

# *Watsons go to Birmingham* by Christopher Paul Curtis (Published in 1995)

Approved for use in 6th grade

## Summary of the Work:

This novel tells the story of the "Weird Watson" family and the humorous events that occur to them in Flint, Michigan, in 1963. After one too many "adventures" by the oldest son, Byron, the parents decide to take a family trip to Birmingham, Alabama, to visit the children's grandmother and hopefully encourage Byron to change his ways. On their way to Alabama and while in Alabama, the Watson children learn that life is different for African Americans in the South.

\* Print resources are available from the library media center and libraries in the district. Contact any library media specialist to view the scholarly sources.

\* Scholarly reviews are also available online through Books in Print and Gale. Contact the library media specialist to obtain username and password information to access the subscription database of full-text reviews.

## Rationale:

This book is a great example of how characters affect the plot of a story. Students will explore how the story would change if the characters reacted differently to events in the plot, in particular the bombing of the church. Students can also explore how the setting of a story. (northern United States vs. southern United States in the early 1960's) impacts the events and reactions of characters in the story. This novel examines how our choices have consequences, not only for ourselves by others as well.

## Professional Reviews and/or Critical Essays:

Along the same line of acceptance, this book would be a great tool for teaching tolerance. *Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults* also says, "The Watsons' reaction to the bombing is one of horror, confusion, and disbelief, but helps Kenny gain perspective on his feelings, and the statements he makes help the reader gain some perspective, too" (p. 447). Students will learn of the destruction, pain, and sorrow that comes from hatred and learn that only through tolerance and acceptance can events like the church bombing be prevented. (1995 August, p. 1946)

According to a reviewer from *School Library Journal* (1995, October), "Written in a full-throated, hearty voice, this is a perfectly described piece of past imperfect." (p. 152). The reviewer also goes on to say, "Curtis's ability to switch from fun to funky to pinpoint-accurate psychological imagery works unusually well . . . humor, sly sibling digs, and a totally believable child's view of the world will make this book an instant hit" (p. 152).

*The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* is recommended in *The Elementary School Library Collection: A Guide to Books and Other Media* (1998 p. 539), *Children's Catalog* (1996) (p. 528), *Children's Books of the Year* (1996) (p. 25), *Middle and Junior High School Library Catalog* (2000) (p. 454), *Best Books For Children* (2000) (p. 345), and *Best Books For Young Adults* (2001)(p.84)

## Noted Distinction:

- 1996 Newbery Honor Book
- 1996 Coretta Scott King Honor Book
- ALA Notable Book
- ALA Best Book for Young Adults
- *New York Times* Book Review Best Book
- *Horn Book* Fanfare
- 1995 Child Study Children's Book Committee award

## Readability:

- Lexile Score: 1000L
- Readability Level:

## Learning Resources Guidelines:

- The novel meets the Learning Resources Guidelines.

## Standard Alignment: ([link](#))

## Approval:

Submitted to Committee:

Approved for Adoption:

## Notes on the Text:

(The best way to evaluate and understand a novel is to personally read the book in its entirety.)

The Watson family faces issues such as: bullying, violence, and racism. This warm and often humorous text carefully examines the realities of the civil rights movement.

## Connection to the Curriculum:

*Watsons go to Birmingham* is appropriate for the English curriculum which emphasizes exposure to quality literature and how literary elements affect plot. In addition, the social studies curriculum focuses on understanding diverse cultures in order to increase acceptance and respect of diversity. This novel allows for in-depth discussions about these topics. Exposing the students to the reality of times: discrimination, segregation, and human rights issues is also an element this novel addresses effectively.

## Additional Connections:

(AP, Honors, Essential/Applied, Dramas, Films, etc.)