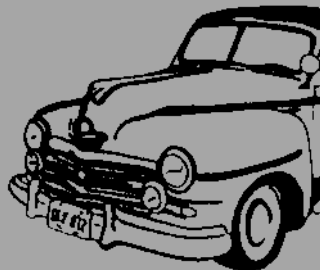


## Setting/Time and Place: Where in the World Are We?



"[Momma] always blamed [Dad] for bringing her all the way from Alabama to Michigan, a state she called a giant icebox."

– *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*

**T**he *Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* takes place in Flint, Michigan; Birmingham, Alabama; and along Interstate I-75, which is the route the Watsons take on their trip to Alabama. Flint is a midsize industrial city, home to many factories and car assembly plants like Fisher Body Flint Plant No. 1, where Christopher Paul Curtis and his father worked. Birmingham is also a city with a large number of steel factories. In 1963, Birmingham was a focal point for the civil rights movement.

Most of the action takes place in the Watson home in Flint, in the Brown Bomber on the way to Birmingham, and at Grandma Sands's house in Birmingham. Although Flint is a city, Kenny's house has a yard where Kenny and his friend LJ Jones can dig holes to bury his toy dinosaurs. And their neighborhood is friendly enough that the family is allowed to keep a running tab for their groceries at Mr. Mitchell's, paying for everything at the end of the week when Mr. Watson gets his paycheck.

Flint, Michigan, has a much colder climate than Birmingham, Alabama, where Momma was born. She often complains about the cold to Dad. When the family arrives in Birmingham, Kenny remarks that it is “like an oven.” But in 1963, the differences between Flint and Birmingham were far more serious than just the weather. Throughout the country, African Americans were often subjected to discrimination, but nowhere was it as extreme as in the South. There, many public areas, such as restaurants, schools, playgrounds, motels, bathrooms, and drinking fountains, were racially segregated, meaning they were to be used either by blacks or by whites, but not by both. The facilities for blacks were always of poorer quality. Many communities and states passed laws that affected African Americans’ opportunities for schooling, housing, and employment. Interracial marriages were prohibited, and laws and tests were created to prevent African Americans from voting.

Until the Civil War was fought in the 1860s, most African Americans in the United States were slaves. After slavery was outlawed, it took a very long time for African Americans to begin to get the same rights and opportunities as white people. One of the first steps was the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth constitutional amendments in the late 1860s and 1870. These amendments promised citizenship rights for African Americans by abolishing slavery, redefining U.S. citizenship to include African Americans, and prohibiting federal or state governments from interfering with a citizen’s right to vote based on his or her race. Later, the Civil Rights Act of 1875 stated that there should be equal accommodations for blacks and whites in public facilities, except schools. Unfortunately, not everyone

followed these new laws, especially people in the South. So for many years, these legislations did little to improve the day-to-day life of blacks in America.

An important step toward ending racial discrimination was the 1954 case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. In this court case, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that public schools could no longer be segregated. However, white racists fought the ruling, threatening black students who attended schools that had been formerly all white. The most extreme confrontation took place at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957; President Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered the Arkansas National Guard to protect the black students. The national media coverage of the daily developments at Central High brought much-needed attention to Little Rock and to the civil rights situation in general.

At the time of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, the civil rights movement, which had begun in the late 1950s, was gaining momentum. Those involved in the civil rights movement used various types of protest in an attempt to gain equal treatment for blacks. And it was working: Not since the Reconstruction period after the Civil War had such important breakthroughs in equal-rights legislation been achieved.

