

The Watson's Go to Birmingham-1963

An adaptation of the novel by Christopher Paul Curtis

Play by Reginald André Jackson

Study Guide by
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Characters:

Kenny: 10 yr. old boy, through whose eyes we hear the story.

Byron: Kenny's older brother. A 13 yr. old juvenile delinquent.

Joetta: Kenny's 6 yr. old sister.

Wilona: 30's. Kenny's Mother.

Daniel: 30's. Kenny's father.

Buphead: 14. Friend to Byron.

Grandma Sands: Late 50's. Wilona's mother. She has suffered a slight stroke.

Mrs. Davidson: A Sunday school teacher.

Mr. Alums: A school teacher.

Larry Dunn: A bully at Kenny's school, 12 yr. old.

Rufus: Kenny's friend, 10 yr. old.

Cody: Rufus' brother, 8 yr. old.

Mr. Robert: 50's. Friend to Grandma Sands.

Voice only: Weatherman/ DJ.

Girl: 6 yr. old.



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Play Synopsis

This is the story of an African-American family that lives in Flint, Michigan in the 1960's. Ten-year old Kenny tells of his life at home with his two siblings and parents, the troubles he has with bullies in the school yard, and the misfortunes of Byron, his older brother, who constantly gets into trouble. When the family decides to take Byron to live with his Grandma Sands in Birmingham, Alabama, the family is faced with tragic events that occurred in the world of the South in the 60's. Will this trip change the Watsons' lives forever?



Christopher Paul Curtis (Author) is a native of Flint, Michigan, and has been writing books for young people for almost two decades. He is the author of several books, including his first, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963*, *Mr. Chickee's Messy Mission*, *Mr. Chickee's Funny Money*, *Bucking the Sarge*, and *Bud, Not Buddy*, for which received the Newbery Medal and Coretta Scott King Award in 2000. Curtis attributes his inspiration for his books to experiences of his own childhood and his rich family history. He is most interested in creating work for young people that focuses on themes of home, family, friendships, and hardship, tackling all of these with a sense of humor. Curtis currently resides in Windsor, Ontario, Canada with his wife and two children.



Reginald Andre Jackson (Playwright) works in Seattle, WA as a professional actor, playwright, and teacher. He has toured with Freehold's Engaged Theatre program, worked as an actor at Seattle Shakespeare Company, and played Othello for the Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Company. He has also worked at the Seattle Repertory Theatre, Intiman, ACT, Book-it, SCT, and Wooden O. In 2010, he received the American Alliance of Theatre and Education's *2010 Distinguished Play Award* for his adaptation of Christopher Paul Curtis' novel, *Bud, Not Buddy*. Jackson has also worked in educational outreach at Intiman Theatre's Living History program, Book-It Repertory Theatre's Book-It All Over, and the Drama School at Seattle Children's Theatre.

Pre-Show Questions:

1. What does the word "family" mean to you? Who do you consider to be your family? What are ways in which each person in your family contributes something unique and special to the group?
2. Has someone ever treated you unfairly because of the way you look or where you come from? How did this make you feel? What did you say to the person or people who treated you this way?
3. Have you ever taken a trip to a new place with your family? Where did you go? How did it feel to be new to another city or town?

Post-Show Questions:

1. What are some things you believe in strongly enough that you are willing to have the courage to stand up for? What is hard about standing up against others? What are some ways your family and friends helps you do this?
2. In the play, Grandma Sands tells Byron, "By not fighting, we let their own hearts tell them their wrong." Have you ever gotten into a fight with someone? How did you feel after? What are some ways you can stand up for yourself without fighting?



Vocabulary List:

hostile
 vital
 intimidate
 emulate
 welfare
 peon
 cockeyed
 idolizes
 conk
 banned
 delinquent
 crackers
 rednecks
 hillbilly
 snitch



1954-1965 American Civil Rights Movement Timeline

1954 - Brown v. Board of Education: The Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas case decides that segregation was unconstitutional. Finally, the 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson "separate but equal" decision was overturned and it became illegal to segregate schools based on race.

