieces can stand alone, together they paint a picture of a family that loves each other, looks out for each other, shares humor, and also struggles.

The structure of the first half of the novel is character driven, using these vignettes to show the dynamics of the family and the kinds of people the Watsons are. The second half places this family in a tragic situation and lets events sweep them through it, thus this half is more about plot. However, the plot is not separate from the characters. In fact, the plot is used for character development, allowing them to grow and change through the course of events.

The plot also serves to indicate the changes that America went through coordinating with the changes Kenny and By go through. That violence and pain took place in the world was something Kenny wasn't too aware of until he went to the south. Much of America, too, seemed to have blinders on to the lynchings, discrimination, and evil

going on in their country. The plot shows, through the characters, how America changed.



## Quotes

"Dad was doing his best not to explode laughing. Big puffs of smoke were coming out of his nose and mouth as he tried to squeeze his laughs down. Finally he put his head on his arms and leaned against the car's hood and howled." p. 14

"Mr. Alums might as well have tied me up to a pole and said, 'Ready, aim, fire!'" p. 24

"After my arm quit hurting from his punch I went back to the alley behind Mitchell's to take another look at the dead bird but it was gone. Right in the spot where the bird had crashed By had dug a little grave, and on top of the grave there were two Popsicle sticks tied together in a cross." p. 84

"Byron stepped into the living room with a real mean scowl on his face. Not only had Dad cut all of Byron's hair off, he'd also shaved his head! By's head was so shiny it looked like it was wet." p. 98

" 'And as far as you being a good parent, don't worry. You'll learn from the mistakes your mother and I make, just like we learned from the mistakes our parents made. I don't have a single doubt that you and Byron and Joey will be much better parents than your mother and I ever were.'" p. 125

"As we drove down the mountain with our arms sticking out of the windows and our fingers wiggling in the breeze, I thought the Brown Bomber must look like a bug lying on its back with four skinny brown legs kicking and twitching to try to put it back on its feet." p. 148

"What came out was a teeny-weeny, old, old, old woman that looked just like Momma would if someone shrank her down about five sizes and sucked all the juice out of her!" p. 156

"It looked like someone had set off a people magnet, it seemed like everyone in Birmingham was running down the street, it looked like a river of scared brown bodies was being jerked in the same direction that By had gone, so I followed." p. 184

"Kenny, things ain't ever going to be fair. How's it fair they'd kill some kids just to stop them from going to school? How's it fair that even though the cops down there might know who did it nothing will probably ever happen to those men? It ain't. But you just gotta understand that's the way it is and keep on steppin'." p. 203

"Maybe they were in the way your father smiled at you even after you'd messed something up real bad. Maybe they were in the way you understood that your mother wasn't trying to make you the laughing 'sock' of the whole school when she'd call you over in front of a bunch of your friends and use spit on her finger to wipe the sleep out of your eyes....Maybe there were genies in the way your sister would throw a stupid tea

party for you and you had fun even though it was kind of embarrassing to sit at a little table and sip water out of plastic teacups." p. 205



# Adaptations

The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963, Curtis's first book, is set in Flint, Michigan, in 1963. His second book, Bud, Not Buddy, is also set in Flint but during the Great Depression. In *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* 1963, Curtis has created a strong family unit, while in *Bud, Not Buddy* readers meet ten-year-old Bud, a motherless boy, who escapes from a bad foster home situation and sets out to find his father.

With LeVar Burton reading the story, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* is also available on audio cassette from Bantam Books-Audio.



# Topics for Discussion

1. How would you help By defrost his lips when they become stuck to the "Brown Bomber"'s side-view mirror?
2. Why would Mrs. Henry, Kenny's teacher, set Kenny up as an example for other kids to emulate? How does that affect any friendships Kenny might have with students in his school?
3. What qualities do you look for in a best friend? Why was it hard for Kenny to make friends? What advice would you give him about being a friend?
4. In chapter five, By plays with matches again. Momma is following through with her threat to burn By the next time she catches him playing with fire. Joey is in a panic and trying to stop her. Is she really going to burn him? What does she plan to do? What will her action accomplish? How would you convince By of the danger of his actions?
5. Why does By think they are going on welfare when Momma sends him to Mitchell's grocery for food items? Why would he go on his own and sign for food items without Momma's knowledge?
6. By seems to have no feelings when he is mean to Kenny and other little kids, but when he hits the bird with a cookie and kills it, he seems filled with remorse. By's reaction perplexes Kenny. Explain By's behavior.
7. In chapter nine, Dad explains to Kenny why By needs to go to Birmingham. Kenny tries to understand what Dad is saying but without much success. Explain what Dad is saying about By, By's world, being in Flint, and being with Grandma Sands in Birmingham.
8. In chapter thirteen, Kenny disobeys his grandmother and By and nearly drowns in the whirlpool at Collier's Landing. Later Kenny talks about the steps he took getting himself into trouble. List the steps and examine them. How would they compare to your own list if you examined yourself and a time you got yourself into trouble?
9. By is almost always mean to Kenny, and readers, along with Kenny, think he has gone on to the guarded swimming area. Explain By's behavior. Why did he check on Kenny?
10. Later in the novel, Kenny and By talk about the church bombing and the unfairness of it. What is your reaction to the questions By asks Kenny: "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? How's it fair that even though the cops down there might know who did it nothing will probably ever happen to those men?"
11. The main theme in this story is relationships, relationships between children and their parents and between siblings. Discuss the relationships between Kenny and his