Led by black leaders including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood Marshall, John Lewis, Medgar Evers, and Fannie Lou Hamer, groups of black and white activists took a stand, riding together on interstate buses and sitting together at whites-only lunch counters. Using nonviolent protest methods like marches, sit-ins, and boycotts, these leaders furthered their cause. The

success of the civil rights movement infuriated white racists, who in turn resorted to violent behavior, even murder, trying to scare people away from their goal of reaching racial equality. The civil rights movement was at its height in 1963. On August 28 of that year, 200,000 people marched on Washington, D.C., to pressure Congress to pass the Civil Rights Bill, and heard Martin Luther King, Jr., deliver his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

The next year, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1965 (also called the Voting Rights Act of 1965). Voter registration and requirements had always been considered a matter of local and state control. The new law changed that, allowing the federal government to get involved if necessary. The law worked. Most Southern states voluntarily opened their registration lists to blacks; in others, the Justice Department took control. Soon after, African Americans, who comprised a majority in parts of the South, were electing black mayors and sheriffs and supervisors. With the Civil Rights Act and 1968’s Fair Housing Act, which granted citizens the right to live wherever they wanted and could afford, the civil rights movement helped many African Americans obtain better jobs and housing.

One of the most shocking crimes committed during the civil rights movement was the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, on September 15, 1963. When a bomb went off during Sunday school, four young girls—Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley—were killed. Curtis depicts this bombing in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* and dedicates the book to those girls. Curtis says, “When I was around ten years old and the civil

rights movement was just beginning, my father was very active in it and he did a lot of traveling with the UAW [United Auto Workers]. For some reason that has been very vivid in my mind, so that's probably the thing that I remember most about my childhood."

To the Watsons, Flint feels like a safe haven from the violence of the South. But despite the situation in Birmingham, Momma is still convinced that it is right for Byron to be sent there. "You're going to like Birmingham, Byron. It's a lot different than Flint. . . . Your grandma tells me it's quiet in our old neighborhood, she says that that stuff on TV isn't happening around her. It's just like I remember it being, it's safe, it's quiet."

Dad doesn't seem to believe that Birmingham is as safe as Momma does, however. He's honest with Kenny, Byron, and Joetta about the fact that African Americans are treated badly in the South, and that they are often subjected to violence. Momma explains the plan for their trip to Birmingham and that they'll have to be selective about where they stop. Kenny asks why. Dad responds, in an imitation of a hillbilly accent, "'Cuz, boy, this he-uh is the deep South you-all is gonna be drivin' thoo. Y'all colored folks cain't be jes' pullin' up tuh any ol' way-uh and be 'spectin' tuh get no room uh no food, yuh heah, boy? . . . Whas a mattah wit' choo, you thank this he-uh is Uhmurica?" Dad knows that the family might come across some people in the South who won't treat them fairly and that they might be denied service at restaurants or motels along the way.

Curtis uses dialects to establish the differences in the settings of Flint and Birmingham. A dialect includes the characters' vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, and is unique to where they live. When Momma is particularly scared, frustrated, or angry, she uses what Kenny refers to as "Southern-style" language. Even though she has lived in the North, in Flint, for many years, when she is very emotional, she can't help but speak in the way she did when she lived in Birmingham.

Dad imitates a Southern dialect when he makes fun of Hambone Henderson, one of Momma's suitors when she was younger and lived in Alabama. Henderson tried to persuade Momma not to move to Flint with Dad, telling her that there weren't any other African Americans there, and that it would be too cold for her since she was used to living in Alabama's warmer climate: "Don't believe I seen nan one colored person in the whole dang city. You a 'Bama gal, don't believe you'd be too happy living in no igloo."

But in the end, when they arrive in Birmingham, Kenny realizes that maybe Birmingham and Flint aren't so different after all. "Birmingham looked a lot like Flint! There were real houses, not little log cabins, all over the place! And great big beautiful trees. Most of all, though, there was the sun."

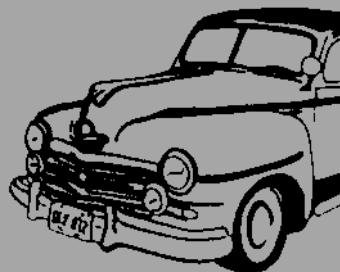
Curtis has used Flint as the setting for both of his published books; his third and fourth books, which he is in the process of writing, are set there as well. Curtis says, "Flint is a fascinating city, in many ways it's emblematic of many of the so-called Rust Belt American towns; it has had tremendous booms and terrifying busts. It is rich in history and fertile ground for a

writer. When I'm asked why all of my stories have taken place in Flint, I answer, 'Why not?' There are so many untold stories there. And that is true of every city and town."

