

A Guide for Using  
***The Watsons  
Go to  
Birmingham  
–1963***

in the Classroom

*Based on the book written by  
Christopher Paul Curtis*

*This guide written by Debra J. Housel, M.S. Ed.*



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# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	3
<b>Sample Lesson Plans</b> .....	4
<b>Before the Book</b> ( <i>Pre-reading Activities</i> ) .....	5
<b>About the Author</b> .....	6
<b>Book Summary</b> .....	7
<b>Vocabulary Lists</b> .....	8
<b>Vocabulary Activity Ideas</b> .....	9
<b>Section 1</b> ( <i>Chapters 1–4</i> ) .....	10
• Quiz Time	
• Hands-on Project— <i>Dinosaurs</i>	
• Cooperative-Learning Activity— <i>Learning About the Empire State Building</i>	
• Curriculum Connection— <i>Social Studies: Greek Mythology</i>	
• Into Your Life— <i>Reader’s Response Journals</i>	
<b>Section 2</b> ( <i>Chapters 5–8</i> ) .....	15
• Quiz Time	
• Hands-on Project— <i>Character Study of a Family Member</i>	
• Cooperative-Learning Activity— <i>Locating Sensory Images</i>	
• Curriculum Connection— <i>Music: Writing Music Critiques</i>	
• Into Your Life— <i>Creating Portmanteau Words</i>	
<b>Section 3</b> ( <i>Chapters 9–11</i> ) .....	20
• Quiz Time	
• Hands-on Project— <i>Recreate the Brown Bomber</i>	
• Cooperative-Learning Activity— <i>Making Cartoon Strips</i>	
• Curriculum Connection— <i>Language Arts: Figurative Language</i>	
• Into Your Life— <i>Using a Road Atlas</i>	
<b>Section 4</b> ( <i>Chapters 12–13</i> ) .....	25
• Quiz Time	
• Hands-on Project— <i>Jackdaws</i>	
• Cooperative-Learning Activity— <i>Creative Review Questions</i>	
• Curriculum Connection— <i>Science: Learning About Weather</i>	
• Into Your Life— <i>Doing Library Research</i>	
<b>Section 5</b> ( <i>Chapters 14–15 and Epilogue</i> ) .....	30
• Quiz Time	
• Hands-on Project— <i>Character Portraits with Main Events</i>	
• Cooperative-Learning Activity— <i>Literature Circles</i>	
• Curriculum Connection— <i>Math: Math Word Problems</i>	
• Into Your Life— <i>Compare Yourself to Kenny or Byron</i>	
<b>After the Book</b> ( <i>Post-reading Activities</i> ) .....	35
<b>Book Report Ideas</b> .....	35
<b>The Newbery Medal</b> .....	36
<b>Culminating Activities</b> .....	37
<b>Unit Test Options</b> .....	38
<b>Cartoon Strip Template</b> .....	41
<b>Venn Diagram Template</b> .....	42
<b>Bibliography of Related Readings</b> .....	43
<b>Answer Key</b> .....	45

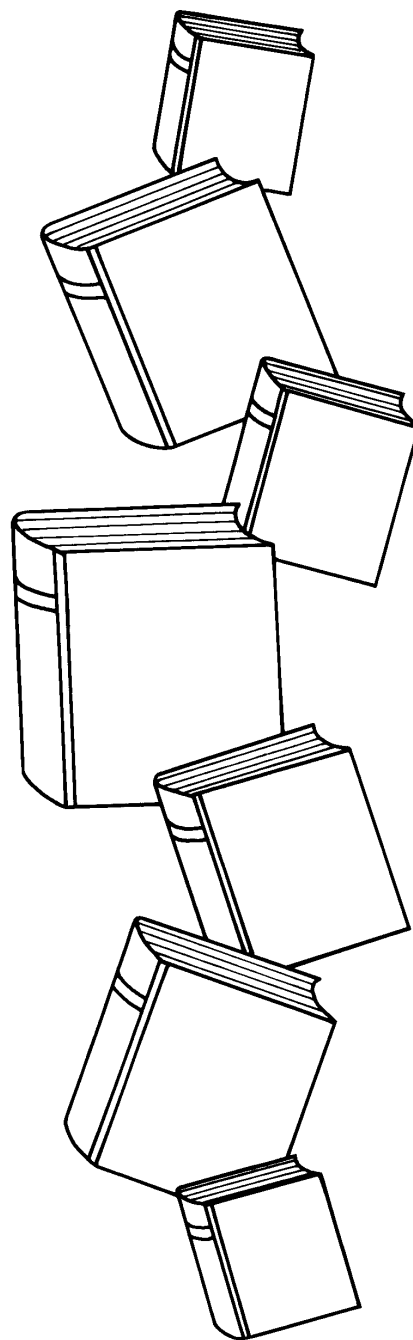
# Introduction

A novel as entertaining as *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* makes the issues of racism and the Civil Rights movement of the early 1960s both real and relevant to today's students. Christopher Paul Curtis helps his readers to experience childhood in the early 1960s through the voice of Kenny Watson, a 10-year-old African-American boy.

