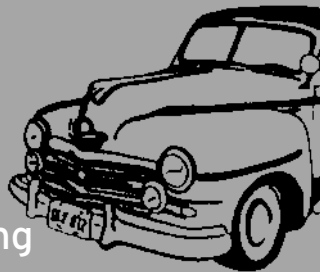


Chapter Charter: Questions to Guide Your Reading



The following questions will help you think about the important parts of each chapter.

Chapter 1

- What interesting language does the author use to describe how cold it is in Flint?
- How does Hambone Henderson try to discourage Wilona from marrying Mr. Watson? What do you think Mr. Watson thinks of Hambone? How can you tell?
- What kind of relationship does Kenny have with his brother, Byron?

Chapter 2

- Why do you think Kenny is afraid when he realizes that the reading he has been chosen to do will be for Byron's class?
- What happens after the reading that surprises Kenny?
- Why does Kenny see Rufus, the new boy on the bus, as his "personal saver"?

Chapter 3

- Why is Kenny hesitant to spend time with Rufus?
- How was Rufus's life in Arkansas different than it is in Flint?
- Why do you think Kenny is friends with LJ, even though LJ isn't nice to him?

- Why does Kenny end up thinking that Rufus is a better friend than LJ?

Chapter 4

- What kind of relationship does Kenny have with Joetta? Can you give examples of things that happen between them that make you think that?
- Why do you think Byron stops Larry Dunn from giving Kenny a “Super Maytag” when Byron often plays similar tricks on Kenny himself?
- How does the author make the reader sympathize with Larry Dunn?
- Have you ever had a problem with a bully at your school? How did you work it out?

Chapter 5

- Why do you think Mrs. Watson speaks “Southern-style” when she gets angry?
- If you were Mrs. Watson, how would you punish Byron when he plays with fire?
- Do you agree with Mrs. Watson’s way of punishing him? Why?

Chapter 6

- Why do you think Byron gets sick after he kills the mourning dove?
- Why does he get angry at Kenny so suddenly?
- How does the author show that Byron is not as tough as he pretends to be?

Chapter 7

- What is your first clue about Byron's latest misdeed?
- Why do you think Byron keeps doing things that his parents have forbidden?
- When Byron misbehaves, who do you think handles the situation better, Mr. or Mrs. Watson? Why?
- In addition to thinking it is ugly, why does Mrs. Watson object to Byron's new hairdo?

Chapter 8

- Why do you think Kenny is so eager to have a real mustache like his dad's?
- Why do the Watsons think sending Byron to Alabama will help him to behave better? Do you think it will work?

Chapter 9

- Besides not wanting to get hooked on country music, why do you think Daddy decides to install the TT-700 in the Brown Bomber?
- Why do you think Joetta wants to keep the angel from Mrs. Davidson in a drawer?
- Why do you think Mrs. Watson is so careful with her planning of the trip, such as where the family is going to stay?

Chapter 10

- Why does Kenny ask for a second serving of Kool-Aid, even though it tastes bad to him?
- Why do you think Kenny feels scared when they're driving through the mountains?

Chapter 11

- How is Birmingham like Flint? How is it different?
- Have you ever traveled to meet relatives who lived far away from you? How did it feel when you first met them?
- How does Byron behave when he meets Grandma Sands? Were you surprised by his behavior?

Chapter 12

- How does Mrs. Watson act differently when she is with her mother in Alabama compared with how she acts at home in Flint?

Chapter 13

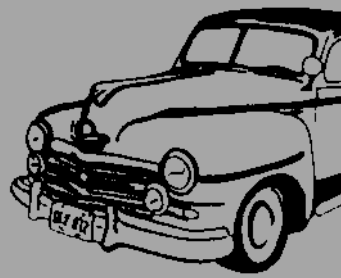
- How does Byron change when the Watsons arrive in Alabama?
- Why do you think he changes so suddenly?
- Why does Kenny decide that it is okay to go into the water at Collier's Landing?
- What did you learn about Byron's feelings for Kenny in this chapter?

Chapter 14

- How does the author describe the scene at the church, after it has been bombed?
- Why do you think Kenny sees the Wool Pooh in the church after it has been bombed?
- Why does Joetta think that Kenny has changed his clothes?

Chapter 15

- Why does Byron spend so much time with Kenny when they come back to Flint?
- Why does Kenny start going to the World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital so often?
- How does Byron help Kenny to feel better at the end of the book?



Plot: What's Happening?

"All of my family sat real close together on the couch under a blanket.... Momma was the only one who wasn't born in Flint so the cold was coldest to her. All you could see were her eyes too, and they were shooting bad looks at Dad."

—*The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*

The *Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* follows the Watson family's experiences in Flint, Michigan, and their 1963 trip to Birmingham, Alabama.