### **Thinking about the setting**

- How are Birmingham and Flint different? How are they similar?
- How does a change in setting change the characters' relationships to one another?
- Why might Momma have wanted to leave the South, despite the fact that she'd spent her whole life there?

## Themes/Layers of Meaning: Is That What It *Really* Means?



[Momma said,] “You know Birmingham is a good place, and I don’t mean just the weather either. The life is slower, the people are friendlier—” “Oh yeah,” Dad interrupted, “they’re a laugh a minute down there. Let’s see, where was that ‘Coloreds Only’ bathroom downtown?”

—*The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*

**T**hemes are the main ideas behind a book or other literary work. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* has several themes of varying importance, including racism, prejudice, and discrimination; family relationships; growing up; friendship; humor; and grief.

### **Racism, prejudice, and discrimination**

Very early in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, it is clear to the reader that racism and prejudice are major themes of the book. Certainly the quotation that opens this chapter is a tip-off that, even in 1963—about one hundred years after the Civil War

and the end of slavery—the South was still a place where African Americans experienced a great deal of discrimination.

In the middle of the night during their trip to Birmingham, the family pulls over at a rest stop in Tennessee. It's very dark because they are in the mountains, far away from any city, but the Watsons are more scared of the people they might come across in this part of the country than they are of the dark. Kenny and Byron decide to go to the bathroom in the woods. Byron tells Kenny, "Man, they got crackers and rednecks up here that ain't never seen no Negroes before. If they caught [you] out here like this they'd hang you now, then eat you later." When he says that the people would eat Kenny, Byron is exaggerating, of course, but at this time in the 1960s, the threat of violence against African Americans was very real.

The Watsons arrive in Birmingham right before the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, one of many bombings of churches attended by African Americans that took place in the South during this period. Kenny goes to the church to try to find Joetta, who went there for Sunday school. He says, "I looked into the church and saw smoke and dust flying around like a tornado was in there. . . . I could see Bibles and coloring books thrown all over the place. . . . I could see a shiny, shiny black shoe lying halfway underneath some concrete." Kenny thinks that the shoe is Joetta's because she'd worn shiny black shoes to church that morning. When Kenny leaves to walk back home, he says, "I walked past people lying around in little balls on the grass crying and twitching, I walked past people squeezing each other and shaking, I walked past people hugging trees and telephone poles,

looking like they were afraid they might fly off the earth if they let go. I walked past a million people with their mouths wide-opened and no sounds coming out.” By placing his fictional family in the midst of something that really happened, Curtis helps the reader to understand what it was like for the people who were actually there.

## **Family relationships**

The Watsons are an unusually close family, with strong emotional connections. The relationship between Byron and Kenny goes through a surprising change in the novel. At the beginning, Byron seems to dislike Kenny and often tries to use his position as older brother to get out of doing things that are his responsibility. When the boys are supposed to share the job of scraping ice off the Brown Bomber’s windows, Kenny says, “I’m not going to do your part, Byron, you’d better do it and I’m not playing either.” Byron’s response is, “Shut up, punk.” Clearly Byron feels superior to his little brother, and is planning to get out of his responsibility knowing that Kenny will eventually give in, as he has in the past. But this time, Byron ends up in a difficult position; Byron’s lips become stuck to the Brown Bomber’s side mirror and the only one who can help him is Kenny. Rather than using this situation to his advantage, Kenny quickly comes to his brother’s aid. “I could have done a lot of stuff to him. If it had been me with my lips stuck on something like this he’d have tortured me for a couple of days before he got help. Not me, though,” Kenny says, “I nearly broke my neck trying to get into the house to rescue Byron.”

