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Meet Newberry Honor Medalist Christopher Curtis: An Interview Conducted by Grade Six Students



ARTICLE BY **RAYMOND P. KETTEL AND BARBARA LATIMER**

"I could see Bibles and coloring books thrown all over the place, then they'd get covered by the smoke. I could see a shiny, shiny black shoe lying halfway underneath some concrete, then it got covered by smoke and the light bulb flickered out again."

—Curtis (1995, p.185)

The above passage from Christopher Paul Curtis' book *The Watsons Go To Birmingham - 1963* reminds the reader of the 33 year-old case which has just been reopened by the FBI as reported in the July 21, 1997, issue of *Time*. Curtis' book, which won both the Newberry Honor and the Coretta Scott King Honor awards, was written in memory of the four African-American girls who died in that terrible blast at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The following interview with the author was conducted by two classes of grade six Detroit Public School students whose ethnic composition was ninety-five percent African American with the remaining five percent Asian, Chaldean and, Anglo-American.

Before the interview project began, we made contact with Curtis, who agreed to be interviewed by the sixth graders, and the school principal, who lent support by obtaining copies of the novel for each of the students. On the day the book was introduced, the classes were taken through the first two steps of Ogle's K-W-L procedure: What Do I Know? and What do I Want to Know? Although K-W-L, is usually associated with expository text, we wanted to draw

on the students' prior knowledge of the historical events that were depicted in this work of fiction. Students made a list of what they knew about racial prejudice, the Ku Klux Klan, and church bombings. In addition, they were asked to suggest what life was like for African Americans growing up in the early 60's. Because some students had relatives from Alabama, they were familiar with the 1963 church bombing in Birmingham. On the following day, the classes wrote what they thought they might learn from reading the novel.

Students were highly engaged in the reading of *The Watsons Go To Birmingham - 1963* because the zany escapades of the Watson family members kept them laughing. As events of the family trip unfolded, the significance of what occurred on that frightful September day in Birmingham hit them with powerful impact. Along with the exciting plot, students were motivated because they knew that they would not only meet the author, but also have the opportunity to ask questions that would help them better understand how stories develop. To help them reflect on the various messages and themes from the book, they recorded their thoughts in a journal as each chapter was read and discussed. As students encountered areas from the K-W-L introductory activity, they incorporated them in their journal writing. From their written reflections, they composed questions both alone and with an assigned partner. As the interviewing activity progressed, we shared our questions with the entire class and invited

students to share theirs, too.

Questions were evaluated on their direct relationship to the story. Areas that were discussed included plot, style, characterization, theme, and setting. Questions that addressed what was involved in the actual writing of the novel were also encouraged. At the completion of the reading, students worked with their partners to determine what they thought their best questions might be. These were read before the class, and it wasn't long before students discovered that several others in class had written the same question, albeit in different words. Thus during the actual interview, many had their questions answered even though some students didn't actually have the opportunity to ask their particular question. All students felt directly involved in the interviewing project because everyone had input in the final draft.

Students were given ample opportunity to practice reading their questions aloud before the scheduled event, and the interview was videotaped so the novice interviewers could enjoy critiquing the event. Finally, the interview ended when Christopher Paul Curtis read aloud his favorite episode, the scene where Byron's lips become frozen to the mirror of the Brown Bomber.

The following are some questions and responses from the interview with the author. Students not only had their questions answered, but also received several insights that they could incorporate in their own writing.

Samantha: *What inspired you to write the book The Watsons Go To Birmingham - 1963?*

Curtis: For years I loved to write. I worked in a factory in Flint for thirteen years, and I hated being there. I would write every day during my break, and that helped me develop a discipline of writing. By developing that discipline, I

came to the point where I could tell stories. One day my wife said, "Why don't you try to write a book?" So, I started with some of the short stories that I had written and worked them into a novel. This is important — when you write short stories, keep them because you never know when you can use them later on. They just might become part of a novel. The main inspiration for writing the book was the amount of writing I was doing. I really do love to write.

Satara: *Did you write this book for a particular audience?*

Curtis: One of the things you are told when you are a writer is to keep your audience in mind. When I wrote the book, I was thinking it was more of an adult novel, but when I submitted it to the publisher, they thought it was for younger people. The publishers decide who the audience is. I think one of the problems that many writers of literature for children and young adults run into is that they write down to children. I try to approach everyone in the same way, adult or child.

Sherita: *Was The Watsons Go To Birmingham-1963 always the title of this book?*

Curtis: No. It was not always the name. Originally I had called the book the *Watsons Go To Florida-1963* because it was more of a family story about a family trip. But then, the story stalled half way through and I had to set it down and work on other things for about six months. Then, my son brought home a poem about the bombing of the church in Birmingham and that got my juices going again and I picked the book back up and it was *The Watsons Go To Birmingham-1963*. The publisher wanted to change the name. Two things are really important about a book as far as publishers are concerned. One is the title and the other is the cover. They

want something that is easy to remember and something sort of catchy. *The Watsons Go To Birmingham-1963* is too long. Even now when I talk to people, they can't remember the name and this presents a problem. They might say *The Wilsons Go To Kentucky*. We tried to work out another title, but we couldn't come up with one. We decided this was the best.