*The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* provides many opportunities for students to discuss the difficulties of growing up. Not only will this literature unit entertain, it will provide a wealth of teachable moments. Teachers who use this unit will find the following features:

- A Sample Lesson Plan
- Pre-reading Activities
- A Biographical Sketch of the Author
- A Book Summary
- Vocabulary Lists by Section
- Vocabulary Activity Ideas
- Chapters of the book grouped by sections, each of which include the following:
  - quizzes
  - hands-on projects
  - cooperative-learning opportunities
  - cross-curricular activities
  - writing lessons
  - connections to relate to the reader's own life
- Post-reading Activities, including:
  - book report ideas
  - culminating activities
- Three Different Options for Unit Tests:
  - objective (matching and true/false/explain)
  - explaining quotes from the book
  - conversations (students write conversation scripts for characters)
- Bibliography of Related Readings
- Answer Keys

This literature unit will be an invaluable addition to your literature planning. By using these ideas, your students will discover the delightful companionship to be found in a good book, while learning about an important historical event in an engaging, thought-provoking way.



# *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*

*by Christopher Paul Curtis*

*(Bantam Doubleday Dell Books for Young Readers)*

*(Available in CAN, Bantam Doubleday Dell; UK, Doubleday Dell Seal; & AUS, Transworld)*

As the middle child in a family of five, 10-year-old Kenny Watson tells us the story of his family, “the Weird Watsons,” who live in Flint, Michigan. Most of Kenny's problems stem from his older brother, Byron, who is also the school bully. Now that Byron is 13, Kenny dubs him “officially a juvenile delinquent.” The book begins in winter with some humorous adventures. Self-absorbed Byron gives his reflection a kiss and ends up with his lips frozen to the side-view mirror on the family car. Later Byron convinces Kenny and their kindergarten-aged sister, Joetta, that people with Southern blood freeze in their tracks and are hauled away in garbage trucks early each morning.



In addition to making trouble for Kenny, Byron is constantly in trouble himself. He frequently skips school; gets involved in fights; defiantly lights matches in the house; and gets his hair straightened into a “conk,” even though he knows it will infuriate his parents. By the end of the school year, the Watson parents decide that only strict Grandma Sands can shape up Byron and teach him some sense. After Dad comes home with a car stereo system called the Ultra-Glide, the Watsons set out on a road trip to Grandma Sands’ home in Birmingham, Alabama. They have no idea that they’re about to experience a tragic moment in American history.

In Birmingham, Kenny faces death, racism, and evil for the first time. Kenny disobeys orders not to go to a swimming hole that has a whirlpool. Pulled under by the terrifying creature he calls the “Wool Pooh,” he practically drowns, being saved at the last moment by Byron. The Wool Pooh is a powerful symbol of fear and death.

The Wool Pooh makes its second terrifying appearance after the bombing of the Sixteenth Avenue Baptist Church, where four girls are killed. (This is based on an actual event.) Joetta is attending Sunday school at the church. Fortunately, she has a mysterious hallucination of Kenny urging her to follow him and leaves the church building just before the bomb goes off. Not realizing this, Kenny rushes to the church to search through the rubble for his beloved little sister. The reader is carried along on the wave of Kenny’s grief, for he believes that Joetta has been killed and that the evil Wool Pooh has her in its cold, gray clutches.

Even though Joetta is safe, after the family returns to Flint, Kenny experiences a severe depression and hides behind the family’s couch. Surprisingly, it is Byron who gets him to come out and promises Kenny that he’ll be all right. Curtis skillfully leads the reader through the development of the brothers’ complex relationship.

# Vocabulary Lists

On this page are vocabulary lists that correspond to each section. Vocabulary activity ideas can be found on page 9 of this book.

## Section 1 (Chapters 1–4)

automatically	juvenile delinquent
blizzard	miraculous
cockeye	panning
demonstration	passionate
egghead	pomade
emulate	punctual
flypaper	reinforcements
frostbite	skimpy
grenade	thermostat
hambone	version
hostile	vital
hypnotized	zombie
incapable	

## Section 3 (Chapters 9–11)

accustomed	peninsula
eavesdropped	rabies
facilities	rednecks
gnashing	sanitation
hillbilly music	sheik
jive songs	snitch
pathetic	temptations

## Section 4 (Chapters 12–13)

duking	trespassing
electrocuted	whirlpool
stingy	wilier

## Section 2 (Chapters 5–8)

antifreeze	maestro
chihuahua	peon
cologne	pinnacle
conscience	seniority
cussing	Siam
dispersal	strangling
executioner	symphonic
flamethrower	technician
haphazardly	traitor
high-fidelity	udders
interpretations	ultimate
jive	Western civilization
linoleum	

## Section 5 (Chapters 14–15 & Epilogue)

boycotts	provoke
confrontations	quest
discrimination	raising Cain
interracial	seamstress
Magnolia tree	segregation
pervasive	sonic boom
picketing	strove
prohibited	