1955 - Mississippi and the Emmett Till case: In 1955, 14-year-old Emmett Till, a black teenager, was murdered by whites for talking to a white woman in a store. Despite witnesses that confirmed the suspects' guilt, the men were declared innocent by an all white jury.

1955 - Montgomery Bus Boycott
When Rosa Parks refused to sit in the back of a Montgomery bus, where the blacks riders were required by law to sit, she was taken away to jail. Her arrest inspired a young Dr. Martin Luther King to organize a bus boycott and eventually cause bus segregation to be ruled unconstitutional.

1957 - Desegregation at Little Rock: Black students arriving for school were met with the Arkansas National Guardsmen and a mob of white citizens refusing to allow them into the school. Eventually, President Eisenhower sent ordered paratroopers and the National Guard to Little Rock to

1960 - 61 Sit-in campaigns, Freedom Riders: Blacks and white across the south stage sit-ins in local

diners to protest against the laws refusing to serve blacks at the time. Freedom Riders were people of mixed races who rode across state lines on buses and trains to protest the segregation of transportation systems across state lines.

1963 - Birmingham: Dr. Martin Luther King led a protest march in Birmingham. He was arrested and taken to Southside Jail. It was here that Dr. King wrote his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which expresses his philosophy of using non-violence and civil disobedience to fight for civil rights.

In September of 1963: The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church is bombed by the KKK, killing four young girls. The church was a center of the African-American community in Birmingham, and its destruction resulted in city wide riots and fires.

1963 - August 28th, March on Washington: 200,000 people descended on Washington to march for civil rights. It was here that Dr. King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

1963 - November 22nd President John F. Kennedy is assassinated.

1964 -The Civil Rights Act of 1964: On July 2, 1964, President Johnson signed this historical piece of legislation into law. This provides federal legislation prohibiting black Americans from being banned from hotels, restaurants, and other public places and

facilities based on the color of their skin.

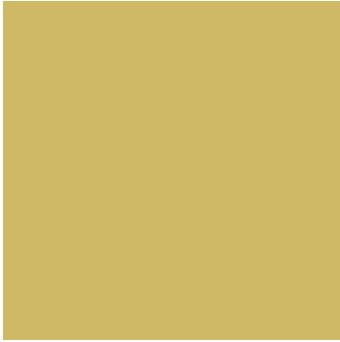
1965 - February 21: Civil Rights leader Malcolm X is assassinated at a rally in New York.

1965 Selma- While marching from Selma to Montgomery, peaceful marchers were attacked by state troopers who used tear gas and batons against the marchers. This date became known as Bloody Sunday, and caused Martin Luther King to lead a follow up march in response.

1965 - Voting Rights Act of 1965: President Johnson passes the Voting Rights Act which prevented the use of literacy tests and poll taxes to keep blacks from voting. The number of black voters that are able to register as a result of this law soars.

1968 - April 4: Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. Blacks and whites across the nation mourn the tragic passing of this heroic leader.

1968 - June 5th: Robert F. Kennedy is assassinated a hotel kitchen in Los Angeles. Kennedy was a champion of civil rights in the U.S.



Racism and Prejudice

In the play, the Watsons deal with themes of racism and prejudice. At school, Kenny, Rufus, and Cody encounter prejudice when they are teased for being blacks from the American South. In the second act of the play, once they arrive in Birmingham, the Watson family is faced with the first hand effects of the civil rights struggle when the church they try and attend on Sunday is bombed. These events, which they were somewhat removed from in Flint, Michigan, suddenly become very real, and the family bonds together to weather this newfound struggle.

Bullying

Bullying can be emotional, verbal, or physical. Kenny and his friends Rufus and Cody, are bullied in all of these ways. They are set apart from the group, called names, and their faces are rubbed in snow. The bullying even tests their friendship.