Laketia: *Our class had quite a debate about the Wool Pooh. Some thought it was the Southern way, of saying "whirlpool" but Kenny saw it again in the church. Would you explain to us what the Wool Pooh really was?*

Curtis: This is something that requires you to use your imagination. It is a Southern pronunciation of the word "Whirlpool." Byron was using this idea to scare Kenny away from the water. Remember that Kenny had a very dramatic experience when he almost drowned. When you are drowning, your brain receives little oxygen and you begin to hallucinate. Kenny felt that he was actually seeing a monster. Byron told him that this was true. So when he went to the church and saw the bomb and all the damage that had been done, he went into shock and once again imagined that he saw the Wool Pooh. To him it represented death. It was not actually something swimming around in the water or crawling around in the church. It was not a physical thing, but it was very real to Kenny. Your mind is so wonderful because it deals with different problems in different ways. The way Kenny was dealing with the horrors of what he was seeing was by imagining again that he saw the Wool Pooh.

LaRoy: *Did you have family members or know another family that acted like the Weird Watsons?*

Answer: The Weird Watsons are probably a combination of my relatives:

my brother and sisters, my mother and father, my friends, and my cousins. It is not a story of one particular group of people but a combination of different people. My family feels differently; they feel the characters are actually themselves. I feel nobody in the book is exactly like someone in real life. There are parts of me in Byron, parts of me in Kenny, parts of me in Joetta and parts of my sister in all the characters.

DeAndre: *Sometimes, Mama's punishment seemed quite harsh, for example when she threatened to burn Byron's fingers if he continued to play with matches. Were most parents in the 60's like Mama?*

Curtis: That was thirty years ago and it was a different way of living.

One purpose in writing this book was to paint a picture of the way life was back then. There were different ways of dealing with issues, and parents did what they thought they had to do. You didn't go to a psychologist, and you didn't have Oprah to tell you how to raise your children. One of the ways parents dealt with problems was to tackle them immediately by acting on their own which in many ways was not all bad. The burning of Byron's fingers was not accepted by the publishers at first because they felt it was too severe. In the end, I explained to them that this was the way it was in the 60's.

Jerrica: *Although the epilogue stated that this story is fictional, what percentage of the story really happened to your family or someone you knew?*

Curtis: Writing is a lot of fun because you can take things that happen to you and change a little bit here and a little bit there. You can even make it happen to someone else. You can take the traits of two different people and put them together to make one character. I think maybe ten percent of the story actually happened to me. There are only a few scenes that really happened the way

they are written in the book. The scene where Mama tried to burn Byron's finger and Joetta blew out the match really happened to me. I used to be a firebug. I don't know why, but I used to light matches. My mother told me, "Don't light matches; you will burn the house down. If you do it again, I will burn you." My little sister, Cydney, blew out the match when my mother lit it to burn my finger. When you are writing something, it is good to include a little bit of you because it makes the story more real.

Freeman: *In the story Kenny always said, "Ready, aim, fire!" Is there a reason for using this phrase so many times?*

Curtis: It's like a song where a phrase is repeated over and over, giving it rhythm. It is a way of getting to know Kenny because you feel he is going to say "Ready, aim, fire!" at any time. It is something that puts you in touch with him and makes you feel closer to him. Once again, this is one of the wonderful things you can do with writing. This is one of the elements that holds the story together because you don't know what the situation will be, but Kenny always seems to find one where "Ready, aim, fire!" applies.

Joanne: *Did you ever have second thoughts about publishing The Watsons Go To Birmingham-1963?*

Curtis: It is always difficult to send your writing out to be published because it is something very personal to you. You put a lot of yourself and a lot of work into it. You are taking a chance that someone will say, "What are you doing? Don't waste any more of your time." Yes, I had second thoughts; I had moments of doubt. As a writer, you will. You doubt yourself a lot of the time, but to find out if what you are doing is worthwhile, you have to overcome your doubts. You have to have confidence in yourself and you have to keep working toward your goal.

I just realized that this was something I wanted to try to do. I had put in a great deal of time and effort, so I had to carry through with it. Yes, I did have doubts about it.

Constance: *Did your wife help you when you were writing this book?*

Curtis: Yes. My wife was a great help. She had more faith in my writing than I did. My wife is originally from Trinidad, which is an island just above South America. She had moved to Hamilton, Canada, and I lived in Flint and we had a long-distance relationship going. I wrote letters to her, and she thought that the letters were very good. She developed a lot of confidence in my writing, and she encouraged me to take a year off from work and try to write to see if I could come up with something that would sell. So, yes, she was a very good inspiration to me.