Throughout the book, there are many instances in which the reader glimpses Byron's true feelings about Kenny. It is only at the end of the story, when Byron helps Kenny through his grief about the Birmingham church bombing, that we see real evidence of just how much he loves his little brother. When Kenny truly needs Byron's support, Byron is there for him.

Byron and Momma also share an important relationship. One of the most intense scenes in the book is after Momma discovers that Byron has been caught playing with fire after being told again and again not to. For his punishment, she plans to burn his fingers.

We all nearly jumped through the roof when the snake-woman voice came back into the room and said, "Joetta, move away from him." Momma was carrying a piece of paper towel, a jar of Vaseline and a Band-Aid in one hand and a fresh, dry book of matches in the other. She wasn't even going to take him to the hospital! She was going to set him on fire, then patch him up right at home!

This harsh punishment is the high point in their constant struggle for power.

Finally, Momma and Dad decide to make a huge financial sacrifice that they feel is necessary for the good of the family: They take Byron to Birmingham, where he immediately starts to behave better and obey his parents. Wilona Watson's relationship with her mother, Grandma Sands, is very close. "Grandma Sands and Momma would get yakking to each other and we could only understand half of the things that they said." These close family

relationships help the Watson family overcome the difficult obstacles they face during the course of the book.

## **Growing up**

From the very beginning of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, it seems clear to the reader that Kenny is the “good boy” in the family and Byron is the “bad boy.” Byron often threatens Kenny and joins forces with his best friend Buphead to bully Kenny. Kenny, of course, has little defense against his older brother. As the good one, he helps his mother and does well in school.

But as the story progresses, we see that perhaps Byron isn’t such a bad boy and that Kenny isn’t all good. When Kenny reads from a book in front of Byron’s class, he is convinced that Byron will beat him up or hurt him in some way; instead, Byron is proud. And at the end of the story, Byron takes the role of comforting Kenny through his grief. For his part, Kenny also disobeys his parents when he decides to swim at Collier’s Landing. In that scene, Byron protects Joetta by taking her to another part of the river to swim. “Here was a chance for another Fantastic Adventure and [Byron] was going in the wrong direction . . . He was acting real dull and square,” Kenny says. “Maybe Byron was getting sick of having more Fantastic Adventures, but I figured I was getting old enough to have some myself.” Ironically, once the Watsons arrive in Birmingham, it is Kenny who disobeys, rather than Byron. Kenny, the good boy, has decided that now that he’s getting older, perhaps he wants to break the rules, just as Byron had earlier in the story.

## Friendship

To Kenny's surprise, he and Rufus Fry become close friends. Rufus is a much better friend to Kenny than LJ Jones, who is always trying to trick Kenny. But one day on the bus Kenny makes a terrible mistake; everyone is laughing because Rufus and his little brother, Cody, share clothes. Kenny starts laughing, too, in front of Rufus. "Rufus shot a look at me. His face never changed but I knew right away I'd done something wrong. I tried to squeeze the rest of my laugh down." After a few days, Kenny goes to Rufus's house and asks him to play dinosaurs. But Rufus refuses and tells Kenny, "I thought you was my friend. I didn't think you was like all them other people." Only after Momma gets involved are the problems smoothed over and Rufus and Kenny get back to being friends. During the course of the book, Kenny learns what friendship really means, and how to be a better friend to Rufus. He comes to understand that what he had with LJ was not really friendship after all.

## Humor

Humor plays a significant role in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. Curtis uses humor to help the characters get through the many difficult situations in the book, be it the possibly dangerous trip to Birmingham or Byron's punishment for getting a conk hairstyle. But sometimes the humor is there purely for fun, like when Byron's lips get stuck after he kisses himself in the frozen car mirror, or in Byron's story about frozen Southerners, which he tells in order to convince Joey that she needs to wear many layers of winter clothes. "[T]here ain't nothin'

more horrible than seein' hundreds of dead, froze-up Southern folks crammed up inside a garbage truck. . . . So Joey, don't be cryin' and whinin' when you put all them clothes on, it would break my heart to see my own family froze solid so's they got throwed in one them fake garbage trucks." Of course, Joey doesn't think this story is at all funny, and Kenny is not sure sure about it either, but the reader understands that Byron is just making it up to get Joey to cooperate.

