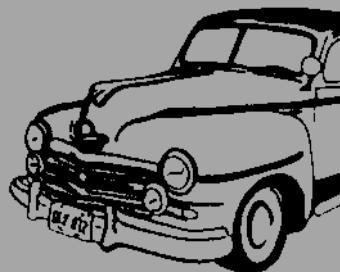


Christopher Paul Curtis on Writing



"Writing to me has always been something that relaxed me. When I was working in the factory, I used to write during breaks because it took me away from being in the factory. I didn't like being there so I would sit down and write. It was much like reading, it would take me away from where I was."

—Christopher Paul Curtis

Christopher Paul Curtis was always a writer. But he never had time to write regularly until he was working on the assembly line at Fisher Body Flint Plant No. 1. He didn't like his job there and found that writing was an escape from the tedious, difficult work. Before he started writing *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, Curtis hadn't written fiction. "I'd tried fiction, but I knew [my work] was terrible. . . . I didn't really feel comfortable with fiction until my late thirties, early forties."

Though Curtis's books are categorized as children's literature, he has said that when he writes, he doesn't really think about writing specifically for kids. "I know you're supposed to think

of your audience, but when I wrote *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, I didn't really write it as a children's book. I thought of it as a story, and the narrator happened to be ten years old." Of course, the book went on to win many awards in the children's-book industry.

The Watsons are a combination of lots of families that Curtis has known, including his own. "One of the great things about writing," Curtis says, "is that you can use your imagination and you can make all kinds of different combinations of people in situations, and that's what I did with the Watsons."

Creating a character is a key challenge when Curtis is deciding what a book will be about and what will happen in it. Also, research sometimes plays an important part in his writing. With research, he can assure that the historical details are correct. "Once I get the character, everything seems to be okay. It's a mental trick: You actually feel like there's someone talking to you. I just write down what they say. It's very inefficient. I write reams of stuff that I can never use. With *The Watsons*, I didn't have to do a lot of research because I was around [Kenny's age] in 1963."

When he's writing, Curtis has a set pattern to his days. "I'll work at the library usually from about nine to noon, then the next morning, I wake up at five o'clock and I start to edit what I did the day before, try to hammer it down into a story. Writing *The Watsons*, I found that it's better if I just write what comes whether it's going to work at that point in the story or not, then work on cleaning it up the next day. A lot of things come up that I use later on."

Curtis has said that his inspiration for writing is “the love of words and the power they seem to have to be able to change things.” He believes that using your own experiences as a resource for your writing is important: “I think it makes your writing more immediate and more believable. There’s a truth in it. When you have autobiographical touches in the story it’s just more interesting to read.”

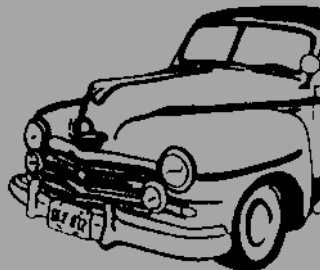
For aspiring writers

Curtis stresses that young writers, in order to succeed, should write as often as possible. He says,

The best advice I can give to any aspiring author is to write. Write anytime you have the opportunity. Set up particular times every day when you write and stick to the schedule. I think writing is like any other skill: You have to work at it and you have to practice. It’s like an instrument or a sport. The more you do it, the better you’re going to get at it. . . . Just the practice of doing it every day makes you better and that’s all you can ask for—to slowly develop. It’s something that takes a lot of time, so be patient and don’t worry if you’re not writing stuff that’s very good right from the word go. Just keep working at it and things will come around.

But as most writers will tell you, writing is not easy. It demands persistence. “When kids say they don’t like what they’ve written . . . I tell them, ‘Be patient. Fiction takes a long time.’” Curtis advises, “Writing is not magical; it’s not mystical. Keep it fun. You’re in control.”

You Be the Author!



- **Keep a daily journal:** Christopher Paul Curtis remarks, “Many times young people feel that writing is, or should be, the result of consultation with some mysterious, hard-to-find muse. I don’t think so; I think in many ways writing is much like learning a second language or playing a sport or mastering a musical instrument: The more you do it, the better you become at it. That’s why I think keeping a daily journal should be high on the list of priorities for every young writer.”

For every writer, it is a good idea to have a convenient place to record observations of the world around you, as well as ideas for stories, characters, and setting.