parents, By and his parents, and Kenny and By. Explain how each of these relationships changes as the story unfolds.



## Essay Topics

Who changes the most, Byron or Kenny, over the course of the novel? Back up your answer with evidence from the book.

Who really was it that Joey saw waving at her from across the street at the church? Why do you think this? Do you have any evidence?

Who or what was the Wool Pooh, and was it real or just something Kenny imagined?

Why did Byron seem to be having so much fun in Alabama, even though it was supposed to be like a punishment?

Why did Byron get so upset, when the bird he knocked off the wire died?

Describe Kenny's personality before Alabama and after.

What are the greatest strengths of this family? What are its weaknesses?

Read a historical account of the bombing of the Sixteenth Avenue Baptist Church in Birmingham using a primary source, such as a newspaper article from the time or an interview with someone who was there. What details does this novel use from the real events? What details are different?

Do you think Momma and Dad were really prepared to leave Byron in Alabama, or do you think it was more a way to scare him? What evidence from the novel supports your answer?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Momma did not really know anything about the cold. After fifteen years in Flint, she still believed cold weather could kill you in a flash. Find out about truly cold weather. Is there a place on earth where the cold could kill you in a matter of seconds or minutes? Create a chart or a method of your choice to record your findings so you can share them with your classmates.
2. The Watsons call their car the "Brown Bomber." Using some descriptive information given early in the novel and in chapter eight, find pictures of a car like it. From the descriptions, try to determine the year it was made. Research into how much the car cost when it was new.
3. Momma has planned their trip down to the last detail. Use a road map of the United States and chart their trip. Use map pins to mark the stopping places Momma had planned. Display the map on a bulletin board featuring *The Watsons Go to Birmingham —1963*.
4. Momma even has the food and snacks planned for the entire trip. Using Momma's choices of foods, plan a picnic to enjoy during the reading and discussion of the trip portion of the book.
5. By frightens Joey and ultimately Kenny with his fabrication of the "Wool Pooh", Pooh Bear's evil twin. Chapter thirteen gives a good description of what Kenny thinks he sees when he is caught in the whirlpool. Create a picture of it. Think about how different art mediums work and choose one that best fits the situation: watercolors, colored pencil, collage, charcoal, or something of your choosing.
6. Research the Civil Rights Movement then work with a partner and plan a role play for sharing the information you find. One of you is involved in the Civil Rights Movement planning a march.

The other is a news reporter for TV, radio, newspaper, or magazine. Your format for reporting to the class will depend your choice of media. Work together to find the information you need, write your questions, and practice before you share with the class.

7. Several people who worked to end segregation and discrimination are listed in the Epilogue. Choose one to research.

Select a method for sharing the information with your class, such as first person reenactment, video documentary, radio documentary, poster, written report, or bulletin board.



8. Listen to a recording or video tape of Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Discuss with the class how reading *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* has helped you better understand the issues King raises in his speech.
9. The Civil Rights Bill was signed by President Lyndon Johnson on July 2, 1964. Find a copy of the Bill, read it, and present a briefing of the Bill to your class.
10. The Voting Rights Act was signed by President Lyndon Johnson on August 6, 1965. Find a copy of the Act, read it, and present a briefing of the Act to your class.



## Further Study

"Curtis, Christopher Paul." In *Something About the Author*. Volume 93. Edited by Alan Hedblad. Detroit: Gale, 1997. A biobibliographical entry detailing Curtis's life and work.

Parravano, Martha V. Review of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. *Horn Book* (March/April 1996): 195-96. Parravano calls this an impressive first novel and speaks enthusiastically of Curtis's writing style and sense of story.

Rochman, Hazel. Review of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. *Booklist* (August 19, 1995): 1946. Rochman feels there are several family stories that are self-conscious, but later calls *The Watson Go to Birmingham—1963* a compelling first novel.

Review of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. *Publishers Weekly* (October 16, 1995): 62. According to this reviewer, Curtis "Evok[es] a full spectrum of emotions."

The reviewer comments positively about Curtis's ability to speak the truth about the struggle for racial equality through the eyes of the young protagonist, Kenny.

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