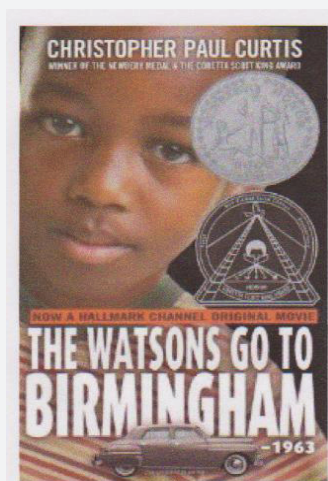


## Second Reaction: Already a Classic? A Look at *The Watsons* across Media, Teaching, and Research

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

*E. Sybil Durand*



With only 19 years since its original publication, it might be too early to call *The Watsons Go To Birmingham—1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis a classic. However, in almost two decades, Curtis's book has established itself as the seminal text for teaching about the civil rights movement. Educators have used *The Watsons* in K–12 social studies and English language arts classrooms, in college level teacher education courses, and in various critical analyses.

A quick Internet search reveals that *The Watsons* is widely used in K–12 classrooms today: a plethora of literature guides, lessons, and unit plans are available for teachers at the upper elementary, middle, and high school levels. Most recently, the book was adapted to film and aired on the Hallmark Channel in September 2013, in time for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church bombing. The website for the movie includes a teacher resource guide, and *Scholastic Action* magazine published a reader's theater play based on the film. This movie adaptation further cements Curtis's representation of the Birmingham bombing as a foundational text.

Many teachers use *The Watsons* in their efforts to support students as they become better readers and writers. For instance, Karen Kelley initially set out to use *The Watsons* in a process drama with students in an elementary classroom "to improve reading comprehension" and "increase awareness of larger societal issues" (85). However, the study actually revealed "the

potential of process drama as a point of connection with characters across racial lines" (85). Kelley noticed that a group of seven girls, whose members were "white and Latina girls from rural, central Florida . . . connected with Joetta (an African American character in the story) in ways that crossed racial lines" (72). The girls "related to Joetta as the youngest sibling and only sister in a family with two older brothers" (83). Although Kelley noted that students did not ultimately engage racial differences, it was nevertheless significant that they identified with a character across racial lines. In this way, Curtis's book presents accessible characters that facilitate learning about a difficult time in U.S. history.

At the college level, education professor Ann Neely used *The Watsons* in a children's and young adult literature course focused on international civil rights efforts and designed for future teachers "to see themselves as more globally interconnected with the social justice agendas of educators today" (279). After reading *The Watsons*, students visited the site of the bombing as well as the Civil Rights Institute in Alabama. Neely contends that the readings and the trip had an enormous impact on her students as evidenced by their written responses and her field notes.

Scholars also continue to perform critical readings of *The Watsons* through various theoretical lenses. For instance, Jonda McNair explores racial humor in *The Watsons* using critical race and humor theories. She identifies several types of humor with racial overtones in the novel and their various functions, including softening the tragedy the Watsons will face (207), underscoring "the hypocrisy of American racism" (207), challenging "notions of white supremacy" (209), and using humor in anticipation of instances of racism (210).

In a different critical reading, Amina Chaudri uses feminist and queer theories to examine the representation of boys in the novel and its implied messages about gender roles. She asserts that, "*The Watsons* effectively challenges white supremacy and racial discrimination . . . but it does not challenge sexism or heterosexual privilege" (151). The author's critique is positive, however, because stories like *The Watsons* "offer opportunities to examine assumptions and imagine new possibilities in the construction of the readers' identities" (161). In other words, *The Watsons* is not only a powerful representation of a significant moment in U.S. history, but it is also an occasion to conduct critical analyses from multiple theoretical perspectives.

In these ways and more, *The Watsons Go To Birmingham—1963* already functions as a classic in children's and young adult literature. Its enduring themes, accessible characters, and portrayal of an important historical event work together in a text educators at all levels can use to teach about the civil rights movement. Moreover, by lending itself to multiple theoretical readings, *The Watsons* offers continued opportunities to examine and challenge various socio-culturalisms.

### Works Cited

- Chaudri, Amina. "Straighten Up and Fly Right': HeteroMasculinity in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*." *Children's Literature Association* 36.2 (2011): 147–163.
- Curtis, Christopher Paul. *The Watsons Go To Birmingham—1963*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1995.
- Kayden, Spencer. "The Watsons Go to Birmingham: Readers Theater Play." *Scholastic Action* 16 September 2013.
- Kelley, Karen S. "I'm a lot like her': Entering the World of Others through Process Drama." *Process Drama and Multiple Literacies: Addressing Social, Cultural, and Ethical Issues*. Eds. Jenifer Jasinski Schneider, Thomas P. Crumpler, and Theresa Rogers. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2006. 71–87.
- McNair, Jonda C. "I May Be Crackin', but Um Fackin': Racial Humor in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*." *Children's Literature in Education* 39 (2008): 201–212.
- Neely, Ann M. "Literature of Social Transformation: Helping Students and Teachers Make Global Connections." *Language Arts* 88.4 (2011): 278–287.
- Selman, Robert L, and Tracy Elizabeth. "An Educator's Resource for *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*." Hallmark Channel. Crown Media, 2014.
- The Watsons Go to Birmingham*. Dir. Kenny Leon. The Hallmark Channel and ARC Entertainment, 2013.

### About the Author

**E. Sybil Durand** is an assistant professor in the Department of English at Arizona State University. Durand's scholarship is grounded in post-colonial and curriculum theories, which situate literature and education at the intersections of sociocultural, historical, political, and national contexts. Her research focuses on post-colonial young adult literature, the ways in which authors represent the lives of young people during and after colonization, and how pre-service teachers engage such narratives.