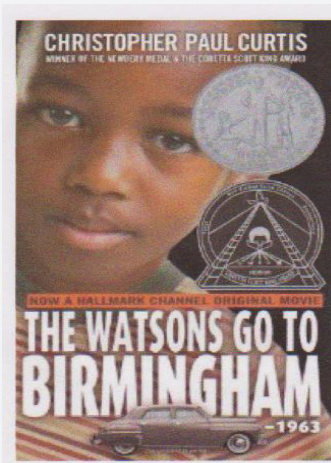


First Opinion: The Weird Watsons

Curtis, Christopher Paul. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*.
New York: Laurel Leaf-Random House, 2000.

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According to Christopher Paul Curtis, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* was initially titled *The Watsons Go to Florida* because the original idea for the book emerged during a car trip his family took to visit relatives there. As the story goes, in early drafts Curtis got the family to Florida but was not sure what to do with them once they arrived. When his son Steven reintroduced him to the Dudley Randall poem, “The Ballad of Birmingham,” Curtis’s writing problem was solved. An award-winning young adult novel was the result (preface).

There are many things to admire about *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*. The skillful use of wit alone makes it noteworthy: the humorous portrayal of burgeoning manhood, resistance to racism, and family dynamics (Who can forget the family’s reaction to Byron’s lips stuck to the mirror?). Throw in Curtis’s use of voice, repetition, foreshadowing, and characterization, and it is no wonder that this novel has been embraced by many—from critics and award committees to students, teachers, parents, and librarians.

In fact, readers are hooked in the opening chapter when we meet The Weird Watsons: Kenny, the ten-year-old precocious narrator; Byron, the older brother, determined to separate himself from the rest of the Watsons; Little Joey, the caring, sensitive peacemaker; Momma, meticulous and encouraging; and Dad, comedic, but focused.

We feel we know each and every one, and we do.

By the time the family is fed up with Byron's latest flirt with teen delinquency, we are, too. But for those of us who remember our Southern history, it is with hesitation that we support the family's decision to take Byron to stay with Grandma Sands in Birmingham for the summer. If we are cognizant of the events from 1963, the title prepares us for what might happen as the family travels south from Flint, Michigan, with packed meals and bathroom schedules because finding a place that will serve blacks might be difficult, or worse, if not selected carefully, humiliating, and possibly dangerous.

Christopher Curtis has used foreshadowing on the assumption that his audience understands the significance of this place and the subsequent racialized events that he will weave into his plot. If we do, though we are nervous, we read on wondering about what will happen once the kind and amusing Watsons reach Birmingham, a city often thought of as Bombingham because of the violent resistance to civil rights demonstrations. Kenny has already told us that Joetta enjoys church services, so we know the family will likely be somewhere near Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on that day in September when the church was bombed and four girls were killed and over fifteen others were seriously injured. Will Joey be there, we wonder. And even when we sigh with relief that she is not hurt, that the Buster Brown shoe Kenny clutches is not Joey's, we cannot fully relax. "Ready, aim, fire!"(24). We are outraged and saddened by Kenny's loss of innocence. We have closely identified with the Watsons, and by extension with the young girls and others who were harmed for simply being. The Watson family is "real" to us; we know them, and by knowing them, we realize we might know others and feel moved to speak out when they are mistreated. We come to realize that a novel as powerful as this not only helps us see atrocious acts of the 1960s anew, but also helps us look at injustices in our own time and be disturbed, moved to action.

When many of us first read *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*, it was in 1995 during a time when a number of churches were burned in several cities in the South. Some of us may have read it yesterday, fifty years after the church bombing, and wondered about Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, or someone else whose life was taken violently. Like any classic historical novel, this one helps shed light on the past, present, and future.

About the Author

KaaVonia Hinton is an associate professor at Old Dominion University and is the co-author (with Katherine T. Bucher) of *Young Adult Literature: Exploration, Evaluation and Appreciation* (Prentice Hall, 2013).