Kenny Watson, the narrator, is ten years old, the same age Christopher Paul Curtis was in 1963. The book begins on a cold, winter day, with the whole family huddled together on the couch under a blanket. Because their heater isn't working they decide to spend the night at their aunt Cydney's. When Kenny and his brother, Byron, are sent outside to scrape the ice from the car windows, Byron does very little scraping, preferring to instead admire himself in the side mirror of the car. He makes the mistake of kissing his reflection, and his lips instantly freeze

to the mirror! It's up to Kenny to save his brother. He calls for his parents, and eventually they are able to detach Byron's lips from the mirror.

Kenny is often the subject of bullying at school because he has a lazy eye. Larry Dunn is the biggest bully in the school, but sometimes Kenny is even bullied by Byron and his friend Buphead. One day on the bus, Kenny thinks that his "personal saver" has arrived in the form of a new kid named Rufus. Rufus has a thick Southern accent and shares his clothes with his little brother; Kenny believes that surely Rufus will become the new target of the other kids' teasing. Kenny is right that Rufus's arrival takes some of the bullies' attention away from him. But when he finds himself becoming good friends with Rufus, suddenly it doesn't feel like much of a relief after all.

Meanwhile, Byron's behavior gets worse and worse: He skips school, and does things against his parents' wishes. Byron and Buphead are too "cool" for school and often play hooky. "Give my regards to Clark, Poindexter," he says, letting Kenny know that he won't be at school that day. Once, when Momma discovers that Byron has been playing with matches, after being told again and again not to, she is at her wit's end. She is so angry that she tells Byron that she's going to burn him as punishment. Joetta and Kenny try to protect Byron from Momma, but she just says, "Don't you see how Momma has to help Byron understand how dangerous and painful fire can be? Don't you see we've tried everything and nothing seems to get through that rock head of his?"

Kenny thinks that Byron will get into more trouble than ever when he comes home one day with a hairstyle known as a conk, which Momma and Dad have told him not to get. Momma asks Byron, “Did those chemicals give you better-looking hair than me and your daddy and God gave you?” Dad shaves Byron’s head, and Momma calls her mother in Birmingham, Alabama. They have decided that Byron will spend the summer with Grandma Sands, who is known to be very strict. Kenny says, “The biggest reason Byron and Joey and me thought they’d never send him to Alabama was because we had heard so many horrible stories about how strict Grandma Sands was. The thought of living with her was so terrible that your brain would throw it out as soon as it came in.” Byron is horrified by the idea of going to Alabama, but there’s no way for him to avoid it.

Momma carefully plans the car trip from Flint to Birmingham. Dad installs an Ultra-Glide machine to play records in the Brown Bomber, the family’s nickname for their car. The trip is to take three days, and Momma is careful to pack plenty of food and water so that they won’t have to stop in an area where they might come across people who are hostile or even violent. The family is aware of the problems in the South—the racial division and tension between black people and white people—but Momma and Dad are still convinced that sending Byron there is the right decision. Kenny tells the reader, “We’d seen the pictures of a bunch of really mad white people with twisted-up faces screaming and giving dirty finger signs to some little Negro kids who were trying to go to school. I’d seen the pictures but I didn’t really know how these white people could hate some kids so much.” Dad says, “Kenneth, I know you’re going to miss Byron,

we all will, but son, there are some things that Byron has to learn and he's not learning them in Flint, and the things he is learning are things we don't want him to."

In the end, the trip takes far less than three days: Dad drives straight through, while the rest of the family sleeps. Almost immediately after the Watsons arrive at Grandma Sands's house in Birmingham, Byron's behavior improves. Kenny takes this opportunity to indulge in some of his own misbehavior. Against Grandma Sands's warnings, he goes swimming at Collier's Landing and comes close to drowning in a whirlpool. Luckily, Byron saves him just in time. Kenny is convinced that Byron had to fight an imaginary monster called the Wool Pooh.

A few days later, Kenny stays home while Joetta heads off to Sunday school at the local church. After hearing a loud noise, he goes outside and sees that people are running toward the church. There's been an explosion, and many people have been injured. In a daze, Kenny enters the church to search for Joetta. In the basement, he sees a patent-leather shoe like his sister's sticking out of some rubble. He struggles to pull the shoe out of the rubble, all the while imagining that he's fighting the Wool Pooh for it. Then he returns home, thinking that Joetta has been killed. When she appears at his bedroom door, he thinks that she is a ghost.

The Watsons (including Byron) return to Flint very soon, but everyone—especially Kenny—is haunted by the church bombing. Kenny spends most of his time alone behind the couch. Byron tries to help Kenny. He tells him, "Kenny, things ain't ever going

to be fair. How's it fair that two grown men could hate Negroes so much that they'd kill some kids just to stop them from going to school? How's it fair that even though the cops down there might know who did it nothing will probably ever happen to those men? It ain't. But you just gotta understand that that's the way it is and keep on steppin'."

Thinking about the plot

- How does Kenny's life change in the book?
- Describe Byron's transformation in Birmingham.
- Why do you think Christopher Paul Curtis chose to include the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, something that *really* happened, in a book that is mostly fictional?