Dad uses humor at the very beginning of the story when the family's heater is broken. He tells the kids about "Hambone" Henderson, Wilona Watson's old boyfriend. "Me and your granddaddy called him [Hambone] because the boy had a head shaped just like a hambone, had more knots and bumps on his head than a dinosaur. So as you guys sit there giving me these dirty looks because it's a little chilly outside ask yourselves if you'd rather be a little cool or go through life being known as the Hambonettes." The story makes everyone laugh and forget for a while just how cold their house is.

## **Grief**

When the family returns home to Flint after the bombing at the Birmingham church, Kenny takes to sitting behind the couch in the Watsons' living room, a place that Byron calls the World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital. "He started calling it the World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital after we noticed that if something bad happened to one of our dogs or cats they just automatically knew they had to crawl in that space and wait to see if they were going to get better." Kenny spends his time there because he is

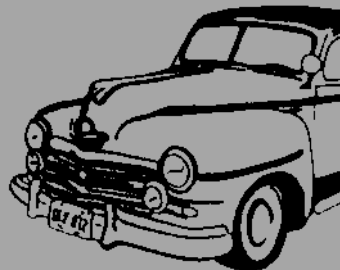
expecting that the “magic powers” that often make his dogs and cats feel better will work on him, too. Kenny feels guilty because after he knew about the church bombing, he went home rather than trying to find Joetta. But Joetta hadn’t even been inside the church when the bomb went off because she’d followed a stranger who she thought was Kenny away from the church. The time Kenny spends alone behind the couch allows him to grieve about the bombing and also to work through the guilt that he feels about his actions that day.

Momma and Dad deal with their own grief as well. “Some of the time they were mad, some of the time they were calm and some of the time they just sat on the couch and cried.” But along with having to face their own feelings about the church bombing, Mr. and Mrs. Watson have to think about how to help their children grieve. They encourage Kenny to spend more time with Rufus and ask Byron and Buphead to take Kenny with them when they play basketball. What we learn is that grief is an emotion that everyone deals with differently; each of the Watson characters reacts in a specific way to their experience with the church bombing.

### **Thinking about the themes**

- What do you think is the most important theme of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*? What are some of the other themes?
- When Kenny admits that he has treated Rufus badly, how does that help to correct the situation?
- What are some other important family relationships in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*?

## Characters: Who Are These People, Anyway?



**T**he *Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* focuses primarily on the Watson family—Kenny, Byron, Joetta, Momma, and Dad—but also includes several other important characters.

Here is a list of the characters, followed by a brief description of each of the main characters.

Kenny Watson	ten-year-old boy, the story's narrator
Byron Watson	Kenny's thirteen-year-old brother
Joetta Watson	Kenny's younger sister
Wilona Watson/Momma	Kenny's mother
Daniel Watson/Dad	Kenny's father
Grandma Sands	Kenny's grandmother, Wilona's mother
Buphead	Byron's friend
Larry Dunn	Byron and Kenny's classmate
Rufus Fry	Kenny's friend
LJ Jones	Kenny's friend

**Kenny Watson:** Ten-year-old Kenny is the narrator of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. This means that everything we read is described from Kenny's point of view. The middle child of the Watson family, Kenny is an excellent student and is trusted by his parents. He craves their approval and is thankful when his parents pay particular attention to him. "I loved when

Dad talked to me like I was grown-up. I didn't really understand half the junk he was saying, but it sure did feel good to be talked to like that!"

While many of the adults in the story take a particular liking to Kenny because he is well-behaved and also a good reader and student, his peers are not so kind. Kenny has a lazy eye—an eye that doesn't focus as well as the other—and they take this as a sign of weakness. Kenny is in the fourth grade and attends the same school as his brother and sister. He is often picked on by his classmates, which is even more frustrating because his older brother, Byron, one of the two oldest kids at Clark Elementary, is so respected by the other kids at the school. Kenny notes that having Byron for a brother "would make me a prince or a real strong angel or something but it didn't work that way, I was just another fourth-grade punk. I guess having the school's god as my brother did give me some kind of special rights but not a whole bunch."