Karen: *What is your favorite chapter in the book?*

Curtis: My favorite is Chapter One, "And You Wonder Why We Get Called the Weird Watsons." As you recall, the story is narrated by ten year old Kenneth Watson. In chapter one we are introduced to Kenny, who has two problems. The first problem is that he has a lazy eye. One of the muscles on one side of his eye is stronger than it should be, and it pulls the eye to the corner of his face. So he gets teased a lot about being cross-eyed. They call him cock-eyed Kenny, but he has learned to handle it. He began to realize that the way he looks is not really important. What really is important is the way he feels inside about himself. The second problem Kenny has is his older brother, Byron. Byron is about thirteen-years-old, which is three years older than Kenny. If you have an older brother or sister, you know how Kenny feels. This older brother gives him grief all the time.

Ray: *What do you want readers to learn from the book?*

Curtis: One of the main things I want readers to learn from reading the book is to understand that a lot of sacrifice went into giving African-American children a better education. You have to take advantage of this opportunity because many people gave their lives for this cause. To understand the message of the book, it is helpful to know something about segregation and the Jim Crow Laws. When the Watsons went to Birmingham in 1963, there was something called Jim Crow laws throughout the South. These laws stated that black people had to sit at the back of the bus, while whites were at the front. There were separate entrances to different buildings such as movie theaters. Blacks had to sit in special designated areas in many public places. The worst part of this was that the school systems were separate, which meant that most of the money went to the white schools and the black schools received very little money. This meant that black students were robbed of a quality education. The federal government decided this was wrong and tried to stop it. This made a lot of the people in the South very upset. In the early 60's in Birmingham, there had been fifty bombings of churches, schools, and homes. The most famous of these took place at the 16th Street Baptist Church. In the story, I have tied in a similar church where four little girls were killed.

Clintones: *What was your reaction when you learned that you had won the Newberry Honor and then the Coretta Scott King Honor award?*

Curtis: I was very excited. The award was announced on a Monday, and for some reason I thought that if you won either the Coretta Scott King or the Newberry award, you were informed the night before. On Sunday night, we were

waiting anxiously, but the phone never rang. We went to bed saying, "Who needs these awards anyway?" On Monday, I went to the public library to work because that is where I do most of my writing. While I was there, the Newberry committee called and informed my wife that I had won a Newberry Honor award. While they were talking to her, the call from the Coretta Scott King committee came in, and she put the Newberry committee on hold. She started talking to them and forgot all about the Newberry people on the other line, so they eventually hung up on her. My wife called the library and left a message for me to call home. I did and was told the news. This was thrilling because I thought that I might have a shot at winning one of the Coretta Scott King awards. I was always under the impression that the Newberry Award was for established authors, and because this was my first book, I didn't think it would even be considered. It was very fitting that they called my house to inform me about the award while I was at the library because I wrote this book at the library.

Andrell: *Are you planning to write another book soon?*

Curtis: Yes. The company that bought this book from me bought two more books that I have not yet written. So, I have two more books coming and one has to be finished this summer and the other by June, 1998. These two books will be for young adults. The one I'm almost finished with now takes place in Flint in the 1930's. It's about a ten-year-old orphan. So far I'm calling it "Bud, Not Buddy."

Rose Marie: *Have you always wanted to be an author?*

Curtis: No, not really. When I was your age, I probably wanted to be a football or basketball player, a doctor, a lawyer, or just about anything. I never

thought about being a writer as a career. It is a very difficult thing to do. Many people have the impression that writers are rich. The truth is that the average writer in the United States makes about \$5,000 a year. I know that it might sound like a lot to you, but you can't live on \$5,000 a year. I never really considered it as a possibility until a few years ago when I took the year off work. I had been writing all the time, but I had never thought of it as a profession.

Tiffany: *Do you enjoy reading books?*

Curtis: Very much so. There are two things you need to do to be a writer. First, you have to write every day. It is something you have to love to do because if you write everyday, you have to love to do it. Second, you have to read. Your mind is wonderful! You are learning even when you don't realize it. You can read something on one level, but your mind is recording what is going on at other levels. You are observing how other authors structure stories and how they make a scene move or make something happen now that ties in with something later. So, I think reading is extremely important. In your school career, if you learn to read and to write well, you will be on top of everything else, because with these two skills you can grow and accomplish almost anything.

Barbara: *What do you enjoy the most about writing?*

Curtiss: You control everything when you write. You control what happens. You could take all the people in this room and turn them into rats if you wanted to, just by snapping your fingers when you are writing. I really want to stress to you to keep working on writing. I know it is difficult when you begin. It was for me, and I wasn't able to make writing work for me until I was a lot older than you are. Writing is something I really enjoy, and I think you will too if you give it a chance.

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