Using a brand-new notebook or one you already have, start taking a few minutes each day to write down what is going on in the world around you or whatever else crosses your mind. Writing a little bit every day is a great habit to get into!

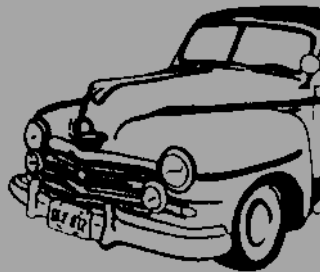
- **A new end:** Christopher Paul Curtis originally planned for the Watson family to travel to Florida instead of Birmingham, but changed his mind when his son brought home a poem about Birmingham. Is there a place that you know of that you would have liked the Weird Watsons to visit? Write a new ending to the book that includes that place instead of Birmingham.

- **Poems can inspire!:** Christopher Paul Curtis decided to send the Watsons to Birmingham after his son read him “Ballad of Birmingham.” Go to the library, check out a book of poems, and find one that is particularly meaningful to you. Perhaps there is a person or place that you feel a connection with in the poem, or maybe you came away from the poem with a new understanding about something. Then, write a story about that person or place or whatever might have drawn you to the poem.

- **Your friends and family are characters:** Is there someone you know who might make a good character in a story or book? Think about what makes that person unique, and how he or she might react to a certain situation. Maybe your mother is a gardener. What if she came across something unusual—fairies, perhaps—in her garden? Write a short story about it.

- **Read all about it:** Design and write your own newspaper. Give it a catchy title, and on the front page, draw a picture of something that happens in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. Write an article to accompany the picture. If you need help, go to the library and look at some of the different ways newspapers attract their readers’ attention. For example, your article could be about something serious, like the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, or something funny, like Byron’s getting his lips stuck to the mirror of the Brown Bomber.

Activities



- **Go back in time:** If you found a time capsule from 1963, what might be in it?

What was important in the news in 1963? To find out, go to the library and look at photographs and articles in newspapers from 1963. Pay special attention to the civil rights movement and the South. You'll see that Christopher Paul Curtis provides historical background about the place and time in his epilogue. But try to take your knowledge a little further. For example, find articles about the church bombings that happened in Birmingham, Alabama.

If you know someone who lived in the South in the 1960s, interview him or her about what life was like in 1963. For fun, you could also find out which movies, books, and television shows were popular that year.

- **Where in the world are the Watsons?:** The Weird Watsons drive from Flint, Michigan, to Birmingham, Alabama, on Interstate 75. As you read the book, look at a road map to track the Watsons' progress. Try to find interesting sites along I-75, perhaps one in each state they would pass through. At the end of the book, answer the following questions:

How many miles did the Watsons travel round trip?

If the Brown Bomber goes only forty-five miles per hour, how long will the trip take?

Did the Watsons take the most direct route to Birmingham? If not, what other highways might they have taken?

• **What are you saying?:** Curtis uses many colloquial (informal and conversational) expressions and words in his writing. As you read, write down some of the different expressions. Try to figure out what the character means from the context in which the expression was used and from other characters' reactions. If you can find a dictionary of regional sayings, that might be helpful to you.

For example, Kenny says, "Dad was going to try to make us forget about being cold by cutting up. Me and Joey started smiling right away, and Byron tried to look cool and bored." Dad, of course, is not actually cutting anything up. We can tell that when he says "cutting up" Kenny means Dad is saying something funny, because he says that he and his sister, Joey, start smiling, and because even this early in the novel we know that Dad is a humorous character.

• **Take the director's seat:** Pretend that *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* is going to be made into a movie. If you were responsible for choosing who would be cast in the movie, whom would you pick to be each of the main characters? Feel free to

use famous people or friends or family members. Explain why you made these choices.

- **Chase your blues away:** The Watsons play music on their new record player—the True-Tone AB-700, Ultra-Glide—all the way to Birmingham. Momma likes “Under the Boardwalk,” but Kenny prefers “Yakety Yak.” Are there any special songs that you listen to when you’re feeling down or when you’re in a great mood? Make a music mix tape or CD of these songs and copy it for your friends. Ask them to do the same and find out what songs are important to them.

- **Heroes:** In his epilogue, Christopher Paul Curtis writes about heroes, “the boys and girls, the women and men who have seen that things are wrong and have not been afraid to ask ‘Why can’t we change this?’” Do you know any heroes? Ask your friends and classmates who their heroes are.