But sometimes Byron surprises Kenny. At one point in the book, Kenny recalls a time in second grade when he was asked to do a reading from Langston Hughes in front of Byron's fifth-grade class. Kenny was mortified. He was so worried about Byron's reaction that he read very quickly through the passages to get it over with. But in the end, Byron wasn't mad at all; in fact, he was proud. "He punched me kind of soft in the arm and said, 'At least you oughta make 'em pay you for doin' that mess. If it was me they'd be comin' out they pockets with some foldin' money every time they took me around.'"

During the story, we learn that Kenny is not altogether loyal. His friendship with Rufus is the best indicator of this trait. While Kenny is perfectly willing to be friends with Rufus in secret, when the other kids on the bus are laughing at Rufus one day, Kenny joins in, hurting Rufus's feelings. "Rufus shot a look at me. His face never changed but I knew right away I'd done something wrong. I tried to squeeze the rest of my laugh down," Kenny says.

Another trait unique to Kenny's character is his fondness for exaggeration. We know this from the very first page of the book, when he says, "It was so cold that if you spit, the slob [spit] would be an ice cube before it hit the ground. It was about a zillion degrees below zero." Of course it's not actually a zillion degrees below zero, but by exaggerating, Kenny lets the reader know that it is *very* cold!

All of Kenny's individual qualities form a realistic character to whom readers can relate. Through him, Christopher Paul Curtis has created a character that is simultaneously funny, flawed, and ever-changing.

**Byron Watson:** At age thirteen, Byron Watson is constantly challenging his parents' wishes. Like any teenager, he tries to see how far he can go without receiving any punishment. The changes Byron goes through are very important to the plot of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. It is because of his unmanageable behavior that Momma and Dad decide to go through with sending him to Grandma Sands. They feel that they have no other choice but to take him away from Flint and the bad influences he has found there. Despite his behavior, Kenny

and Joetta still look up to their older brother. “Larry Dunn was king of the kindergarten to fourth grade only because Byron didn’t care about them. Larry was the king of Clark . . . but Byron was a god,” says Kenny.

Throughout the story, we see hints of Byron’s true caring nature, like when he is proud of Kenny’s reading, or when he makes the older kids play basketball with Kenny, or when he gets sick after killing the dove. “Maybe there were magic powers hiding in the way your older brother made all the worst thugs in the neighborhood play basketball with you even though you double-dribbled every time they threw you the ball,” Kenny says. But what is most shocking to the Watson family is how quickly Byron’s behavior changes once they reach Birmingham and Grandma Sands. “The way Byron kept his head down and was smiling and saying ‘Yes, ma’am’ this and ‘No, ma’am’ that, it looked like he had surrendered before the first punch was thrown.” And by the end of the book, when he helps Kenny through his grief after the church bombing, Byron has become a kind of adviser to Kenny. In the last few pages, after Byron has talked Kenny into coming out from his hiding place behind the couch, he says:

It’s ’bout time you cut this mess out, Momma and Dad beginning to think your little behind is seriously on the blink. Today is the day you check out of the World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital. Don’t let me catch you back there no more. You ain’t got no cause to be ashamed or scared of nothing. You smart enough to figure this one out yourself. Besides, you getting the word from the top wolf hisself; you gonna be all right baby bruh. I swear for God.

**Wilona Watson/Momma:** Momma is the source for both humor and tension in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. She regularly reminds Dad that if it were up to her she'd still be living in her hometown of Birmingham. She is a caring mother, but a tough one; she often feels that the three children are getting out of her control, especially Byron. And she loses control herself sometimes, as in the scene where she threatens to burn Byron as punishment for playing with matches.

