

# The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963

**Synopsis** Kenny Watson affectionately refers to his family as the Weird Watsons in the humorous, poignant, and oftentimes serious stories he shares about life in Michigan. But the novel takes a serious turn when the Watsons make a trip to Birmingham, Alabama, and arrive just in time for one of the most tragic events in American history.

## Introduction: Explore Fiction

Point out Flint, Michigan, and Birmingham, Alabama, on a map of the United States. Explain to students that they will be reading a piece of historical fiction that takes place in these two cities. Briefly explain the historical context of an African American family living in Michigan during the early 1960s. Share that many of the stories in this novel are humorous, but there are very serious and sad moments as well.

Say, *This novel is written in first-person point of view, from the perspective of ten-year-old Kenny Watson. How does a first-person narrative differ from one told in the third-person point of view?* Ask students to watch for and record examples of figurative language in their reading journals as they read the book.

## Vocabulary

**Tier Two:** desperate (33), emulate (24), generate (1), outhouse (140), peon (76), punk (7), surrendered (151), vital (23)

**Tier Three:** juvenile delinquent (2), Mummy (47), Nazi (37), radioactive (39)

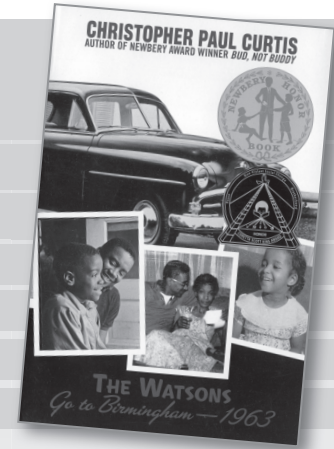
## Word Work

**L.5.4a** Use context (e.g., cause/effect relationships and comparisons in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

**L.5.4c** Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases.

Introduce vocabulary in context as it appears within the book before or during reading. Clarify the meaning of *generate* by asking, *If a machine generates heat, does it use heat or does it create heat?* Clarify the meaning of *emulate* by asking, *If I emulate someone else's behavior, do I try to act like the person, or do I dislike the way they are behaving?* Have students look up the definition of *peon* in a dictionary and compare it to Byron's explanation of its meaning on page 79. Write *punk* in a word web, and have students suggest words or phrases with similar meanings. Record their responses in the web. Have students guide you in listing things that are *vital* to getting good grades. (*paying attention in class, studying, being a good reader, and so on*)

Discuss the meanings of *juvenile* and *delinquent* separately, and then have students explain the meaning of the open compound in their own words. Have students identify the two smaller words that make up *radioactive*, and then discuss the meanings in relation to the meaning of the vocabulary word.



**Author:** Christopher Paul Curtis

**Genre:** Fiction

**Guided Reading Level:** U

**Standards:** L.5.4a, L.5.4c,  
RF.5.3a, RF.5.4c, RL.5.1,  
RL.5.2

## English Language Support

Offer realia, gestures, or photos to support the introduction of the new vocabulary. Show a photo of an outhouse, and discuss how it is similar to and different from a Porta Potty. Show a photo or video of a mummy from a horror film, and then demonstrate walking stiffly like a mummy. Explain Nazi as a member of a group of people in Germany during World War II who followed the cruel ruler Adolf Hitler.

## Understanding the Text

**Literal:** *Where does the title of the book come from?* (It is the name of the notebook Mrs. Watson brings on the trip.) *Why does Byron throw up when he kills the bird?* (He is very upset.) *Why does Kenny describe himself as “different”?* (He is smarter than most of the other students; he looks different because he has a lazy eye; he is more empathetic than the other students.)

**Interpretive:** Discuss how Kenny and Byron change through the story. *Which boy changes the most? What events bring out the best traits in each boy? What about the worst traits? Cite examples from the text.*

**Applied:** Discuss the use of metaphor in the story, specifically the Wool Pooh. *What does the Wool Pooh represent to Kenny? Where does the name come from? Why would an author choose to use a metaphor like the Wool Pooh?* Guide students in understanding that metaphors can help talk about or describe vague or difficult ideas by making them more concrete or relatable for the reader.

## Phonics and Word Recognition

**RF.5.3a** *Use combined knowledge of all letter-sound correspondences, syllabication patterns, and morphology (e.g., roots and affixes) to read accurately unfamiliar multisyllabic words in context and out of context.*

As students read, monitor their understanding of unfamiliar multisyllabic words. As needed, write these words on a whiteboard or chart paper, and guide students in breaking them down into syllables, calling attention to root words and affixes. Model pronunciation using the component parts of the words. Have students echo your pronunciation.

## Fluency

**RF.5.4c** *Use context to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding, rereading as necessary.*

Discuss the author’s use of dialect and accents. Discuss with students that while they probably think they don’t speak with any accent, someone from another part of the country or the world would disagree. Say, *Although it is difficult to hear your own dialect or accent, everyone*

*speaks in a way that reflects where they are from.* Refer to a passage written in dialect. (*for examples, see pages 132 or 151*) Discuss how the text is written differently from formal English, and have students attempt to read it aloud.

Have student refer to pages 12–17. Point out the unusual punctuation and spelling included in Kenny’s dialogue. Ask students why it is written this way. (*Kenny cannot talk clearly because his lips are stuck to the mirror.*) Model reading aloud some of the dialogue, and then have students take turns reading aloud the remainder, following your model.

## Reading Literature

**RL.5.2** *Determine the theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.*

Discuss the tragedy at the end of the book and its effect on Kenny. Discuss the theme of familial love. Ask students to cite examples from the text that show how much love there is between the Watsons, despite moments of anger or conflict. In particular, discuss the love between Kenny and Byron and the role it plays in the characters’ motivations and actions. Return to the figurative language chart created during the introduction. Have students refer to their charts as they provide examples from the text for you to add to the classroom chart.

## Writing

**RL.5.1** *Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.*

Point out that the story contains many humorous moments as well many serious, and even tragic, ones. Ask students to create a list of three funny scenes or events from the novel and a list of three serious events or issues included in the story. Then have students share their lists with the rest of the group. Discuss why the author would choose to write a story that is both funny and sad.