Web Resources:

Bullying:

<http://www.tolerance.org>

<http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov>

http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/problems/bullies

<http://pbskids.org/itsmylife/friends/bullies/>

Civil Rights Teaching Resources:

<http://www.civilrightsteaching.org/>

http://www.civilrightsmuseum.org/?page_id=77

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/themes/civil-rights/>

<http://www.pbs.org/teachers/thismonth/civilrights/index3.html>

Family

A strong sense of family is very important to the Watsons. Siblings stick up for each other, parents sacrifice to make a better life for their children, and the love extends across generations. The support of the family unit helps these characters overcome many difficult situations.

Activities

Game: Group Yourselfes

Have students begin walking around in the room, making sure to cover the whole space. After a few moments, shout “Freeze!” and have students group themselves by various categories, giving them a chance to decide amongst themselves, without talking, which groups to make. The following prompts may be used:

1. Group yourselves by what color you are wearing today
2. Group yourselves by what kind of shoes you are wearing today
3. Group yourselves by how tall you are
4. Group yourselves by eye color

Once the series has been completed, take a few moments to talk with students about their experience during the game. A few key questions are:

1. How did you decide what group you belonged to? Did you decide for yourself or let others decide?
2. Did you ever feel out of place or unwanted in a group?
3. What was hard or uncomfortable about this for you?
4. What did you do if you felt like you didn't belong to any of the groups? Did anyone choose to stand by themselves? Why/why not?

Use this activity as a lead to a discussion about civil rights and/or prejudice.

Family Coat of Arms Activity

Materials:

Family Crest Template (visual below)

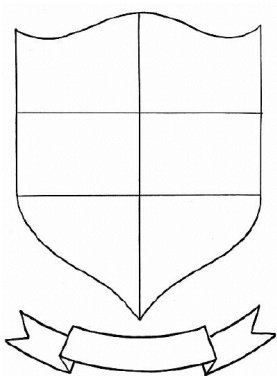
Magazines (for students to cut pictures from)

Scissors

Construction paper (optional)

Crayons or markers

Glue



Activity:

1. Discuss what a family crest is with students and, if possible, show students pictures of different family crests. As a class, brainstorm ideas for how they could represent their family histories, cultures and traditions, such as:

a. Flags that represent the countries their families came from, pictures of food that are common to their ethnicity or individual family, pictures that represent first or last names, drawings that depict favorite family events, photographs that show family celebrations, etc.

2. Pass out the family crest worksheet to students and inform them that they are going to be creating their own family crest!

a. Discuss with students that each square on the family crest should represent a different element of their family, such as: heritage, traditions, members of their family, special events or memories, significant cultural aspects, etc.

b. Encourage students to look through magazines and search the web for pictures they cut out and add to their crest. Students may also draw pictures and symbols on their family crest.

3. Once crests are finished, have students write a paragraph explaining their family crest. Mat the crests on a large sheet of construction paper, along with their family crest descriptions.

4. Hang the family crests around the classroom, so students have the opportunity to look at all of the crests and learn more about their classmates and notice the similarities and differences between their family and others' families!

Borrowed from lesson idea at

http://www.eduplace.com/rdg/gen_act/family/f_crest.html

ACTIVITY:

Use Langston Hughes' poem, "Mother to Son" to get students to reflect on the themes of hardship in the play and in their own lives.

1. Have students read poem, and as a class, brainstorm what the tacks, splinters, and torn up boards represent in the world of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963*.
2. Have students then work individually to brainstorm what the tacks, splinters, and torn-up boards could represent in their own lives. Examples include a friend moving away, a pet dying, or having to study really hard for a test.
3. Come back together as a class and brainstorm people or things that have been the solid, polished parts of the staircase that help the climber to keep going. How do these good things make the challenging times easier?
3. As a class, using a large piece of butcher paper with the outline of a staircase drawn on it, create a visual representation of everyone's hardships and supportive people and things. Fill in each tread with these ideas, each student contributing the ideas they brainstormed about. Students can write words, draw pictures, and add images from magazines and newspapers. When it is finished, have students take some time to look at the staircase. Do the good times balance out the hard times? What are some common themes you see?

Exploring the Play Through Poetry

"Mother to Son"

*Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.*