When Momma feels that she is being challenged, she quickly lets the kids know who's in charge; they can sense the change in her because she starts talking "Southern-style," something she also slips into when she is afraid, nervous, or angry.

Momma is just as much in charge of the family as Dad; she organizes every detail of the family trip to Birmingham because she is worried that they could possibly meet trouble along the way. "Momma had everything planned about the trip, everything! Where we'd eat, when we'd eat, who got baloney sandwiches on Day One . . . She'd figured out how long we could hold ourselves between going to the bathroom, how much money we'd spend on hamburgers, how much was for any emergencies, everything." Despite her controversial ideas about punishment, Momma is a good mother to the three kids and is the glue that holds the family together.

**Daniel Watson/Dad:** Dad is another source of humor in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. He often tries to ease a tense situation by making his family laugh, for instance, when they are freezing cold in the first scene of the book, or when they are

traveling to Birmingham and worrying about what they might encounter along the way. “I swear I’ve been looking in the rearview mirror and wondering where my babies were and where these three bad-dispositioned, sour-faced, middle-aged midgets came from,” he says toward the end of the trip. Even when he must punish Byron for getting a conk hairstyle without permission, Dad’s sense of humor never disappears. After he shaves off all of Byron’s straightened hair, he comes down the steps. “Mrs. Watson,” he said, “I’d like to introduce you to your long-lost son from Siam, His Royal Highness, Yul Watson!” (Dad is referring to Yul Brynner, who played the bald king in the movie *The King and I*.) But Dad wants Byron to know that the situation is serious and tells him, “This is it, By. You’re old enough now and you’ve been told enough, this time something’s going to be done.”

**Joetta Watson:** Even though Joetta is the youngest of the Watson family, she shows great spirit, strength, and intelligence. She does not hesitate to stand her ground—even if it means standing up to Momma. When Byron gets in trouble for playing with matches, “Joey” is the first to protect him from Momma. “Joey spread her arms out to the side like a traffic cop and stood between Momma and Byron. ‘No, Mommy, wait . . .’”

At another point in the novel, the Watsons’ neighbor, Mrs. Davidson, gives Joey an angel figurine, telling her that she has named the angel after Joey. The angel is white and Joey is upset that Mrs. Davidson has named it after her. “Mrs. Davidson said it reminded her of me, but it didn’t look like me at all.” Rather than letting Mrs. Davidson know how upset this has made her, Joey

politely accepts the angel, and later places it in her sock drawer, where she won't have to look at it.

**Grandma Sands:** Grandma Sands (Momma's mother) lives in Birmingham in the same house Momma grew up in. Grandma Sands is known to the Watson kids as a tough woman. When they finally meet her in Birmingham, they're a bit taken aback. "I was expecting a troll," Kenny says. "I thought Grandma Sands would be bigger than Dad, I thought she'd be foaming at the mouth like she had rabies." But instead, "What came out was a teeny-weeny, old, old, old woman that looked just like Momma would if someone shrank her down about five sizes and sucked all the juice out of her!" Grandma Sands has a very close relationship with her daughter Wilona; they not only share a mother-daughter relationship, but are also very good friends.

**Rufus Fry:** When Rufus and his little brother walk onto the school bus one morning, Kenny is sure that they will become the new targets for Clark Elementary's bullies, and will take some of the pressure off him. "As I looked at this new boy with the great big smile and the jacket with the holes in the sleeves and the raggedy tennis shoes and the tore-up blue jeans I knew who he was . . . I knew God had finally sent me some help, I knew God had finally sent me my personal saver." Rufus and his brother often share clothes, which lets us know that they are probably quite poor. He is protective of his little brother and very innocent compared to the other kids at Poindexter. While Rufus is hurt by Kenny's treatment of him, he does find it in himself to forgive Kenny and to trust him once again.

### **Thinking about the characters**

- Which character changed the most during the course of the book? Why do you think that?
- How is your family similar to the Watsons? Different? How so?
- How does Christopher Paul Curtis let the reader know that Kenny is not all good and that Byron is not all bad?