

The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 by Christopher Paul Curtis

Subjects: African Americans—Fiction; Family life—Fiction; Prejudices—Fiction; Brothers and sisters—Fiction; Flint (Mich.)—Fiction

Awards: Newbery Honor Book; Coretta Scott King Honor Book; Best Books for Young Adults; Horn Book Fanfare

Book Lists: America, Civil Rights, Gifted, North America



The Watsons are not an ordinary family. For example, although they live in Flint, Michigan, Mrs. Watson is from Alabama and she is convinced that her children will freeze to death from the cold in Flint. So, she bundles them in clothes. 13-year-old Byron, 10-year-old Kenny, and their younger sister Joetta must wear so many layers of sweaters and coats that they can hardly move. They look ridiculous and even though that kind of padding is great protection when you're being pelted with snowballs, it is no wonder people think the family is strange.

We learn about the Watsons through the intelligent eyes of middle child, Kenny. We especially learn about his older brother Byron who, according to Kenny, is an "official juvenile delinquent". Byron is big for his grade as he was held back a year. He uses his size to his advantage. Sometimes he uses his size to protect Kenny but sometimes he doesn't.

We also learn about his parents' attempts to make Byron behave. For instance, when Byron straightens his hair, his parents shave it off. When he is caught playing with

matches, his mother tries to burn his fingers. When he admires himself too closely in the side-view mirror of the family car on a cold day, he gets his tongue stuck. Okay, that wasn't something his parents did, that was just a dumb thing to do. But, when gang influences threaten to turn him from a good kid to a bad kid, the Watsons decide to drive 1,000 miles to Birmingham to take Byron to Grandma Sands, who will be able to set Byron straight.

So, the family heads South. They're going toward one of the darkest moments in America's history. They are trying to help their son, but what the Watsons don't anticipate is the racial hatred they find in Birmingham. Hatred strong enough for white men to blow up a black church. (*Hold up book*) Both funny and sad, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis takes you back to a time when the color of your skin determined what kind of world you lived in. Experience it for yourself.